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THE "ALLITERATIVE MORTE ARTHURE": THE FORM OF EPIC TRAGEDY

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THE ALLITERATIVE MORTE ARTHURE: THE FORM OF EPIC TRAGEDY

by

Ronald Steven Stottlemyer

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
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1983

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As members of the Final Examination Committee, we certify that we have read the dissertation prepared by Ronald Steven Stottlemyer entitled The Alliterative Morte Arthure: The Form of Epic Tragedy and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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STATEMENT BY AUTHOR

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ABSTRACT

The most enduring problem in the criticism of the Alliterative Morte Arthure is the difficulty of describing its genre accurately. In the past most critics and literary historians have been content to label the poem variously as a romance, a chronicle, an heroic poem, an epic, or a tragedy solely on the basis of a superficial reading of its subject matter, plot, and theme. This study challenges those readings of the poem with an extensive analysis of its total artistic structure of narrative techniques, patterns of imagery and symbolism, and thematic development. The results of this analysis indicate that the Alliterative Morte Arthure is best described as an epic tragedy.

The analysis of the poem's form and content is inductive in nature. After a review of the criticism dealing with the poem's genre and an exposition of the study's methodology, the analysis then proceeds with a close reading of the particular narrative structure and content of the poem's three macro-episodes. Since this study rests on the critical proposition that the analysis of a work's genre is best founded on an examination of its narrative structure, this reading focuses primarily on the description of the various narrative relationships that exists between the episodes of each macro-episode. The analysis simultaneously accounts for the thematic significance of the various patterns of imagery, symbolism, and other narrative content that emerge from this close reading.
The study then concludes with a discussion of the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*'s genre. A preliminary description of the basic features of epic and romance suggests that the poem is undeniably a species of epic narrative. The results of a close reading of the poem, however, indicate that this designation of its genre as well as the widely accepted classification of it as a medieval tragedy of fortune are both inadequate to illuminate the particularly communal nature of Arthur's tragedy. For this reason the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* is most appropriately described as an epic tragedy, a narrative that presents the epic hero's catastrophe in the context of his relationship with his community.
CHAPTER 1

CRITICISM

Criticism of the Alliterative Morte Arthure has been concerned primarily with the attempt to define its genre. Although such a matter may seem simple to resolve, literary historians and critics are far from reaching any consensus about what kind of poem it is. They have variously labeled it a romance, an epic, a chronicle, a chanson de geste, a heroic poem, a medieval tragedy of fortune, an ethical discourse, and, most recently, a fürstenspiegel, a treatise of instruction for kings. There are a number of reasons for this diversity of opinion. The Alliterative Morte Arthure is, first of all, a deceptively simple work of art. On the surface it seems little more than a vigorous heroic poem about King Arthur's wars with the tyrannical Roman Emperor Lucius and his usurping nephew Mordred. The plot is straightforward, the characters simply drawn, and the narrative brisk. This view, however, is complicated by the intrusion of elements from other genres of medieval literature. The giants that Arthur and his knights battle and the magic potion that heals Priamus and Gawain belong to the world of romance. The grandeur of Arthur and his knights as they struggle against the assembled mercenaries of the Roman Empire gives the poem an undeniably epic spirit. The poet's attention to historical details and his realistic descriptions of warfare suggests the sober traits of a chronicle. Last of all, Arthur's dream about the wheel of fortune and his
The poem itself is not, of course, the main reason why critics have trouble agreeing on its genre. The fault rather lies with the kind of criticism it has received. Critics have generally been content to make impressionistic comments about the poem's form and content rather than to attempt thorough explanations of its varied and apparently contradictory effects. In their observations about the poem, most critics fail to define what they mean by specific kinds of narrative--romance, epic, chronicle, and so on--and therefore proceed with discussions that are unfocused from the beginning. Their comments on details of plot, characterization, imagery, and the like are consequently fragmentary and have the character of random observations rather than close analyses of the poem's aesthetics. Even worse, many of these critics seldom present a cogent argument for some belief they hold about the poem. The result of this sort of criticism is a diversity of weakly supported opinions about what kind of poem the Alliterative Morte Arthure is and how it should be ranked as a work of art in Middle English literature.

Classifications of the Poem

The Alliterative Morte Arthure was first classified as a romance. In the introductory remarks on Pearl, Cleanness, and Patience in his 1864 edition of Early English Alliterative Poems, Richard Morris casually refers to the Morte Arthure as an "early English alliterative
romance." Morris's comment was merely descriptive: any explanation of how the poem is a romance was clearly outside the purposes of his introductory remarks. But, as is frequently the case, Morris's label has stuck to the poem. A number of other literary historians and critics, either following Morris's lead or recording their own impressions, have persisted in calling the poem a romance. J. D. Bruce (1913), in his brief mention of the poem in an article on the Morte Arthure theme, describes the poem as "a full-fledged romance" without any sort of argument to defend his position. Elise Van Der Ven-Ten Bensel (1925) likewise terms it a romance and quickly proceeds to describe its artistic excellences. Later, in a study on textual matters in the poem, J. L. N. O'Loughlin (1935) calls it "one of the most vigorous and attractive" romances in Middle English, again without developing proof for his assertion. Even in more recent times Albert C. Bauth (1967) and Laura Hibbard Loomis (1952) treat it as a romance as if that classification were self-evident.

At first glance it is tempting to accept William Matthews' (1960, p. 94) explanation for the critics' careless description of the poem as a romance. He believes that most commentators have ignored the subject of form and technique in Arthurian narratives:

It is the habit of historians and bibliographers of Middle English literature to discuss in one group all poems and prose works that deal with Arthurian subjects. Since most of these are romances and since form and technique do not often engage the close attention of Arthurian scholars, it is not uncommon to treat Morte Arthure, simply out of convenience, as a romance.
There is no doubt a good deal of truth in Matthews' observation. Arthurian scholars have been far more interested in source studies and textual considerations than in aesthetic matters, but this explanation seems much too simplistic. The fundamental reason for the problem may well lie much deeper: the persistent difficulty of defining precisely what a romance is.

The first critic to discuss the *Morte Arthure* in terms other than those of the romance is Charles S. Baldwin (1922, p. 142). Although his comments are brief and hardly supported by extensive evidence, they represent a considered estimate of the poem's form and content. In addition to lacking the usual features of romance—"no Merlin, no Holy Grail, no love interest"—the *Morte Arthure* displays a number of traits that are epical in spirit. The poet, first of all, takes an epical interest in the details of the story: he is continually describing small, precise details about armor, fighting, preparing for combat, and embarking for war much in the way Homer and the *Beowulf* poet exhibit a similar interest. The poet's interest in verisimilitude, Baldwin continues, likewise extends to characterization. Unlike the writer of romance who creates a world of vague, generalized characters, the *Morte Arthure* poet in true epic fashion presents dramatic characters who express themselves vividly in speech and action. The *Morte Arthure* is also epical in two other aspects. Like other epic poems it has a strong spirit of communal feeling about it, a national pride that finds joy in the destruction of villainous foreign adversaries. The *Morte Arthure*, finally, has the stern moral tone characteristic of English epics; there
is no room in it, Baldwin contends, for courtly behavior and erotic love. It is, rather, a poem praising loyalty between heroes and a simple faith in God's justice.

Most other critics who agree that the poem is primarily epical in form and content have little to add to Baldwin's description of it. R. W. Chambers (1939), for example, laconically observes that it is "a poem more truly 'epic' than anything surviving in English literature between Beowulf and Paradise Lost" (p. 93). He does not begin to support his contention with details about the poem's characters, their motivations, or the events that shape their lives. David Zesmer (1961) and A. C. Gibbs (1966) are also very brief in their remarks on the poem, both merely noting that the Morte Arthure is indisputably an epic.

A. C. Spearing, however, classifies the poem as an epic for stylistic and historical reasons (1970, pp. 26-28). The alliterative style for him is mainly a heroic style in its vocabulary, poetic formulas, and vision of human life. Rather than dying out, the heroic style of Old English poetry continued to inspire epic poetry in late medieval times for historical and religious reasons. The conflict between heroic and Christian values in Old English poetry became greatly heightened in the poetry of the Alliterative Revival because Christianity was by that time far more deeply entrenched in men's daily lives than in Anglo-Saxon times. The tension between heroic and anti-heroic attitudes, he continues, is particularly sharp in the Morte Arthure since King Arthur is both a Christian and the chief exponent of the heroic life (p. 27). The main theme of the poem, Spearing seems to suggest, is precisely an
examination of the ambiguities inherent in an heroic Christian leader's life, a theme he thinks the poet never really resolves (p. 28).

Other writers, focusing on the poem's realistic details, geographical references, and historical allusions, suggest that the Alliterative Morte Arthure is best defined as a chronicle poem. P. G. Thomas (1924, pp. 130-131) is the first to look at it in this way:

The Morte Arthure can scarcely be classified as a romance in the sense that the term is employed of the Gawain poems. It is rather a serious chronicle, a record of dramatic situations and of deeds done, during that career of conquest that bore the king to Rome. . . . As for the more romantic elements of the Arthurian story, --the wizardry of Merlin, the mystic spell of the Grail, the loves of Lancelot and Guinevere, --these things are lacking.

While J. P. Oakden (1935) largely agrees with the description of the Alliterative Morte Arthure as a chronicle poem, he is careful not to obscure its epical qualities. It is, for him, "a chronicle in form and incidentally much more epic in quality than a medieval romance can ever be" (p. 35). Richard Barber (1971, pp. 48-51) takes a different tack. He does not attempt to describe how the Alliterative Morte Arthure fits the requirements of a chronicle poem; he discusses its relation to its chronicle sources--Geoffrey of Monmouth, Wace, and Laamon--and contemporary English history, thus clearly intimating its chronicle form.

The two other critics of this school, D. S. Brewer (1968) and Larry Benson (1974), call it a chronicle poem for largely the same reasons: the poet's use of real dates, place names, and events, and his preference for historical rather than supernatural episodes.

Apparently unconvinced that the Alliterative Morte Arthure is either a fully developed example of an epic or merely a poetic record
of historical events, George Kane (1951, pp. 69-70) and others call the poem a heroic work. Although Kane never denies that it is a romance, he clearly believes its heroic features predominate. Everything about it points to the heroic mode:

Above all it is heroic, not romantic, and comes in its richness of treatment, its high seriousness and dignity, its stately splendour of colour and imagery and its concept of its subject matter nearer to the epic than any of the other romances.

In a less impressionistic account of the poem, Dorothy Everett (1955, p. 61) also contends that the poem is essentially heroic. In both its theme and treatment of Arthur and his knights, the poem strongly reminds her of Old English heroic poetry:

The Morte Arthure is, in subject and treatment, a thoroughly masculine work. Its heroic theme resembles those beloved by the Old English poets. Arthur is the mighty conqueror, haughty to his enemies, generous to his knights, and undaunted in defeat; his sole occupation, and that of his men, is fighting; courage and loyalty are the virtues they prize.

The resemblances she finds to Old English poetry do not end here. The relationship between Arthur and his warriors, more specifically, makes her think of the Old English poet's comitatus, the tried band of loyal retainers who support their lord even into death. The hearty, martial spirit of the poem, moreover, precludes for her the display of chivalrous attitudes typically found in romances: the sardonic jokes the knights make in battle reveal "how superficial the relationship between this poem and the romances of chivalry really is" (p. 63).

An equally strong argument she makes for a heroic reading of the poem rests on her observations about its pervasive realism. Unlike
the unusually idealized, conventional descriptions of setting and action in romance, those in the Alliterative Morte Arthure are full of details from everyday life:

Constantly a scene is brought to life by some realistic detail, as when the sheriffs "sharply shift" the commons to make room for the great lords who are to embark for the expedition against Lucius (725), or, as when Arthur, having climbed to the top of Mont St. Michel, lifted his visor and "caught of pe colde wynde to comforthe hym seluen. . . ." (Everett, 1955, p. 64).

This attention to detail, she seems to suggest, firmly locates the poem in this world rather than in the imaginary landscapes of romance.

The two other critics who read the Morte Arthure as a heroic poem, Margaret Schlauch (1956) and George Keiser (1974), do not give strong arguments for their beliefs. Schlauch merely observes that its "words and rhythms echo with resemblances to Old English heroic verse, still perceptible after the lapse of centuries" (p. 185). Keiser, on the other hand, develops a novel argument for his position. Basically, he maintains that the Morte Arthure poet altered scenes in Wace to enhance Arthur's heroism among fourteenth-century readers. Restricting himself to the first 720 lines of the poem, Keiser compares the dramatic scenes in this first part of the poem with their counterparts in Wace and contemporary literary sources. In the scene in which Arthur expresses his anger toward the Roman ambassadors and their insulting message from Lucius, Keiser argues that the poet is really presenting a conventional portrait of a hero's anger, a description that has strong parallels in the Laud Troy Book, Richard the Lion-Hearted, and in Froissart's Chroniques. In other scenes he argues that the poet
contrives Arthur's reactions to people and events so as to have Arthur emerge as a wise, prudent, magnanimous lord.

The most popular reading of the *Morte Arthure*, however, is the interpretation of it as a tragedy. Aside from Elise Van Der Ven-Ten Bensel's casual reference to its tragic tone, Karl-Joseph Hültgen (1957) is the first critic to offer a tragical interpretation of the *Morte Arthure*. Basically, he develops his argument around the role that the Goddess Fortuna plays in the poem. The early chroniclers of Arthur's life--Geoffrey of Monmouth, Wace, and Layamon--were, he argues, almost exclusively interested either in praising him as a national hero or in holding him up as a model for the ideal courtly knight. But the introduction of Fortuna and her wheel into the story in the French prose romance, *Mort Artu*, radically changed the depiction of Arthur and his deeds. For the first time in Arthurian literature Arthur's life and deeds are circumscribed by the forces of fortune and death that destroy him and his kingdom. Arthur becomes a tragic figure. But his fall in *Mort Artu* is not, for Hültgen, a typical *de casibus* tragedy. Rather it is a fall that illustrates "the general tragedy of worldly knighthood" (p. 43). As such it prepares for the first treatment of Arthur as an individual in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, the first work to present a classical fall in which Fortuna participates fully as a dramatic representative of Christian values.

The poet's tragic interpretation of his material is, for Hültgen, obvious in the way he structures the narrative and assigns roles to Fortuna and the Philosopher. He deliberately heightens the
tragic conflict between the heroic and the spiritual by putting the Dream of Fortune at the climax of Arthur's long, astonishingly successful campaign against the Romans. This dream and the philosopher's analysis of it prepares for Arthur's fall and points out the poem's tragical rise and fall structure. Höltgen further argues that Fortuna and the Philosopher give the poem a spiritual dimension. Appearing to Arthur as a splendid duchess descending from the sky, Fortuna bears a strong resemblance to conventional images of the Virgin Mary. The poet also develops this religious significance, Höltgen maintains, by having her turn the wheel of fortune, a function she serves as "ancilla dei" in God's hierarchy of spiritual beings. The Philosopher plays a similar role as a Christian force in the poem. In explaining Arthur's sin he complements Fortuna's role as a spiritual teacher. Last, the structure of the Dream itself mirrors, in miniature, the rise and fall structure of the entire poem.

Following the work of Höltgen, William Matthews (1960) attempts a thorough analysis of the Morte Arthure's tragic nature in The Tragedy of Arthur. He opens his discussion of genre by examining the different classifications critics have applied to the poem. After dismissing interpretations of it as a romance, a native heroic poem, and a chronicle, he develops a lengthy analysis of its narrative design, claiming that it exhibits the archetypal rise and fall structure of tragedy.

Although observing that important critics such as George Kane (1951) and Dorothy Everett (1955) refer to the Morte Arthure as a romance, Matthews argues that there is very little in the poem to warrant
this classification. The romantic elements—Arthur's magnificent court, the Round Table, the miraculous healing waters that save Gawain and Priamus, the exotic giants, elephants, camels, and Saracens, and the chivalric code of behavior—are incidental. More significant, however, is the absence of features which are found in most medieval romances: the quests of individual knights, the themes of erotic love and service to women, the concept of a knight's gentilesse, the simplistic characterization of people, and the idealistic world of fantastic possibilities. The whole tenor of the poem, for Matthews (1960, p. 96) is decidedly realistic:

Despite its free fictions and its few supernatural episodes, the poem has indeed a realistic inclination: its precise dating and topography, the careful details of armor, shipping, heraldry, and battle formation, the employment of contemporary ideas on kingship, succession, and war are all indications that the poet intended his story to be taken as historical truth. . . .

The Arthurian themes that the poet develops, moreover, are ones associated with Arthurian chronicles rather than Arthurian romance.

Matthews finds it equally erroneous to call the Morte Arthure a native heroic poem. Its alliterative verse and heroic features—the expressions of loyalty between Arthur and his men, the patriotic theme, the exhortations and vows made to honor, and so on—are not for him substantial enough reasons to believe that the Morte Arthure springs from the native tradition of Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry. He maintains that it is impossible to argue that a native heroic tradition lasted in England for more than six centuries or that the poet had an antiquarian interest in the past. The resemblances critics have noted between the
Morte Arthure and the old epic poetry are to be explained by the poet's use of chronicle sources, the similarities between all heroic poetry, and by simple coincidence.

It is also a mistake, Matthews contends, simply to define the Morte Arthure as a chronicle poem. While acknowledging that it shares historical details, textual relations, and stylistic similarities with the chronicles of Geoffrey of Monmouth, Wace, and Layamon, he points out that the Morte Arthure is different from these works in intellectual content, narrative design, aesthetic effect, and moral purpose (p. 98).

Although his approach to his material resembles Geoffrey's in its creative additions and concern for historical accuracy, the Morte Arthure poet is for Matthews interested in a good deal more than merely telling Arthur's story truthfully. The special purpose the poet has for the story is found in the changes he has made in it. First of all, he focuses his attention only on the climactic events of Arthur's last years of life--his campaign of conquest against Lucius and his disastrous civil war with Mordred. At the same time he substantially expands and alters Geoffrey's treatment of these events to give them much more dramatic impact. The most important change, however, is his addition of the wheel of fortune dream to the poem. Matthews contends that this dream reveals the structure and genre of the poem: the archetypal rise and fall structure of the medieval tragedy of Fortune (p. 105).

Basically, Matthews defines a medieval tragedy of fortune as a narrative that presents the untimely fall of a king of some other noble person from success to ruin. The tragedy of fortune is not, however, limited to a simple design. The iconography of Fortune's
wheel--the central symbol in this kind of narrative--offered medieval writers the opportunity to write more complex narratives. The four different positions a king might occupy on Fortune's wheel--sume sine regno, regnabo, regno, and regnavi--opened the way for writers such as Boccaccio and Chaucer to compose tragedies that balance the protagonist's rise to glory with his fall to misery (pp. 106-107).

The Morte Arthure poet, Matthews continues, like Chaucer adopted this more balanced, complex structure, although he altered his source materials more radically:

The chronicles gave a lead for a rise and fall, although they did not invoke the theme of fortune. He selected that part of the story which contained the climax, reduced the original climax to a setting and substituted a new climax in a later position, added to the preceding events so as to achieve a long and steady rise in Arthur's fortunes, and at the apex introduced an extensive scene of the duchess-of-the-wheel and an interpretation that forms a commentary on what precedes and what follows (Mattheus, 1960, p. 107).

The result of these alterations is unmistakable. The structure of the poem, Matthews argues, is a carefully articulated series of individual scenes which gradually develop Arthur's splendor and military conquests, assess his triumphs, and rapidly bring him to his catastrophic disasters and death. The archetypal structure, moreover, is built on a series of ironic contrasts between Arthur's rise to greatness and his fall to ruin, a balance not found in the poet's chronicle sources. The other point Matthews makes is that Arthur's role is changed in Morte Arthure. In the chronicles he is frequently a passive figure who plays no decisive part in the major battles, a king seemingly caught up in the sweep of events. In the Morte Arthure, on the other hand, Arthur's role
is greatly expanded. He almost always occupies the center of our attention: he presides over the council that decides vengeance against Rome; plans campaigns and battles; slays the giant of Mont St. Michel, Lucius, Mordred, and a host of other adversaries; has the poem's prophetic dreams; and is given a magnificent death and funeral. The whole poem is, consequently, a study of character, a tragedy of fortune rather than a chronicle.

Although some medievalists disagree on particular details of Matthews' argument, most accept his reading of the *Morte Arthure* as a medieval tragedy of fortune. The three reviews of *The Tragedy of Arthur* are no exception. While they all concur about the poem's tragic form and content, each one takes exception to one or more of Matthews' points. Helaine Newstead (1962/63), for example, takes issue with his suggestion that Arthur suffers his tragic reversal of fortunes as the result of divine justice punishing him for his desires of worldly conquests. She contends that this interpretation is fallacious because it rests on Matthews' overreading the violent, bloody descriptions of battle and the philosopher's admonitions to Arthur to repent his sins. The whole spirit of the poem, particularly the poet's obviously great admiration for Arthur and his deeds, far outweighs, in her opinion Matthews' essentially religious interpretation of Arthur's fall. In another review of the book, J. L. N. O'Loughlin (1963) disagrees with Matthews about the kind of tragedy the *Morte Arthure* is. He asserts that it is more of an Aristotelian-Shakespearean tragedy than one of the medieval-Elizabethan kind because the *Morte Arthure* poet uses the
concept of hamartia to explain Arthur's downfall. O'Loughlin does not, however, support his perception with any solid evidence. The other reviewer, John Finlayson (1963), likewise takes issue with Matthews about the cause of Arthur's fall. Arthur's catastrophe for Finlayson is not brought about by his cruelty and imperialistic designs; the wars Arthur wages, on the contrary, fulfill medieval standards for just wars. Thus the uncomplimentary portrait of Lucius and the heroic image of Arthur that the poet gives us is further evidence that we should not consider Arthur's fall the result of sin.

Other commentators on Matthews' work attempt for the most part to define more precisely what kind of tragedy the poem is. Larry Benson (1966) starts his discussion of the poem's genre with an observation about how our unconscious assumptions about tragic structure can distort our interpretation of the Morte Arthure's success:

The difficulty is that when we think of tragedy we think in Aristotelian terms, and if we classify a work like the Morte Arthure as tragedy and think furthermore that it is a very good work, almost unconsciously we begin trying to justify our judgment by discovering Aristotelian elements in it. The plot, we think, must be well-made by classic standards, and so we look for a "suitable antagonist" or for some logical way of accounting for all the parts of the plot, including the siege at Metz and Gawain's encounter with Priamus... (p. 79).

If we fail to account for everything, he continues, we judge the poem structurally flawed; if, on the other hand, we do explain all parts of the plot, we overestimate the poet's artistic subtleties.

Medieval tragedy for Benson is quite different from Aristotelian tragedy in basic premises. The cause of tragedy for medieval writers is, first of all, external to men. All worldly goods--love, wealth,
position, and life itself—are inevitably and painfully transitory, and the antagonist to felicity is chance and death rather than any human villain. The hero's fall, furthermore, is not a matter of his flawed nature or ill choices; rather it is an illustration of the medieval doctrine that man is unable to control his fate. The hero of medieval tragedy is, moreover, often an exemplary human being precisely for the purpose of underscoring the horror of his fate and the necessity of turning to heaven for our salvation (p. 80).

It is on the point of the hero's role in his tragedy that Benson disagrees most sharply with Matthews. Essentially, Matthews maintains that Arthur falls because of his pride and the cruel, imperialistic wars that it engenders. Benson, on the contrary, adopts Hültgen's explanation for Arthur's tragedy, the conflict between earthly and spiritual ideals:

The tension in a work like the *Morte Arthure* is thus not between good and evil, between the "excess" of earthly kingship and the virtue of renunciation; the tension is between the Christian detachment that is necessary for ultimate happiness even on this earth and the complete engagement with an earthly ideal that is necessary for heroism (Benson, 1966, pp. 80-81).

Arthur does fall into moral confusion, Benson admits, but the poet employs this frailty to illustrate the transitory nature and vanity of all earthly conquests. His attitude toward Arthur's catastrophe is similarly complex. He wants us to condemn the sinfulness and destruction of war and admire Arthur at the same time. The whole purpose of the poem, Benson concludes, is to demonstrate that "the worldly ideal of
heroic kingship...like all worldly ideas leads even its finest adherents to the inevitable turn of Fortune's wheel and a tragic fall" (Benson, 1966, p. 84).

In his long, careful article on the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, Robert Lumiansky (1968) generally seeks to correct what he considers the weaknesses of both Matthews' and Benson's discussions of the poem's form and content. Matthews errs primarily in minimizing the poet's praise of Arthur's as the glorious national hero and Benson mainly in discounting the poet's deliberate pointing to Arthur's sinful faults. There is no need, Lumiansky suggests, to exclude or play down either of these aspects of the poem. The poet, he points out, resolves the conflict between these two features of Arthur's story with the philosophical concepts of medieval tragedy and the virtue of Fortitude, both subsumed under the symbol of Fortune.

Lumiansky begins by objecting to Matthews's description of medieval tragedy. Matthews is wrong in deriving his definition from the one Chaucer's Monk gives about a man falling "out of heigh degree / Into myserie..." (p.98). The Monk, he explains, is merely a fictional character, hardly a reliable, deep thinker on the matter. Lumiansky also dismisses other contemporary critics' definitions based on a comment Lady Philosophy makes in Boethius's *Consolatio*. The speech Lady Philosophy gives about tragedy's being a fall from a high place to a low one dies not represent her own opinion but rather is based on a speech she repeats from Blind Fortune. A proper understanding of the medieval concept of tragedy must come, he maintains, from an
analysis of the moral principles fully developed in Boethius's 
Consolatio, the set of ethical and moral principles that explain man's 
relation to God.

Basing his argument on Boethius's vision of the world (which he 
assumes the Morte Arthure poet knew and accepted), Lumiansky finds more 
problems with Benson's and Matthews' concepts of tragedy in the poem. 
Benson's idea that all men are subject to tragic doom does not square, 
according to Lumiansky, with the principles of Boethius, who distin-
guishes between right-thinking and wrong-thinking men. A wrong-thinking 
man seeks after transitory goods and thereby suffers an inevitable fall 
while the right-thinking man concentrates mainly on attaining the love 
of God and, consequently, does not consider the loss of worldly posses-
sions tragic (pp. 101-102). Matthews' ideas about medieval tragedy are 
flawed in a different way. Basically, Lumiansky doubts that any medie-
val writer or audience would have thought about what Matthews calls 
"sentimental tragedy" (an admirable hero suffering undeserved misery) or 
that any writer would have concerned himself with either a simple or 
complex poetic structure in his definition of tragedy (pp. 101-102).

The other concept necessary for an accurate understanding of 
the Morte Arthure, Lumiansky observes, is the virtue of Fortitude, an 
idea he finds closely related to that of Fortune and certainly one an 
enlightened man of the fourteenth century would readily recognize. 
Medieval and Renaissance discussions of Fortitude, he continues, 
characteristically had the purpose of instructing men, particularly 
kings, how they should react to both prosperity and adversity. The
story of Arthur's adjustments to prosperity and adversity suggests, therefore, that the Morte Arthure is not properly a tragedy but a kind of exemplum about Fortitude:

In my view, we most closely approach the meaning of the poem when we observe that Arthur, after exhibiting virtuous magnificence and magnaminity in prosperity, risks tragic consequences by concern with self-glorification in Tuscany, rapidly shifts to steadfastness in adversity as he returns to Britain, approaches a wretched end through despair in reaction to Gawain's death, and then courageously rallies to a noble death and departing. In each of his two lapses from proper kingly behavior—one in time of prosperity and one in the face of adversity—he receives direct admonitions: (1) through the dream of the Duchess and the philosophers' interpretation of it, and (2) through Ewayne's lecture against despair. Thus I read the work of this learned and devout poet as an exemplum setting forth aspects of the virtue known as Fortitude, as they apply both in prosperity and adversity (p. 117).

Rather than being a tragedy, then, the Morte Arthure only offers tragic possibilities for Arthur's morally reprehensible actions.

The other major commentator on Matthews' reading of the poem is Gardner (1971, pp. 239-56). Generally accepting the ideas that the poem is a tragedy, Gardner develops additional arguments to support Matthews' position. The key to the poem's dramatic structure, Gardner suggests, is the idea of transience. The poet examines the tragic consequences of this concept in Arthur's life through a number of ironic contrasts between the beginning and ending of the poem. One of the most obvious contrasts is between the actions and fortunes of Lucius and Arthur. In the early part of the poem Arthur's nobility provides a clear contrast to Lucius's tyranny. In the last part, however, Lucius's deeds—his cruelty, heedless destruction of people and cities, and his
catastrophic fall--become an ironic prefigurement of Arthur's prideful actions and tragic fate.

Another device the poet uses to suggest the transitory nature of the world, and hence the tragic reversal of fortunes that awaits Arthur, is the image of the earthly paradise. This image of the locus amoenus--the beautiful garden of singing birds, blooming flowers, and luxuriant trees situated by a river--frequently appears as a peaceful contrast to scenes of conflict and violence as, for example, in the case when Arthur and his party ride by such a garden on the way to Arthur's combat with the giant of Mont St. Michel. In addition to providing this sort of contrast, the locus amoenus serves a larger function in the poem. Throughout medieval literature the pleasant place seems impervious to change when in fact it is not. The poet uses this ironic meaning, according to Gardner, to help underscore the poem's central theme of Fortune's duplicity (p. 247).

Still another pattern of iconography the poet uses to prepare for Arthur's fall is his dream of the combat between the dragon and the bear. Gardner observes that this dream carefully presents Arthur's conflict with evil forces in the first part of the poem. The poet employs the image of the bear, a standard medieval symbol for ferocity and man's bestial nature, to represent both the giant of Mont St. Michel and Lucius. The image of the dragon, on the other hand, is ambiguous since it represents both vital energy and evil destructiveness. This ambiguity, however, enables the poet to prepare for Arthur's evil doings and tragic fate. His potential for evil and destructiveness is for Gardner ironically present in the image of the dragon all along (p. 254).
The most recent editor of the *Morte Arthure*, Valerie Krishna (1976) also agrees that the poem is a medieval tragedy of fortune. Noting that it is a hard poem to classify, she points out that it contains a good number of both romantic and heroic traits. Although the usual heroic traits mentioned in discussions of the poem—the loyalty and generosity that Arthur and his knights extend to each other, the stylized language of boasting, insults, and exhortations to courage, and the council of advisors to the king—are all standard features of literary descriptions of warfare, the poem still has a predominantly heroic spirit. Auerbach's definition of a romance as the story of a single knight's adventures in a world removed from historical and political exigencies is clearly not appropriate for the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*. Most of the actions in the poem are collective efforts that serve definite political purposes. On the other hand, the poem still has a good many romantic qualities: its idealized natural settings, the abduction of the lady by the giant of Mont St. Michel, Gawain's adventure with Priamus, and the healing of their wounds by a magic potion. Matthews' theory that the poem is a tragedy reconciles in Krishna's estimation its heroic and romantic traits and reveals that it is a work that has a coherent aesthetic form (Krishna, pp. 19-22).

Two of the latest commentators on the poem also view it as a tragedy. Remarking that it makes greater deviation from its chronicle sources than does its companion poem, *The Wars of Alexander*, Thorlac Turville-Petre (1977) observes that the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* has a structure that balances Arthur's rise and fall with the dreams of the
dragon and the bear and the Goddess Fortuna and her wheel. Turville-Petre is not comfortable, however, with the explanations most critics have offered for Arthur's fall:

It has. . . been maintained that Arthur's fall is caused by his vaunting pride and his unjust and cruel wars, but no two commentators are agreed on when Arthur's wars become unjust. Are they unjust from the outset, or after his defeat of the Roman Emperor Lucius (11.2386 ff.), or as he fights with great cruelty in Tuscany (11.3150 ff.)? This difference of opinion is quite understandable, because there is no discussion in the poem of the concept of the "just", no explicit comment on when and why Arthur's wars become sinful, and no consistent attitude toward the warriors' reckless ambition (p. 103).

The poem, Turville-Petre concludes, thus examines the moral ambiguities of a hero's attitude toward war, but it does not begin to resolve them. Maureen Fries (1981) likewise agrees with the general consensus that the poem is a tragedy. Where she differs from this common opinion, however, is in her assessment of what kind of tragedy it is. The diverse sources from which the poet drew his inspiration—romance elements, the chronicle structure, folklore materials, and pseudo-history—suggest to her that the Alliterative Morte Arthure is ultimately a complex casibus tragedy (p. 42).

The other major way critics classify the poem is to describe it as a chanson de geste. The leading proponent for this way of reading the poem is John Finlayson (1968). Unlike most commentators, however, Finlayson takes care in defining his terms and constructing arguments to support his position. In the process he raises a good many critical topics for any useful study of the poem's genre and aesthetic effects.
In his introduction to his edition of the poem, he begins his comments on genres by defining *chanson de geste*. Basically, a *chanson de geste* is a species of heroic poem devoted to extolling martial values, particularly the valor that the hero exhibits, sometimes excessively, in the interests of his lord or king. Acknowledging similarities between the *chanson de geste* and romance, he nevertheless draws a distinction between them:

Both have in common certain aristocratic values, such as courage, loyalty, honour, skill in arms, which are most frequently illustrated through the medium of combat. The difference lies in the emphasis placed on these qualities, on the ends which they are made to serve and on the contexts within which they operate (Finlayson, 1968, pp. 6-7).

Although the heroes of romance and *chanson de geste* are both valiant champions, they express their prowess in significantly different forms: the hero of the *chanson de geste* displays his valor publicly while the hero of romance exhibits his in the attempt to attain some private goal. The importance of distinguishing the hero's field of action is, Finlayson notes, the key to understanding the different natures of these genres.

The poet's source for his hero's character also largely determines whether the poem is a *chanson de geste* or a romance. The hero of a *chanson de geste* is drawn from life while his counterpart in romance is fashioned from literary conventions. The ideals ascribed to these heroes are, accordingly, very different:

The ideal to which the romance hero aspires is that of *courtoisie* and, while the values of the *chanson de geste* are expressed primarily through battle, *courtoisie* operates equally through the refinement of laws of combat, social intercourse, and service to women (Finlayson, 1968, p. 6).
The contrast Finleyson seems to be making here is that the hero of romance attempts to perfect himself in all spheres of courtly life while the hero of a *chanson de geste* endeavors to be a perfect warrior.

Using these distinctions between the *chanson de geste* and the romance as criteria, Finleyson builds the argument that the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* is best described as a *chanson de geste*. He first points out that it closely resembles the *Chanson de Roland* and other chansons in heroic sentiments, particularly in its Anglo-Saxon attitudes toward battle, the loyalty of Arthur and his men to each other, its lack of a "love-interest," and Arthur's conventional lament for Gawain's death. Similarly, the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, like the *Chanson de Roland*, is "concerned with nationalism, the glories of war, with warrior heroes and a warrior king, and in addition to all this has a strong religious tone" (p. 11). The other argument Finlayson offers is the similarity between the structure of both poems. He suggests that both the *Chanson de Roland* and the *Morte Arthure* naturally fall into four sections of narrative that closely parallel each other.

In a more recent essay on the poem, Finlayson radically modifies his views on the poem. Although he still believes it to be a *chanson de geste* in subject matter and spirit, he admits that its style and characterization are not purely heroic. There is much about the poem that is romantic:

In addition, much of the expressive technique of the poem evokes the ethos of courtly romance rather than that of the bleaker world of *chanson de geste*. The "decorative" elements such as the description of landscape, but more particularly the description of Arthur's arriving and the
vivid visual insets of the two dreams, add a physical substance to the poem which allies it more to the *Knight's Tale* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* than to the *Chanson de Roland* (Finlayson, 1968, pp. 256-257).

Similarly, Finlayson is less dogmatic about his description of Arthur's character. He maintains that "the lines of Arthur's character are not purely heroic or romantic; they are not even purely fictional" (pp. 256-257). He also remarks that the poem has a tragic dimension although its tragedy is based neither on a simple rise and fall structure nor on the capricious workings of Fortune.

The other critic who classifies the *Morte Arthure* as a chanson de geste is W. F. Bolton (1970). He does not, however, begin to define what he means by this label, what particular kind of plot, characters, and themes a chanson de geste has. He merely remarks that "the *Morte Arthure* was a heroic poem which had the nature of a chanson de geste" (p. 399).

The *Morte Arthure's* diversity of artistic effects has forced other writers to adopt mixed views about its genre. One of these critics, J. L. N. O'Loughlin (1959), alternately refers to it as a romance, an epic, and a tragedy. His first reference to it as a romance seems much more casual than critical since he does not begin to explain how its plot, characters, and themes are romantic. Similarly, he gives no reasons to support his claim that it is an epic other than noting that R. W. Chambers (1939) classified it as such. His observation that it has tragic significance rests merely on this assertion that the noble and courageous Arthur rose and fell as the result of his hamartia of engendering Mordred (p. 524).
Roger Sherman Loomis (1963, p. 150) gives much more cogent arguments why the Morte Arthure must be called both a heroic poem and a tragedy. It is, first of all, an epic because its overriding interest in martial actions and thematic parallels with other epics:

Indeed, the Morte Arthure itself has been classed as an epic, and there is nothing about it particularly romantic—no love interest, no mystery. Like most of the chansons de geste, Beowulf and the Iliad, it is preoccupied with deeds of physical prowess. There are long stretches devoted to thrusts of lance and cuts of sword, as exciting—or boring—as similar passages in the Iliad or a running commentary on a football match. By chance, the Morte Arthure and Beowulf offer a certain parallelism in depicting a fight with a monster and ending with the death and obsequies of a hero.

At the same time Loomis finds the structure of the poem dramatic in form. The symmetrical arrangement of the plot into the rising and falling actions of Arthur's fortunes along with the carefully placed dream of Fontune is, for Loomis, irrefutable evidence that the author intended his poem to be accepted as a tragedy. But, unlike Hültgen, Matthews, and other critics, Loomis does not believe that Arthur suffers a tragic fate as a result of hamartia or sin. Realistically, he falls because of Mordred's unexpected treachery and, symbolically, because of Fortune's fickleness (p. 150).

Another critic apparently undecided about how to classify the poem is John E. Stevens (1973). He begins by pointing out that general descriptions of romance and epic apply only to model poems of the genre, not to the many other poems we call romances. The Alliterative Morte Arthure is a particularly good case in point since it is "uncommonly hard to classify, but uncommonly rewarding in the attempt" (p. 90).
There are a number of reasons why Stevens finds it difficult to decide if the poem is a romance or an epic. There is, first of all, the matter of Arthur's role in the poem. Arthur is not the typical hero of romance:

... Arthur does not stand for Man Alone in the way that, for example, Chretien's Lancelot does, or the English Gawain in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Apart from anything else, he seldom is alone, except on Mont St. Michel; he usually has a huge army in support; the central action of the poem is a campaign not a quest (Stevens, 1973, p. 91).

But Stevens does not share John Finlayson's view that the heroic and communal values expressed in the poem necessarily make it a chanson de geste. He argues that these values are often central features of romances as well as epics.

While admitting that the parallel between the Chanson de Roland and the Alliterative Morte Arthure is useful, Stevens goes on to note that it can distort our understanding of the Morte Arthure's unique character.

In so far as valour, loyalty, religious fervour are also qualities of the epic hero, the parallel with epic is useful. But where the parallel obscures the issue is, I think, in the balance between individual and social values. The essential difference between the ethos of the Chanson de Roland and that of the Morte Arthure is this—In the former the individual (Roland, particularly) is, as it were, carried by the community, which has in an important sense created him; in the latter, the individual (Arthur) is the fountain and well-head of the community, the Round Table, which he has himself created ... (Stevens, 1973, p. 92).

This distinction is particularly significant because it identifies the social role Arthur plays in the poem. Arthur is not only an individual hero but also the figurehead of an entire civilization: he must,
therefore, be defined as fulfilling both roles—hero and king—thus preventing us from reading the poem exclusively either as a romance or an epic.

Another reason why Stevens cannot agree to call the Morte Arthure a chanson de geste is the Morte Arthure's greater feeling for "the richness of life." Unlike the Chanson de Roland which almost exclusively occupies itself with the martial life, the Morte Arthure creates a fuller sense of the world surrounding the campaigns Arthur and Lucius wage. It is this greater sensitivity to the physical world and the material and social splendors of Arthur's court that convinces Stevens to argue for the poem's romantic nature. Unable to accept either Finlayson's distinction between the dream and reality of romance and chanson de geste or his belief that the Morte Arthure gives "a heightened view of reality". Stevens argues that it combines both romantic and heroic features:

So the difference between the alliterative Morte and other romances is not absolute; it resides in the kind and quality of "reality" which is heightened into "dream", or (as I should prefer to say) idealized. The ideal is, indeed, of a "Christian warrior-king" but one who also embodies the virtues of chivalry and knighthood (Stevens, 1973, p. 94).

Some of the most recent full-length studies of the poem attempt to solve the problem of classifying it by devising new genres for it. Apparently expanding upon Lumiansky's idea that the poem should be read as an exemplum, James E. Boren (1970) develops the argument that the poem has the form of an ethical discourse. Basically, he suggests that the poem is divided into five narrative sections punctuated by Arthur's
combat with the Giant of Mont St. Michel and Gawain and Priamus's encounter. These two episodes enable the poet to contrast the self-indulgent, morally reprehensible behavior of literary romance with the grim responsibilities of medieval warfare and kingship. The whole poem, then, is for Boren an assessment of Arthur's kingship and simultaneously a condemnation of contemporary practices of romantic behavior and warfare. Following Lumiansky's analysis of the poem even more closely, Gratia H. Murphy (1976) argues that the Alliterative Morte Arthure should be read as a fürstenapiegel, a treatise of instruction for kings. She contends that this genre best enables critics to answer questions about the character of Arthur, the unity of the poem, and the poet's artistic purposes in composing it. Typical of other such treatises popular in England during the late medieval period, the Alliterative Morte Arthure exhibits the poet's desire to teach us about the problems of kingship, to call for moral balance in the king's behavior, and to argue for the king's obedience to the law. This pedagogical purpose, furthermore, explains the poem's structure of contrasts and parallelism of actions and characters.

Conclusions

Despite these critics' attempts to classify the Alliterative Morte Arthure, the problem of describing its essential nature as a narrative still remains. Most commentators, unfortunately, have been content to define its genre on the basis of its themes and surface details of characterization, action, and setting. A more satisfactory approach to defining its genre, however, is one that endeavors to
explain the underlying reasons for our perceptions of the poem's particular details of theme, character, action, and setting—in short, a structural analysis—since different genres exhibit fundamentally different patterns of organization (Bloomfield, 1970). The aim of this study, accordingly, is the analysis of the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*'s plot structure, the way the poet constructs and joins together the various episodes of the story into a particular artistic design.
The most difficult problem is studying the structure of the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* in delimiting the scope of the analysis. Any valuable discussion of the poem as a particular narrative involves, first of all, defining what a narrative is. The complexities of the subject are vast, including such matters as point of view, narrative time, and modes of discourse, all topics of continuing controversy. The particular critical dilemma is determining what relevance, if any, these matters have to a discussion of the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*’s narrative structure and genre.

A second problem, that of finding a precise language to describe the poet’s total narration of his story, is only slightly less formidable. Much of the language formerly used to explain the various elements of storytelling—terms such as narrative, episode, motif, narration, motivation, and so on—must either be used with greater precision and consistency or be abandoned as imprecise. Still other terms must be invented to illuminate various modes of narration.

The place to begin the analysis of the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*’s narrative structure is with the terms narrative and narration. A narrative is a series of real or imaginary intercalated episodes and macro-episodes bound together with passages of description and commentary into a particular chronological order by a variety of causal,
temporal, and thematic relationships. Narrative therefore refers to the total content of the work. By *narration* I mean all of the writer's artistic manipulations of the details of his story, e.g., the way he orders the episodes and macro-episodes of the plot, the amount of space he devotes to narrating different episodes and describing characters and setting, the amount of commentary he makes on actions, the patterns of imagery he develops, and so on. To put it another way, a narrative is a finished artistic product whereas narration is the process by which the product is completed.

**Elements of Narrative**

A useful way to begin describing the various components of a narrative is by distinguishing between *story* and *narrative*. This distinction is helpful because it clarifies the writer's role in shaping an individual narrative. *Story* is a general term that designates the incomplete accumulation of logically, thematically, or temporally related incidents and details about a particular event or the actions of a character concerned with that event. The term *narrative*, on the other hand, refers to a completed artistic creation, the product of the writer's deliberate choice and arrangement of details and incidents from a story.

The writer's creation of a narrative in turn depends essentially on his construction of a plot, the central artistic structure of the work. Aristotle's discussion of plot still illuminates the nature of narrative form and content. A plot is a unified, complete action that
possess significance, importance: it is what Aristotle (1950) calls a "whole":

A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end. A beginning is that which does not itself follow anything by causal necessity, but after which something naturally is or comes to be. An end, on the contrary, is that which itself naturally follows some other thing, either by necessity or as a rule, which has nothing following it. A middle is that which follows something as some other thing follows it. A well-constructed plot, therefore, must neither begin nor end at haphazard but conforms to these principles (p. 11).

The definition and position of the major parts of the plot's action—its beginning, middle, and end—are governed by the principles of logical necessity. There is no choice about what the beginning and ending of the plot's action should be.

A more precise analysis of the nature of plot demands an examination of its chief component, the episode. Although Aristotle frequently refers to the episode in his discussion of plot, he never defines it. The critical problem is describing its relative size in a narrative. Morton Bloomfield (1970, p. 99) illuminates both these matters. An episode, first of all, is any reasonable division of action in a plot:

Critics may differ as to how many episodes a plot may be divided into, but by and large I suspect there will usually be a large measure of agreement on the subject. I am using the term in the broad sense, of any natural unit of action, any section into which a plot may be with some reason divided.

Episode, then, is a relative term that refers to actions of different magnitudes.
What an episode is, Bloomfield (1970) continues, does not, however, explain the considerable complexity possible in the structure of some plots. There are all sorts of episodes that may be joined together in a variety of ways:

Episodes may be in other episodes, as clauses may be in other clauses. A knight embarks on a quest and meets a number of adventures and finally terminates his quest. The quest as a whole may be considered as a macro-episode in which episodes are embedded. There may even be, as in some Icelandic sagas, several macro-episodes in a narrative. Episodes may be unusual or decorative or essential: they may be of long or of short duration. Some may consist of dialogue; others of described action. All sorts of complexity are possible. . . (p. 99).

At the same time Bloomfield distinguishes between the episode and other elements of narrative. He points out that the episode is the central element of plot but certainly not the only component of narrative:

A narrative, of course, consists of more than episodes, for there are also descriptive passages which may slow down the action, and there may be comments of a person or teller which punctuate an episode or act as a division between episodes (p. 99).

Moreover, these other elements of narrative—passages of description and commentary—also embellish episodes and modify the rate at which the plot unfolds.

Aristotle (1950, pp. 12-13) suggests that there is a further distinction to be made about episodes: some episodes are essential for maintaining the integrity of a plot; others are not:

As, therefore, in the other imitative arts, the imitation is one when the object imitated is one, so the plot, being an imitation of an action, must imitate one action, and that a whole, the structural union of the parts being such that, if any one of them is displaced or removed, the whole will be disjointed and disturbed. For a thing whose presence or absence makes no visible difference is not an organic part of the whole.
For the purpose of discussion it is useful to label these two different kinds of episodes. Episodes that are essential to preserve the integrity of the plot—that is, the causal necessity that exists between its parts—may be called integral episodes; the others, non-integral.

This distinction between narrative units has significance for the plot structure of a narrative. Although the writer's artistic freedom is in some measure limited by the causal and chronological relations between episodes, he still has considerable liberty to add non-integral episodes along with description and commentary.

As the elemental component of plot, the integral episode, then, is the primary avenue along which a narrative moves. Their analysis, moreover, reveals the core of the plot. The study of the narrative's non-integral episodes and passages of description and commentary likewise describes the writer's artistic embellishments in constructing his work. The particular form his embellishments take also helps to clarify the narrative's meaning.

An examination of the integral and non-integral episodes in the Alliterative Morte Arthure is especially valuable for a description of its artistic structure. As William Matthews (1960) has pointed out, the poet made a great many substantive changes in the material of his sources. At the same time he chose various episodes from his source, he also diminished or amplified their thematic significance. At the same time he added a good number of episodes and passages of description and commentary to his narrative. By considering the various uses he makes
of these integral and non-integral episodes and other passages, it is possible to describe both the poem's artistic design and genre.

The other main component of plot is the macro-episode, as defined above by Bloomfield. At the level of macro-episode a narrative's plot is comprised of a few major actions. In a typical romantic comedy, for example, two lovers are separated by adversity, suffer a number of trials that define their worthiness as lovers, and then are united in marriage. The three major actions of separation, trial, and union are in turn all composed of individual episodes. At the same time these three macro-episodes clearly have archetypal significance. The actions of separation, trial, and union have universal meanings in whatever romantic comedy they appear. We are, consequently, able to compare our romantic comedy with others that have the same three major actions and thus to distinguish features peculiar to our narrative.

Elements of narration

In addition to having a specific content of episodes, descriptions, commentary, and macro-episodes, every narrative also displays a specific form derived from the various temporal, spatial, aesthetic, and thematic relationships between its different parts as well as the narrator's relationship with his material. The analysis of the creation of a narrative is accordingly concerned with defining the contribution the form makes to the artistic effects.

The writer's total articulation of his narrative may be described under four general headings. The first of these is the ordering of episodes and passages of description and commentary into a particular
temporal arrangement, whether it is given in chronological order or in
the anachronous order of flashbacks, flashforwards, and parallel narrat-
on.\(^1\) The order of events in a narrative is especially important for
its artistic effects. As Bloomfield (1970) puts it, "the mere fact
that one episode rather than another follows upon an episode is of great
aesthetic significance" (p. 101).

Another major aspect of narration is emphasis. Not every detail
of a story is equally important. The author presents, therefore, dif-
f erent narrative details in different forms. Some relatively unimpor-
tant details he merely summarizes. More important details he expands
into extended descriptions of places, people, and events, or into dra-
matic exchanges. Still other content he passes over entirely with an
ellipsis. The amount of space and kind of artistic treatment he gives
to different narrative content help to establish the emotional tone of
his narrative, thereby contributing to its overall artistic effect.

The third feature of a narration is pace, the speed at which it
unfolds. Since a narrative is composed of different kinds of narrative
content--passages of summary, description, dialogue, and action of vari-
ous lengths--it has its own narrative tempo that rises from the alter-
nation of these different kinds of content. The analysis of pace thus
involves a description of the artistic effects pace gives to narration.

The fourth major aspect of narration is focus. The three basic
modes of focus are point of view, voice, and aesthetic distance. Point

\(^1\)I am generally indebted to Gerard Genette for the definitions of narrative and narration as well as those for flashback, flashforward, and parallel narration that follow. See Genette, 1980, pp. 25-32.
of view refers to the physical place or ideological perspective from which the work is narrated. Included in point of view are overt, covert, and absent narrators with varying degrees of information about the narrative's mental and physical action. A narrative's voice, on the contrary, is distinct from its point of view. Point of view refers only to the particular physical or ideological perspective from which the narrative is presented. Voice, on the other hand, designates the form of expression the narrative takes, the patterns of speech used to communicate its events and dramatic situations to the audience (Chatman, 1978, p. 153). Aesthetic distance, the other mode of focus, refers to the psychological relationship that the writer has with his narrative, the degree to which he is able to narrate it objectively or subjectively (Preminger, 1974, pp. 5-6). In choosing different points of view, voices, and aesthetic distances from which to narrate different scenes, the writer deliberately controls the amount and kind of information we receive about characters and events.

The focus of my study of the Alliterative Morte Arthure's genre will be directed to the ordering of events, which is particularly important because the analysis of genre most fundamentally rests on the linkage between events. More important than any other feature of narration is temporal arrangement, since it presents the sequence of actions that determine the character's good or bad fortunes and his consequent response to events.

2 Wayne C. Booth, of course, gives the most comprehensive discussion of point of view in his Rhetoric of Fiction. I owe this particular distinction about point of view, however, to Seymour Chatman. See Chatman, 1978, p. 153.
Ordering of Events

The ordering of events in a narrative may be of two kinds. The first is a temporal arrangement, the straightforward structure of events. In this kind of arrangement the narrative moves in a natural, historical sequence. The other kind of arrangement is anachronous in which the narrative displays a variety of devices that alternatively disrupt and restore the straightforward sequence of events. Most narratives use both of these arrangements.

The narrative devices that disrupt the natural temporal arrangement of episodes are flashbacks, flashforwards, and parallel narration in a narrative. Simply stated, a flashback refers to a movement of the narrative into the past for the purpose of recalling an action or dramatic situation earlier than the present moment of the narrative. A flashforward, on the other hand, designates any movement of the narrative into the future to evoke an action or dramatic situation after the present moment of the narrative. A parallel narration refers to a shift from one action to a separate but simultaneous action or dramatic situation.

Flashbacks and flashforwards have reach, the amount of time they move us away from the present moment of the narrative. The reach of flashbacks and flashforwards may also be either definite or indefinite. If the narrator gives a clear indication of how far backward or forward we have moved in time, the reach is definite; if he does not, the reach is indefinite. Since parallel narration presents actions or dramatic situations occurring simultaneously with the abandoned narrative, it has
no reach. Second, flashbacks, flashforwards, and parallel narration all have extent, the duration of the action or dramatic situation they present. This duration varies: it may be seconds or centuries.

Along with possessing these attributes, flashbacks, flashforwards, and parallel narration also reveal various relationships with the action they momentarily displace. A flashback or flashforward is external if its extent is entirely outside the temporal boundaries of the action it displaces. An example of an external flashback comes from the *Odyssey*. In Book XIX the narrator suddenly disrupts his account of Ulysses's reception by his old nurse to narrate the story of Ulysses' being wounded by a boar decades before the action of the *Odyssey* begins. The extent of this flashback is clearly outside the temporal boundaries of the *Odyssey*'s primary narrative.

A flashback or flashforward is internal, on the other hand, if its extent is entirely inside the primary narrative. An instance of an internal flashback is the narration of Arthur's activities during his war with Mordred toward the end of the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*. While Arthur waits for an opportunity to land his forces after his sea battle with Mordred's Danish mercenaries, the narrator suddenly abandons Arthur's exploits to present the parallel narration of Gawain's landing his men and encountering Mordred's waiting army. Then after Gawain's death the narrator abruptly flashes back in time to recount Arthur's actions in the immediate past. This flashback is internal because its extent is located entirely inside the temporal boundaries of the primary
narrative of the poem. The other narrative device, parallel narration, is always internal since parallel narration occurs simultaneously with the primary narrative.

Both internal and external flashbacks and flash forwards, furthermore, may or may not directly influence the primary narrative they momentarily displace. The ones that do influence it are either completitive— they fill in past or future gaps in the narrative—or reiterative— they repeat parts of the narrative already presented. The internal flashback mentioned above clearly is completitive in that it fills in the gap of what transpired between the time that Gawain left Arthur's forces in the bay and Arthur's subsequent discovery of Gawain's corpse on land.

The other possibility is an internal/external flashback or flash forward: that is one whose extent lies partially inside and outside the primary narrative. At the end of the leave-taking scene early in the poem when Guinevere watches Arthur ride out of sight, the narrator observes that Guinevere sees him no more. If we interpret this comment to mean that Guinevere has seen him for the last time, it illustrates an internal/external flash forward since its extent begins inside the primary narrative and extends past its end— Arthur's death. Guinevere does survive Arthur in a nunnery.

At the same time that flashbacks, flash forwards, and parallel narration exhibit different temporal relationship with the primary narrative, they also display different closure with it. Since a flashback, flash forward or parallel narration may or may not have the same extent as the period of time it displaces in the primary narrative, it
may or may not close with it. A flashback, flashforward, or parallel narration does not close with the primary narrative if it ends with an ellipsis, a space of unnarrated time between it and the primary narrative it rejoins. An example of a parallel narration that does not close with the primary narrative occurs during Arthur's siege of Metz. After Arthur's army has set up a siege around the city, the narrator presents the parallel narration of Gawain's foraging expedition and subsequent encounters with Priamus and the Duke of Lorraine's army. When he has narrated these episodes, he dutifully returns to his narration of Arthur's siege without accounting for what events transpired during Gawain's absence, thus leaving a space of unnarrated time between the two different narrations.

A flashback, flashforward, or parallel narration closes with the primary narrative if it connects temporally with it without exposing any space of unnarrated time. An episode that illustrates closure between a parallel narration and the primary narrative is found early in the poem. Temporarily abandoning his narration of Arthur's activities after giving the Roman envoy instructions about leaving England, the narrator gives a very rapid summary of the envoy's return to Rome. He then advances this parallel narration more than a month into the future by giving a description of Lucius Iberius's preparation for war and subsequent invasion of Germany. Flashing back to the primary narrative he momentarily left, the narrator then accounts for Arthur's activities from the point of the envoy's departure to a point in time that parallels Lucius's invasion of Germany. The narrator thus effects closure with the two different narrations.
The end result of these various kinds of temporal dislocations is to involve the reader in the active recreation of the narrative. As Meir Sternberg (1978, p. 50) puts it,

The literary text may be conceived of as a dynamic system of gaps. A reader who wishes to actualize the field of reality that is represented in a work, to construct (or rather re-construct) the fictive world and action it projects, is necessarily compelled to pose and answer, throughout the reading process, such questions as, What is happening or has happened, and why? What is the connection between this event and the previous ones? What is the motivation of this or that character? To what extent does the logic of cause and effect correspond to that of everyday life? and so on. Most of the answers to these questions, however, are not provided explicitly, fully and authoritatively (let alone immediately) by the text, but must be worked out by the reader himself on the basis of the implicit guidance it affords.

The art of narration, consequently, exists precisely in the writer's deft manipulation of this system of gaps in his narrative. He must constantly balance the reader's desire for suspense with his need for coherence.

**Motivation**

Up to this point in our discussion we have focused primarily on the various kinds of temporal dislocation possible in a narrative and the devices that disrupt and restore temporal order in the primary narrative. These narrative effects, however, are only surface manifestations of the narrative's deeper structure. To define this deep structure, we must take our analysis a step further to study the complex network of causal, chronological, and aesthetic connections existing between the various elements of the plot—its episodes and
macro-episodes—as well as passages of the narrator's description and commentary.

The study of structure at this level of analysis is called motivation. The term is not used here to refer to psychological reasons that explain a character's attitudes or responses to events or situation of his or her life. Motivation here refers rather to the narrative relations that bind episodes, macro-episodes, and passages of description and commentary into a particular narrative form.

Although Tomashevsky (1965) suggests that there are three different kinds of motivation—compositional, realistic, and artistic—it is possible to classify all of these narrational concerns under two general headings: plot motivation and artistic motivation. Plot motivation designates the inclusion of an episode, macro-episode, or narratorial comment in the narrative for the purpose of constructing an unified plot or for describing a character or his actions. Artistic motivation, on the other hand, refers to the use of an episode, macro-episode, or narratorial comment for an artistic effect other than that of furthering the action of the plot. Included in artistic motivation are such effects as thematic contrasts, the creation of a particular emotional atmosphere for a scene, enhancing the narrative's verisimilitude, and so on. Every literary narrative displays a combination of these various kinds of motivation.

These two general categories of motivation suggest a number of different ways an author may join segments of narrative together. Basically, he may link segments together temporally, causally, and
artistically. A temporal linking is characterized by joining one segment to another in chronological order, as when, for example, a knight in a romance dies of mortal wounds after receiving them in combat. Another knight may then decide to take revenge for his fellow knight's death. Such joining of segments satisfies a demand for causality in the narrative. Artistic linking, on the other hand, designates a yoking of segments for a variety of thematic effects other than those of merely establishing the plot's causal and chronological coherence. In a romance, for instance, the poet may suddenly interrupt his protagonist's perilous journey through a wasteland with an unexpected appearance of a pleasure garden over a ravine to suggest the magical quality of the alien landscape. It is also possible that a linking of segments may exhibit two (or even all three) kinds of linking simultaneously. The sudden appearance of the pleasure garden in the ravine may have been foretold in the quester's dream as a mysterious place where he would meet a guide who would lead him to Chapel Perilous. The linking in this case would clearly satisfy both temporal and causal reasons for its inclusion in the narrative.

In addition to different kinds of motivation, there are also different motivational states between narrative segments. Morton Bloomfield (1970) observes that the linking between them may be fully or adequately motivated, poorly or inadequately motivated, or not motivated at all. He also points out that there are two different modes of presenting the motivation between two segments of narrative: forward and backward motivation. By forward motivation he means that in any two consecutive segments of narrative, the reason for the second segment's
existence in the narrative is found in the first segment. In backward motivation, on the other hand, the reason for the first segment's existence in the narrative is found in the second segment. Thus, in Arthur's dream of the dragon and the bear in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, for instance, we are required to wait for the philosophers' explanation of the dream to understand its presence in the plot. In still other cases, there is no discernable reason for the linking of two segments together. In addition, Bloomfield (1970, p. 126) identifies a fourth state that he calls "prepares the way for," when none of the other motivational states seems to apply yet the preceding segment of narrative is clearly an introduction to the segment that follows. He cites the genealogical opening of *Beowulf* that prepares for the combat with Grendel as an example of this fourth motivational state. The virtue of Bloomfield's distinction about motivational states is that it permits a complete description of the various ways segments may be related to one another.

**Macro-Structure**

The most convenient place to begin an analysis of the *Alliterative Morte Arthure's* structure is at the level of macro-episode, at which the poem's basic pattern of organization reveals itself most clearly. In its most general terms the story of Arthur's war with Lucius is composed of three macro-episodes, each of which is comprised of a number of integral and non-integral episodes as well as passages of description and commentary. Arthur rebells against Lucius's demands for vassalage and tribute. He leaves England to wage war with the
Romans in France and Italy, defeating all of the Roman armies and eventually killing Lucius. After overcoming the Roman Threat, Arthur returns to England to face civil war and his own death at Mordred's hands.

That the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* does in fact exhibit this tripartite division of its narrative is evident in the way the poet uses Arthur's two prophetic dreams to separate the three macro-episodes dealing with Arthur's fortunes. Although a number of critics have advanced theories to describe the poem's macro-structure—notably James Boren (1971), John Finlayson (1963), Karl-Joseph Höltgen (1957), Jean Ritzke-Rutherford (1981 and Thorlac Turville-Petre (1977)—none have offered compelling evidence to support their positions. The first section of the poem (ll. 1-830) constitutes a prelude to Arthur's campaign against the Romans. In these lines we learn about the strong character of Arthur's kingship, Lucius's challenge to it, Arthur's council of war, and his departure for the continent. In mythic terms his first section of the poem represents Arthur's separation from England and his normal activities of kingship to meet the Roman threat to his sovereignty.

At this point in the narrative the poet momentarily interrupts the physical action of Arthur's night voyage to Normandy with Arthur's first dream of the combat between the Bear and the Dragon (ll. 760-830). In addition to concluding the first major action of the poem, this symbolic dream also foreshadows the particularly violent struggles that will take place between Arthur and the tyrants who seek to overcome him.
In the long middle section of the poem (ll. 831-3217), we follow Arthur's various exploits—his combat with the Giant of St. Michael's Mount and his numerous battles throughout France and Italy—as he gradually changes from a benign conqueror to a despot. In the course of his struggles to defeat the Roman armies, Arthur experiences the exhilaration of wielding virtually unlimited political power. This new experience is clearly Arthur's initiation into the possibilities of the heroic life and the limitations of earthly power.

At the height of Arthur's success the poet again temporarily stops the physical action of the narrative with Arthur's prophetic dream about the Wheel of Fortune (ll. 3218-3455). This dream performs narrative functions similar to those of the first dream. At the same time that it comments on the vanities of human fortunes and, by implication, the tenuousness of Arthur's power, it also prepares symbolically for his catastrophic return to England.

The last section of the poem (ll. 3456-4346) presents the tragic conclusion to Arthur's exploits. Responding to the news of Mordred's usurpation of his throne, Arthur quickly appoints regents to govern his conquered lands in Europe and wearily returns to England with his army to free his subjects from Mordred's reign. Even though Arthur's return is catastrophic, it still represents the mythic return of the hero. Arthur's adventures in war have come full circle.

The poem's tripartite structure is further substantiated by the poet's balanced construction of narrative. The first part of the poem—Arthur's departure for the continent—occupies 830 lines; the
last part—his doomed return to England—takes 891 lines to narrate.
Even though the poet does not balance these two parts of the poem with exactly the same number of lines, the balance of parts is apparent.
The relatively short first and last sections obviously enclose the relatively long middle section in much the same way two slender end panels frame the wide center panel in a triptych. The two dreams are structurally like frames that join the panels.
Arthur's Departure

The first macro-episode of the poem (11. 1-830)—the amount of the events leading up to Arthur's departure from England to wage war on the continent—is composed of seventeen episodes that carefully delineate the development of the conflict between Arthur and Lucius. Five of these episodes—the arrival of the Roman ambassador with Lucius's demands for Arthur's fealty and tribute (11. 78-165), Arthur's council of war with his knights (11. 243-406), the Roman ambassador's delivering Arthur's challenge to Lucius (11. 503-569), Arthur's appointment of Mordred as Regent (11. 693-721), and Arthur's dream about the fight between the dragon and the bear (11. 756-805)—must be described as integral episodes because they contribute to the integrity of the story's plot. Each raises crucial questions about the outcome of events and forces the plot to move in one direction or another.

Although these scenes differ in details in Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia Regum Britanniae, Wace's Roman de Brut, Laumon's Brut, and the Alliterative Morte Arthure, all four episodes appear in the four narratives. It is no surprise that all four writers should have included the first three incidents of political conflict. The logical
consistency of the narrative's unfolding of events demands that we have these episodes in which the two combatants respond to each other's threats of war and death. What is curious, however, is all four writer's choice to include the episode of Arthur's dream about the dragon and the bear, even though it seems to have no logical reason for being in the plot. There are, moreover, too many changes in the story's structure--some episodes dropped, some added, some modified--among its various versions to explain the dragon's presence as the writer's slavish adherence to Arthurian legend. The sufficient reasons for the dream's inclusion in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* become clear when we describe its structural relationship to the episodes immediately surrounding it.

The first twenty-five lines of the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* constitute an elaborate prelude to its action. In these lines the poet reveals his dual purpose of wishing to instruct and delight us with his narrative. The prayer of the first eleven lines reminds us of our dependence upon God for same passage from this treacherous world to heavenly peace. The next thirteen lines form a proem to the action that follows. At the same time that the prayer and proem serve these rhetorical functions, they also clearly establish the present moment of narration. In them the narrator is addressing us directly before beginning the poem's action in the distant past.

On the surface the prayer that opens the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* seems little more than a rhetorical set piece similar to those found at the beginning of many other medieval works (Finlayson,
1967, p. 35 n). As he points out the world's sinful nature and asks God's grace to escape its snares, the narrator also expresses the typical sentiment that his poem may both entertain and teach his audience:

Now grett glorious Godd, thurgh grace of Hym seluen
And the precyous prayers of Hys prys Modyr,
Schelde vs fro schamesdede and synfull werkes,
And gyffe vs grace to gye and gouerne vs here,
In this wrechyd werld, thorowe vertous lywnge,
That we may kayre til Hys courte, the kyngdom of Hevyne,
Whenoure saules schall parte and sundyre fra the body,
Ewyre to belde and bye in blysse wyth Hym seluen,
And wysse me to warpe owte some worde at this tym
That nothyre voyde be ne vayne, bot wyrchip till Hym selvyn,
Plesande and profitabill to the popule pat them heres.

(11. 1-11)\(^1\)

The prayer, moreover, gives the moral perspective from which we are to view Arthur's struggles with Lucius Iberius and Mordred. Adopting the appropriate heroic metaphor of God as the liege lord who protects his retainers, the poet presents a somber Christian vision of sin and salvation. God "sheilds us from shameful death and sinful works." Only through his grace are we able to govern ourselves and leave "this wretched world" to abide forever in "His court, the kingdom of Heaven."

The narrator's petition for self-control and right conduct is particularly poignant because it contrasts sharply with the heroic actions of characters tempted to exceed the rightful use of power later on in the poem.

The next thirteen lines prepare for the beginning of the poem more directly in the form of the narrator's address to the audience.

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\(^1\)For this study I have selected Valerie Krishna's critical edition of the Alliterative Morte Arthure as my primary text. Subsequent quotations from the poem will come from this edition.
Along with its traditional functions of asking for the audience's attention and announcing the subject matter of the narrative to follow, this address serves other narrational purposes (Manly, 1960, pp. 274-76). First of all, it changes the poem's mood from the somber tones of the prayer to the lighter tones of martial adventure. The juxtaposition of the prayer and the patriotic address to the audience also sets up one of the central dramatic tensions in the poem: the conflict between the spiritual and the secular. The prayer, on the one hand, clearly intimates that the world is thoroughly corrupt, a place in which man needs God's grace to avoid sin until his passage to heaven. The address to the audience, on the other hand, implicitly suggests that the world is a place where men may achieve lasting glory through deeds of arms:

Herkynes me heyndly and holdys sow stylle,  
And I sall tell sow a tale pat trewe es and nobyll,  
Off the ryeall renkys of the Rownde Table,  
That chefe ware of cheualrye and cheftans nobyll,  
Bathe ware in theire werkes and wyse men of armes,  
Doughty in theire doyngs and dredde ay schame,  
Kynde men and courtays and couthe of courte thewes;  
How they whanne wyth were wyrchippis many,  
Sloughe Lucyus pe lythre, that Lorde was of Rome,  
And conqueryd that kygnyrke thorowe craftys of armes;  
Herkenes now hedyrwarde and herys this stortye.  

(ll. 15-25)

Coming as it does before the action of the poem begins, this juxtaposition between the spiritual and the secular becomes the moral touchstone by which we come to measure Arthur's conduct that follows.

The first episode of the poem's narrative action is the narrator's catalogue of Arthur's conquest throughout the world and his founding of Caerleon (ll. 26-77). This summary episode has the effect of a
flashback from the present moment of narration: the now of "Herkenes now heydwrarde and herys this storie." Both the reach and extent of this "flashback" are indeterminate. The narrator gives no indication of how long ago Arthur's conquests started or over what period they took place. In addition to providing us with an economical summary of Arthur's martial and political successes, the indeterminate time of the action imparts a timeless mythical quality to his accomplishments. His deeds seem to have become legendary.

This summary episode performs a completitive function of the poem, since it presents information about Arthur's kingship. In it we discover the greatness of Arthur's military and political power abroad and his largess at home. The episode also makes a complete closure with the primary narrative since it fills us in on Arthur's most recent activity before the first scene of the poem. The episode then ends with a description of Arthur's initiation of a ten-day feast with his court on Christmas day; the first dramatic scene of the primary narrative then begins with the ornate feast on New Year's day.

The poet clearly links this summary episode to the narrator's previous address to the audience. In the last line of his address, the narrator asks the audience to listen to his story. In the next line of the poem--the first line of the summary episode--he launches into a rapid account of Arthur's past conquests. The inclusion of this summary is adequately motivated because it provides essential information about Arthur's character and his rule, details we need for a full understanding of Arthur's personality and stature in the world. To comprehend the
tragic nature of his fall later on, we must know the height to which he climbed as a conqueror. The summary of his military triumphs and generous kingship gives us this information and prepares the way for the scene of his magnificent New York's celebration.

The first major event of the poem—the Roman ambassador's sudden arrival and disruption of Arthur's banquet with Lucius's insulting demands for vassalage—is unlinked to the previous episodes. Appropriately, there is nothing in the summary episode that comes before it to prepare us for the interruption of the New Year's festivities. The sudden appearance of the hostile envoy therefore creates much surprise. After the festive tone of the banqueting and merriment that opens the episode, the scene abruptly becomes tense. More importantly, the bellicose nature of Lucius's message functions as the catalyst that disturbs the equilibrium of Arthur's world and forces him to choose between several courses of action:

I make the somouns in sale to sue for þi landys,
That on Lammesse Daye thare be no lette rouneden,
þat thos bee rey at Rome with all thi Rounde Table,
Appere in his presens with thy price knyghezt,
At pryme of the daye, in payne of your lyvys,
In þe kydd capytoile, before þe kyng selvyn,
When he and his senatours bez sette as them lykes,
To ansuere anely why thou ocupyes the laundez
That awe homage of alde till hym and his eldyrs
Why thou has redyn and raymede and raunsound þe pople,
And kyllyde dou his cosmyns, kyngys ennoynttyde
Thare schall thou gyffe rekkyntyg for all thy Round Table
Why thou arte rebell to Rome and rentez them wytholdez.
þiff thou theis somouns wythysytte, he sendes thie thies wordes:
He sall the seke ouer þe see wyth sexten kynges,
Bryne Bretayn þe Brade and bryttyn thy knyghtys,
And bryng the bouxsomly as a beste with brethe whare hym lykes,
That thou ne schall rowte ne ryste vndyr the heuene ryche,
þoþe thou for reddour of Rome ryne to þe erthe.

(11. 91-109)
This message, couched as it is in abusive language, is obviously a challenge. Arthur has to decide between two alternatives: either he must submit to Lucius's humiliating demands for vassalage or attempt to overthrow him in war.

The narrative importance of this opening action can hardly be overemphasized. It is a crucial action since it generates all of the action that follows in the poem. In addition to being the occasion for the epic struggle between the British and Roman armies, it also tests the moral values of Arthur's court, and thus engenders indirectly the subsequent actions of Arthur and his knights. The poem's chain of causality could not exist without Lucius's challenge. Without it Arthur would not be tempted to take Rome's crown and thus become subject to Fortune's fickleness. Mordred in turn would not be appointed guardian of Britain in Arthur's absence and thus tempted to usurp the British throne and sleep with Guinevere. Britain likewise would not have been thrown into civil war and lost her heroic king and splendid Round Table.

Another function this episode serves is that of characterization. In the course of the dramatic confrontation between Arthur and the Roman ambassador, the poet describes the ferocity of Arthur's character. He presents him scowling at the Romans with the looks of a raging lion. At the same time, however, he tempers this impression with Arthur's restrained words to the Roman Senator. Although he notes that he has been deeply insulted by the senator's haughty delivery of Lucius's challenge, Arthur declares that he will take counsel from his
noble retainers and put aside his desire to avenge himself for the insult. To top matters off, he even commands Sir Kay to prepare quarters for the Romans suitable to their station in life. But the particular tone and details of his instructions to Kay complicate the portrait of Arthur's character. Not only a wrathful, yet controlled, man who inspires fear in ordinary men, Arthur also displays much pride in himself:

He comand Sir Cayous, "Take kepe to thoos lordez, To styghtyll þa steryn men as theire statte askys, That they bee herberde in haste in thoos hege chambres, Sythyn sittandyln sale seruyde theraftyrr. That they fynd no fawte of fude to thiere horsez, Nowthire weyn, ne waxe, ne welthe in þis erthe, Spare for no spycerye, bot spende what þe lykes, That there be largesce on lofte and no lake founuden. If þou my wyrchip wayte, wy, be my trouthe, þou sall haue gersoms full grett, that gayne sall þe euere."

(11. 156-165)

Arthur's ironic use of the epithet steryn (l. 157) for the Romans who quavered before him moments before is entirely in keeping with his boastful instructions to spare nothing for their comfort. As well as setting up the logical cause for Arthur's war with Lucius, this episode also introduces the spiritual source of Arthur's tragic fall: his great pride. He is obviously a man who will brook no insult.

In addition to starting the plot and beginning the complex characterization that follows, this first integral episode also firmly locates the narrative in the narrative present. The summary episode that precedes it is distanced from the present moment of narration by the past tense, but with the senator's first words to Arthur, the poet establishes the dramatic present moment of his narration, giving the
scene the compelling immediacy that the present tense commands. As with
the opening scene in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, with which it
shares a good many obvious features of arrangement and physical details,
this opening scene begins on New Year's day, ironically a time of re-
newal, rather than on an ordinary day of feasting as in the three
chronicle poems that depict the same scene.

The next three episodes of the poem—Kay's settling the Roman
guests into their quarters (11. 166-175), Arthur's New Year's banquet
(11. 176-230), and Arthur's toasts with his knights and the Roman envoy
(11. 231-242)—are non-integral episodes. The poet could have easily
omitted them from his narration without disturbing the causality of the
plot. It would have been perfectly plausible for Arthur to convene his
council of war with the Round Table immediately after hearing Lucius's
demands. This is precisely the sequence of events that Geoffrey, Wace,
and Laamon describe to us present in their versions of the story.

What the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* poet would have lost by this strat-
strategy, however, is one of the most conspicuous strengths of the poem: its
verisimilitude. Together with serving the functions of characterizing
Arthur as a courteous host and narrating a space of time between two
integral episodes of the plot, the delivery of Lucius's ultimatum and
Arthur's council of war, these three non-integral episodes also help
sketch in the realistic background—such details as the particular kinds
of rooms the Romans had, the kinds of rich foods the banqueters enjoyed,
and the tone of Arthur's toast 'to the Romans, and so on—against which
the major events of the poem take place. The poet's elaborate descrip-
tion of the various dishes served at the banquet, for instance, not only
presents the opulence of Arthur's feast but also satisfies our demand for the illusion of reality in a narrative. These concrete details convince us that Arthur's court exists.

The next major episode in this first macro-episode—Arthur's council of war with the knights of the Round Table (ll. 243-406)—is once again logically motivated. It is, first of all, a reasonable consequence of the Roman's delivery of Lucius's message. Arthur has no other choice but to consider what course of action to take in the face of the Roman threat. Because he is presented as an eminently rational man at this point in the poem, he must seek the advice of his loyal retainers, the men upon whom he must rely to raise armies and help him wage war. Not only is this episode necessary to the poem's chain of causality, but it also does much to characterize the particularly strong political base of Arthur's power. In the course of presenting their different arguments for war, Arthur's knights exhibit a fierce loyalty to him and Britain. In response Arthur warmly thanks them for their advice and vows of loyalty with words that are strongly reminiscent of the Anglo-Saxons lord's expression of affection to retainers:

\[
\text{Thane } \text{he Conquerour kyndly comforthes } \text{these knyghtes,}
\text{Alowes } \text{haim gretly theire lordly avowes:}
\text{"Alweldande Code wyrchip } \text{sow all,}
\text{And latte me neuere wanntte } \text{sow, wyllys I in werlde regne;}
\text{My menske and my hanhede } \text{se mayntene in erthe,}
\text{Myn honour all ytterly in oþer kyngey landes;}
\text{My wele and my wyrchipe, of all } \text{his werlde ryche,}
\text{S} \text{e haue knyghtly conqueryde, } \text{pat to my coroun langes;}
\text{Hym thare be ferde for no faees } \text{pat swylke a folke ledes,}
\text{Bot euer fresche for to fyghte in felde when hym lykes;}
\text{I acontye no kynge } \text{pat vndyr Criste lyffes;}
\text{Whills I see } \text{sow all sounde, I sette be no more."}
\]

(ll. 395-406)
Arthur's speech also expresses the central political value of the poem: the communal bond that exists between the king and his retainers, a bond based on the mutual affection they feel for one another. Arthur properly locates the source of his political power and personal dignity in the knights who support his kingship. In retrospect, however, Arthur's statement that he wants nothing more in life as long as he sees his knights in good health becomes darkly ironic. As he pursues his various military successes, he gradually loses sight of his responsibilities to his knights and kingdom in his destructive quest for personal power.

The two episodes that follow the council scene—Arthur's stern instructions to the Roman senator about his return to Rome with the answer to Lucius (11. 407-483) and the envoy's speedy journey to flee England (11. 484-502)—are again non-integral episodes that further the movement of the narration by explaining the immediate effects of Arthur's decision to go to war. Although they are not necessary to preserve the plot's causality, they are both strongly linked to the war council episodes that precede them. Arthur's insulting message to Lucius is obviously a necessary consequence of his preparation for war since Lucius's challenge must be answered. Similarly, the departure of the Roman envoy for Rome results from its having to deliver Arthur's message to Lucius. The motivation for these episodes is clearly logical.

What is particularly interesting, however, is the way the poet links these two episodes together with the departure motif for aesthetic
purposes. In Geoffrey, Wace, and La, amon the envoy's hasty return is presented in a perfunctory sentence. The Alliterative Morte Arthure poet could have easily followed this precedent in his retelling of the story, or he could have omitted the action altogether since it serves only as a minor transition between two major events in his chronicle sources. Instead he presents the envoy's journey twice with considerable embellishment. The first time he gives it in the form of Arthur's instructions to the Roman senator about his return to Rome. This scene has the effect of a flashforward. In the process of stipulating the conditions under which he will guarantee the envoy's safe passage to Sandwich, Arthur gives a vivid preview of the envoy's hurried journey. We see this future action as it exists in Arthur's mind. The second time the poet presents the envoy's journey as an objective action that opens the next episode of the poem. This time we actually see the Romans riding furiously to fulfill Arthur's conditions to the letter. The double presentation of the departure apparently characterizes Arthur as a fierce, decisive monarch who easily translates his ideas into actions and commands the obedience of lesser men. At the same time the repetition of the departure in different times--one in the future, one in the present--also makes a pleasing variation in the poem's predominantly present tense narration.

The rest of the episode recounting the envoy's return to Rome is largely transitional; it does little more than fill in a temporal gap in the narration. The one exception is the poets description of the Roman's arrival at Sandwich. Here by deftly sketching into the
narration some concrete details about the seaside town, he vigorously conveys the Romans' relief at arriving there on time:

By þe sevend day was gone þe ceþée þai rechide;
Of all þe glee þondire Gode so glade ware þey neuere,
As ȝf þe sounde of þe see and Sandwyche belles.
Wyþowttyn more stowmntyng þey schippide þeir þorsez,
Wery, to þe wane see þey went al att ones;
With þe men of þe walle þey weyde vp þeir ankryrs,
And fleede at þe fore flude; in Flaundrez þe rowede.

(ll. 488-494)

At the same time these concrete details—the sounds of the sea and the bells, the men loading their horses on the ship, the gloomy sea, and so on—all serve the purpose of enhancing the poem's realistic background. The poet's use of these kinds of details throughout the poem helps to create the sense that the actions are taking place against the backdrop of life itself. This description is thus artistically motivated.

With the envoy's arrival in Rome, the poet brings us to another major episode in the poem: the senator's conveying Arthur's challenging letter to Lucius (ll. 503-569). This episode is integral, well motivated. The plot's progress demands that Lucius should receive Arthur's response to his demands. The further development of the plot requires, moreover, that the conflict between these two men either be resolved or intensified. A limited number of options is possible. Either Lucius, Arthur, or both of them, must abandon the idea of waging war against the other or both of them must press on with preparations for war. Since Arthur's message clearly states his intentions to destroy Lucius, it only remains for the poet to give us Lucius's decision either to resist or submit to Arthur's authority.
Along with presenting Lucius's intentions, this episode also serves a number of other narrative purposes. Anxious to learn about Arthur and his reactions to his own demands, Lucius immediately bombards the returned envoy with many questions. But before the senator has the opportunity to answer any of them, Lucius chides him for not having seized Arthur's scepter and forced him to serve him during this stay at the British court at Caerleon. This audacious remark of course prompts the senator to defend his temerity by describing the ferocity of Arthur's character. In addition to underscoring the formidable impression we first get of Arthur's lionlike spirit in the banquet scene, the senator's characterization of Arthur also locates the source of his wrath in his great pride:

Of all the wyse þate I watte in this werlde ryche,
The kynhtlyeste creatoure in Cristyndome halden,
Of kyng or of conquerour crowneþe in erthe;
Of countenaunce, of corage, of crewelle lates,
The comlyeste of knyghtehode þat vndyre Cryste lyffes.
He maye be spoken in dyspens despysere of syluere,
That no more of golde gyffes þan of grette stones,
No more of wyne þan of watyre þat of þe welle rynnys,
Ne of welthe of þis werlde bot wyrchipe allone.

(11. 533-541)

The rhetorical phrasing of the last sentence in this passage clearly suggest that Arthur's concern for honor is obsessive.

Lucius's response to the senator's characterization immediately settles the question of what future direction the plot is going to take. Eager to engage Arthur in a military contest, Lucius directly addresses the threat of Arthur's invasion of Rome by sketching out battle plans for Germany and France. He will use his best knights, including his Genoan giants, in these campaigns and set up a great battle
tower on both Mount Gotthard and Mount St. Bernard to guard the narrow passes against Arthur's invading armies. Along with obviously expressing Lucius's resolve to make good his challenge to Arthur, this speech also neatly parallels in form the one Arthur made to the Roman envoy in the previous episode since it, too, has the effect of a flashforward and directly prepares for the next episode of the poem. After we learn of Lucius's plans for battle, we then see them materialize in the episode that follows. The poet thus appears to be linking these two sets of episodes together by mirroring their artistic structures.

The next episode (11. 570-609) accordingly narrates Lucius's actions of assembling his army of mercenaries from various parts of his empire. This particular episode is a non-integral one since the poet could have easily deleted it from his narration without materially changing the sequences and causality of main episodes. His reasons for including it, however, seem both logically and aesthetically motivated. First of all, Lucius's summoning of mercenaries gives the poet an opportunity to catalogue the extent of Lucius's power throughout the world. This epical catalogue suggests that Lucius is a mighty foe for Arthur, a man whose powers must be respected. Along with fulfilling this logical purpose, the catalogue of mercenaries also strikes aesthetic balance with the catalogue of Arthur's conquests that opens the poem. Typical of other writers of late fourteenth-century narratives in England, the poet seems to value symmetry as an important feature of narrative style.
The other episode treating Lucius's military actions before he finally engages Arthur in battle—his invasion of Germany (ll. 610-624)—also develops out of Lucius's outlining what course his campaign against Arthur will take. Here again the poet could have omitted this episode and moved the scene of his narration back to England to Arthur's preparations for war without sacrificing details important to his story. His motive for providing this information about Lucius's invasion of Germany, however, appears to be something more than merely making transition between events. Throughout the poem he seems to be interesting in sketching in a complete account of his story, thus fleshing out the frequently bare statement of facts in his chronicle sources. His aim in narrating Lucius's invasion is evidently three-fold: to establish the plausibility of what happens, to provide evidence of Lucius's power, and to describe fully the sequence of events in the war between Arthur and Lucius.

The other four episodes in the first macro-episode of the poem present Arthur's preparations for war. These episodes—Arthur's orders to his lords to assemble troops at Sandwich to sail for the continent (ll. 625-635), his address to Parlement at York and appointment of Mordred as regent (ll. 636-692), his leave-taking from Guinevere (ll. 693-721), and the embarkation of the English forces for Barfleur (ll. 722-755)—all parallel Lucius's preparations for war and his invasion of Germany. Once again the poet is using non-integral episodes to enhance the story's credibility. As we follow Arthur's actions in these various episodes, we learn more about the way his mind works, the
way he deals with other people. He becomes a more credible character. Similarly, the poet's description of the English army's departure for Barfleur is full of realistic details that make the narrative more concrete, more vivid. The images of men loading and rowing barges, images of tents and glittering shields, of sacks of cloth, dappled waves, and so on all help to create strong visual impressions for us. Along with exhibiting this artistic function, these episodes also reveal a strong plot motivation for their inclusion in the narrative. They explain the chain of relatively minor events that results from Arthur's accepting Lucius's challenge of war. Thus they assert the credibility of the poet's narrative.

The careful references the narrator makes to time in earlier scenes indicate, moreover, that both rulers are readiness themselves concurrently. The first dramatic scene of the poem takes place on New Year's day, which becomes the temporal reference point from which we date subsequent actions in the first macro-episode. The next temporal reference the poet makes is to the day Arthur gives the senator his message to convey to Lucius. Although the precise date is not given other than "aftre pe Epiphanye," (1. 415), we can deduce that it must be January 8th since seven days of feasting have passed since Arthur's council of war on January 1st (1. 413). The instructions Arthur gives the senator allow the Romans precisely seven days to reach Sandwich, which they do, thus advancing the time of the narrative to January 15th.

An indeterminate amount of time after leaving England, the senator arrives in Rome and makes his report to Lucius about Arthur's
response to his ultimatum. Lucius immediately begins building up his armies for the campaign against Arthur. Lucius's earliest actions probably take place either in the last days of January or the early part of February, since the Roman party probably took a couple of weeks to complete its journey from Normandy to Rome to inform Lucius of Arthur's military intentions. From this point the narrator advances Lucius's actions an indefinite period into the future with the account of his invasion of Germany. The only indication he gives us of the time the invasion takes place is Lucius's expressing his desire to make war in Germany by Easter (ll. 554-555).

When the narrator shifts the scene of his narration back to England to recount Arthur's readying his forces for war, he does so by means of a flashback. After briefly describing Lucius's conquest of Wesphalia and his settling into Cologne, he flashes back to the "utias of Hillary," January 13th, to begin bringing his narration of Arthur's actions up to the same point that Lucius's have reached (Krishna, 1976, p. 172). January 13th, then, becomes the temporal reference point from which we date Arthur's preparations to encounter Lucius. On this day he commands his lords to assemble their armies and also sends out orders to his mariners to ready their ships for transporting troops to Normandy. Sixteen days later, the last days of January, Arthur's fleet, the narrator tells us, is assembled and ready to set sail. These references clearly indicate that both rulers were simultaneously preparing to meet each other in battle.
After moving his narration of Lucius's actions relatively far into the future with rapid summaries of his military activities, the narrator's sudden flashback to Arthur's actions several months in the past makes a serious temporal rupture in the steady progress of his narration. The last three episodes of this section of the poem—Arthur's parting address to Parlement and naming Mordred regent (ll. 616-692), his departure from Guinevere (ll. 693-721), and the English fleet's setting sail for Barfleur (ll. 722-755)—not only close this rupture and restore temporal order to the narrative, but they also serve a variety of subsidiary purposes. Chief among these other purposes are the narrator's further characterization of important figures in the story, his "seeding" the narrative for future conflict, and his creation of an aesthetically pleasing and realistic narration of the English armies' ritualistic departure for war.

Arthur's address to his Parlement at York emerges as one of the most important non-integral episodes in the poem. The construction and placement of it reveals a precise sense of dramatic art. First, in addition to supplying us with a concise, romantic exposition of Arthur's plan for the governance of the kingdom in his absence, this scene also underscores our impression of Arthur as a sensible, even-tempered king and defines some of the central social values of Arthurian culture, the ethos upon which it rests. Along with soberly pointing out to Parlement the dangerous nature of his struggle with Lucius, he also demonstrates his responsibility for the well-being of the kingdom by appointing his nephew Mordred sovereign during his campaign in Europe. Arthur's
detailed instructions to Mordred about his duties as regent reveal, moreover, his concern that Mordred maintain the honor, order, and justice of the realm:

"I make the kepare, Sir Knyghte, of kyngrykes manye, Wardayne wyrchipfull, to weilde al my landes, That I haue wonnen of werre, in all pis werlde ryche. I wyll pat Waynour, my weife, in wyrchipe be holden, That hire wannte noo wele ne welthe pat hire lykes; Luke my kydde castells be clenlyche arrayede, There cho maye suggourne hire selfe wyth semlyche berynes; Fanne my foreteez be frythede o frenchepe for euere, That nane werreye my wylde botte Waynour hir seluen, And pat in pe seson whene grees es assignyde, That cho take hir solaunce in certayne tymms. Chauncelere and chambyrleyn chaunge as pe lykes; Audytours and offycers ordayne thy seluen, Bathejuréez and juggez and justiccez of landes; Luke thor justifye them wele that injurye wyrkes. If me be destaynede to dye at Dryghtyns wyll, I charge the my sektour, cheffe of all oper, To mynystre my mobles fore mede of my saule To mendynauntez and mysese in myschefe fallen; Take here my testament of tresoure full huge: As I trayste appon the, betraye thowe me neuer! As pow will answere before the austeryn Jugge, That all pis werlde wynly wysse as Hym lykes, Luke pat my laste wyll be lelely perfournede. Thow has clenly pe cure that to my coroune langez Of all my wer[l]dez wele, and my weyffe eke; Luke powe kepe the so clere there be no cause fonden When I to contré come, if Cryste will it thole; And thow haue grace gudly to gouerne thy seluen, I sall coroune pe, knyghte, kyng with my handez.

(11. 649-679)

The emphasis Arthur puts upon honor and justice reveals a good deal about the moral code of his kingdom. His pursuit of these two ideals illuminates many of his and his knights' actions throughout the narrative. The Round Table's unanimous decision to wage war against the Romans is, for example, solidly based on defending England's honor and asserting Arthur's ancient, ancestral claim to tribute from Rome.
ironically, however, it is Arthur's obsessive concern for these ideals that leads to the tragic destruction of him and the Round Table later in the poem. The poet's repeated references to the Round Table's fellowship, honor, and justice in these early episodes thus effectively foreshadow the ironic reversal of its fortunes in the third macro-episode of the poem.

Arthur's strong admonitions to Mordred to look out for Guinevere's well-being and comfort and to discharge his duties as regent faithfully also subtly prepare us for Mordred's treachery later on. The Alliterative Morte Arthure's treatment of this strand of the story shows considerable sophistication over its presentation in the chronicle sources. In his Historia Geoffrey (1929) gives only the briefest reference to Mordred's appointment as regent and no mention whatsoever of his villainy. Both Wace (1962) and Laamon (1978), on the other hand, clearly state that Mordred and Guinevere have a secret love affair and bring the kingdom to ruin as a result of it. Exhibiting a finely honed dramatic sense, the narrator of the Alliterative Morte Arthure avoids this kind of anti-climactic exposition in favor of suggesting Mordred's malign nature. To do so he first presents Arthur's underscoring Mordred's responsibilities for honorable behavior in his absence. Then he observes that Mordred will have to answer to God for any malfeasance of power. Mordred's response of pleading to be relieved from these duties so that he may win valor with Arthur in war accomplishes two purposes. First, it underlines the doubts about Mordred's integrity that Arthur's admonitions raise. Mordred apparently puts his
own interests before those of the kingdom. Second, his pleas characterize him as a proud, ambitious young man. His specific reason for declining the post of regent reveals a decidedly political turn of mind:

"I beseke ȝow, Sir, as my sybbe lorde, 
ȝat ȝe will for charyte cheese ȝow anȝer
For if ȝe putte me in ȝis plytte, ȝowre pople es dyssauyde;
To presente a prynce astate my powere es symple.
When ȝer of werre wysse are wyrchipide hereaftyre,
Than may I forsothe be sette bott at lyttill.
To passe in your presance my purpos es takyn,
And all my purueance apperte fore my pris knyhtez."

(11. 682-688)

In this speech Mordred demonstrates that he is obviously concerned about securing a position of substantial fame and power in the future.

This scene, then, strikes the first discordant note in the narrative. For the first time the narrator raises apprehensions about the welfare of England's body politic during Arthur's absence. The dramatic effectiveness of this scene, however, finally rests in the way the poet motivates it. At this point in the narrative it is impossible to foresee what Mordred's future behavior will be, much less to predict that he will usurp the throne and plunder Arthur's patrimony. We simply do not have enough information. This whole exchange between Mordred and Arthur consequently exists as a "seeding" episode in the narrative, one whose full significance is revealed to us much later in the poem by backward motivation. When we learn about Mordred's predations on the kingdom two-thirds of the way through the poem, we suddenly understand the poet's reasons for including this episode. If he had left it out, Mordred's usurpation of the throne would have struck
us as totally unanticipated in the narrative. As it is we are able to look back to this episode and reread it as a prelude to Mordred’s subsequent treachery, particularly if we read Arthur’s response to Mordred’s declining the office of regent as a veiled threat:

Thowe arte my newe full nere, my nurree of olde,
That I haue chastyede and chosen, a childe of my chambyre;
For the sybredyn of me, foresake noghte pis offyce;
That thow ne wyrk my will, thow watte whatte it menes.

(11. 689-692)

Along with being sternly warned about the dire consequences if he should fail to discharge his duties faithfully—"As I trayste appon the, betraye thowe me never / As how will answere before the austeryn Jugge"

(11. 669-670)—Mordred is also forced to remain in England when other knights are earning valor with Arthur on the battlefield. It is not at all implausible that these injuries should rankle and eventually lead Mordred to seek revenge against Arthur by seizing both his kingdom and his wife. Mordred, as his response to Arthur’s appointment suggests, is anything but an obedient young man. He has warned Arthur of his desire for fame throughout the kingdom.

In the scene that follows—Arthur’s leave-taking from Guinevere (11. 693-720)—the king is apparently making one last preparation before leaving for war. This episode, like the one before it, is logically well-motivated. It is altogether believable that a king would get both his public and private affairs in order before leaving for war. Guinevere’s tearful behavior is also perfectly credible. But here again the narrator includes a detail in his narration that seems to take on additional meaning in retrospect. In the course of trying to
console Guinevere about his absence, Arthur tells her that he has named
Mordred regent to look after her needs:

I haue made a kepares, a knyghte of thyn awen,
Ouerlynge of Yngland, vsyngre thy seluen,
And that es Sir Mordrede, bat pow has mekyll praysede,
Sall be the dictour, my dere, to doo whatte thy lykes.

(11. 709-712)

After reading about Mordred's villainy in the last part of the poem, we
may then read Arthur's reference to Guinevere's fondness for Mordred--
"bat pow has mekyll praysede"--as possibly meaning a good deal more
than merely her admiration for his knightly skills. This reading seems
especially credible if we remember that the account of their illicit
relationship is a story that the poet, as well as many of the members
of his audience, must have known well from chronicles such as those of
Geoffrey, Wace, and Lažamon as well as from romances.

What is puzzling, though, are the narrator's reasons for allud-
ing to Mordred and Guinevere's relationship in such a casual manner
when it was in all likehood a very familiar story. William Matthews'
useful observation that the poet's method of narration is fundamentally
dramatic helps to explain his handling of their relationship. This
method of narration precludes any detailed, direct characterization of
either Mordred or Guinevere. The narrator's recounting of Arthur's
preparations for war does not provide any natural opportunity for delv-
ing into Mordred's and Guinevere's emotional lives. To do so would
interrupt the narration of Arthur's preparations for war with a digres-
sion, a narrative device that the narrator avo1'dn. Aside from tracing
the development of the conflict between Arthur and Lucius, the main
focus of the episodes in this macro-episode of the poem is the charac-
terization of Arthur as the strong-willed, proud-hearted heroic king of Britain.

The last episode of this macro-episode is strongly linked chronologically to the leave-taking scene that precedes it. Riding away from his farewell to Guinevere, Arthur strikes off for Sandwich. The final preparation he has left to make is the boarding of his forces on the assembled fleet. At the same time that this episode is motivated by the narrator's need to complete his recounting of events in the plot, it is also motivated artistically in that the description of the boarding and embarkation helps to establish the credibility of his narrative, what might be called its "authenticating realism" (Bloomfield, 1964, p. 340). The circumstantial details that he includes in this passage give the narrator's account of the British armies' twilight departure its compelling vividness. The poet's evocative, concrete description of the scene full of men, animals, and gleaming weapons being loaded on the ships as well as the fleet's slow movement out to sea, greatly enhances the reality of the narrator's experience. Along with concluding the first macro-episode of the poem, this tableau of the English armada's ritualistic departure strikes the full chord of epic adventure. The emotional resonance of this scene is worthy of similar episodes of warriors' putting to sea in The Iliad, The Odyssey, Beowulf, and Atlamal:
Qwen all was schyppede that scholde they schounte no lengere,  
Bot ventelde them tyte, as ðe tyde rymnez;  
Coggez and crayeres ðan crossez ðaire mastez,  
At the commandment of ðe Kynge vncouerde at ones.  
Wyghtly on ðe wale ðay wyte vp ðaire ankers,  
By wytt of ðe watyre-men of ðe wale ythez;  
Frekes on ðe forestayne faken ðeire cibilez,  
In floynez and fercostez and Flemesche schyppes;  
Tyt saillez to ðe toppe and turnez ðe lufe,  
Standez appon stere bourde, sternly ðay songen.  
The pryce schippez of the porte prouen theire depness,  
And fondez wyth full saile ower ðe fawe ythez;  
Holly withowtyn harme ðay hale in bottes  
Schipemen scharply schoten ðaire portez,  
Lauchez lede apon lufe, lacchen ðer depez;  
Lukkez to ðe lade-sterne when ðe lyghte faillez,  
Castez coursez be crafte when ðe clawde rysez,  
With ðe nedyll and ðe stone one ðe nyghte tydez;  
For drede of ðe derke nyghte ðay drecchede a lyttil,  
And all ðe steryn of ðe streme strekyn at onez.

(11. 736-755)

The Dream of the Dragon and the Bear (11. 756-830)

Up to this point in its development the narrative of the Alliterative Morte Arthure is logical. Every episode is well-motivated and linked to those surrounding it by a variety of logical, temporal, and aesthetic connections. Nothing that happens in the narration seems gratuitous or implausible. Then in the midst of an ordinary account of the fleet's night passage to Barfleur, the narrator suddenly presents Arthur's dream full of fantastic images and actions. The dragon Arthur sees swooping across the landscape is the shimmering fabulous beast of some mythic world:

Hym dremyd of a dragon, dredful to beholde,  
Come dryfande over ðe depe to drenschen hys pople,  
Ewen walkande owte of the west landez,  
Wanderlande vnworthyly ouere the wale ythez;  
Bothe his hede and hys hals ware halely all ouer  
Oundyde of azure, enamelede full faire;  
His scoulders ware schalyde all clene syluere,  
Schreed oure all ðe schrympe with schrinkande poyntes;
Hys wombe and hys wenges of wondyrfull hewes,
In merualyous maylys he mountede full hye;
Whaym bat he towchede he was rynt for euer.
Hys feete ware floreschede all in fyne sablyll,
And syche a vennymous flayre flowe fro his lypez,
That the flode of he flawez all on fyre semyde.

(ll. 760-773)

The black bear challenging him is also scaled to unearthly proportions
and belongs to a world of marvels:

Than e come of pe oryente, ewyn hym agaynez,
A blake, bustrous bere abwen in the clowdez,
With yche a pawe as a poste and paumes full huge,
With pykes full perilous—all phyande þam semyde;
Lothen and lothely lokkes and oþer,
All with lutterde legges, lokerde vnfaire,
Filtyrde vnfrey, with fomaunde lypez,
The fouleste of fegure that fourmede was euer.
He baltyrde, he bleryde, he braundyschte perafter;
To bataile he bounnez hym with bustous clowez;
He romede, he rarede, that roggede all þe erthe,
So ruydly he rappyd at to ryot seluen.

(ll. 774-785)

Everything about these gigantic beasts and their encounter is thoroughly
marvellous, an attribute that John Stevens (1973, p. 100) finds essen-
tial to the spirit of romance:

If the exotic invites us to feel the thrill of fascination,
of intriguing strangeness, the marvellous can be more dis­
turbing: it astonishes, may baffle, even frighten us, as
it does the heros who confront its manifestations. The
essence of marvellous objects or happenings is that they
appear to defy the ordinary laws of Nature; they are
irrational and in varying degrees improbable.

The cataclysmic death struggle that takes place between these fabulous
creatures certainly astonishes, baffles, and frightens Arthur:
His dream mirrors a reality that exists far beyond the range of his ordinary experience, so much so that he is forced to seek his philosopher's help to interpret its mysteries.

At the same time the philosophers' explanation is comforting to Arthur, it is also subtly ironic. They identify the brilliant, fierce dragon as Arthur and the rapacious bear either as a tyrant that harries his people or as a giant he will face in a future combat. What makes this interpretation ironic, however, is the philosophers' failure to comment upon or explain away Arthur's promonition that the dragon is rushing across the sea to drown his people. Their explanation that the dragon is an emblem for Arthur's martial triumphs therefore leaves us with the ominous suggestion that Arthur's military adventure in Europe will result in his predations upon his own people.
The interpretation they advance for the bear is not at all ominous, only mildly suspenseful. Their observation that he represents tyrants who torment Arthur's people is curious since at this point in the narrative only Lucius has been clearly established in this role. The poet's use of the plural here seems to be a subtle foreshadowing that Arthur will be forced to overcome several tyrants in addition to Lucius. The alternate explanation of the bear’s significance—that he may represent a giant Arthur will have to destroy in single combat—similarly appears to be a foreshadowing of his fight with the giant of St. Michael's Mount that takes place a few episodes later in the poem.

A comparison of the dream with its analogues in Geoffrey (1929), Wace (1962), and Layamon (1978) demonstrates once again the Alliterative Morte Arthure's considerable sophistication as a suspenseful, well-wrought narrative. In both Geoffrey’s and Wace's account of the dream, Arthur’s wise men interpret the dream as a combat that Arthur will fight with some monstrous giant; Arthur disagrees, maintaining that the dream means nothing more than a reference to his struggle with Lucius. Layamon, on the other hand, deepens this ambiguity about the dream's meaning by having Arthur's bishops and knights hide their dark intimations about its significance with favorable comments about its prophecy:

\begin{verbatim}
Biscopes þis iherden. & boc ilærede men.
þis iheorden eorles. þis iherden beornes.
Ælc bi his witt. wisdom sæden.
þis sweuen aræhten.
Ne durst þer na cniht. to ufele ræcchen na wiht.
Leoste he sculden leosen. his leomen þat wenren him deore.
\end{verbatim}

In the absence of any unfavorable interpretation of the dream from these men, we are left to ponder its ominous significance, recalling that
Arthur described the dragon as a fiery monster who consumed boroughs with his great flames (La干脆, Brut, l. 12773).

The ambiguity that persists about the dragon's predatory nature in Geoffrey, Wace, La干脆, and the Alliterative Morte Arthure suggests, moreover, another level of interpretation for Arthur's dream. In her analysis of Arthur's first dream Elaine C. Southward (1943, p. 249) argues that "it should surely be understood as a presage of Arthur's coming destruction at the hands of his nephew." She bases her argument on the conjecture that Geoffrey of Monmouth misunderstood the tragic prophecy of the dream in his Welsh source and therefore invented Arthur's fight with the giant of St. Michael's Mount to fulfill the interpretation that Arthur's knights give to the dream. To support her contention Southward cites the dream episode in the Brut Tysilio, a Welsh chronicle roughly contemporary with Geoffrey's Historia, in which the Welsh writer reproduces the dream episode in virtually the same form but fails to follow it with Arthur's combat with the giant of St. Michael's Mount. Her point is that the Welsh writer, knowing the dream's oracular value in the original legend, saw no point in inventing Arthur's struggle with the giant. This same writer, furthermore, may have been aware that the knights' interpretation of the dream was "only a superficial one, intended perhaps to deceive the reader, or audience, as it deceived the king" (p. 250).

The real significance of the dream, Southward contends, rests in the etymology and emblematic nature of the combatants' names:
In point of fact the Welsh account could indicate nothing more nor less than the coming of the battle of Camlan. The king, having committed his realm and wife to the care of his nephew, and having started on his journey to Gaul, dreams that he sees a bear, an *Arth*, his own animal emblem, withered up by the breath of a sea-dragon, a *Mor-draig*, an obvious if only approximate attempt at an animal emblem of Mordred. The dragon comes out of the west; the battle of Camlan traditionally took place in Cornwall, and the form Mordred of the traitor's name is the Cornish one (Southward, 1943, p. 250).

The Welsh writer who originated this dream, she concludes, clearly intended to foreshadow Arthur's defeat by means of a prophetic dream that Arthur would tragically fail to interpret correctly.

Whether or not the poet of the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* was aware of the verbal irony of the names in Arthur's dream and intended an ironic effect from them is, of course, impossible to prove. That the dream is enigmatic and foreshadows the ironic reversal of Arthur's fortunes seems far more certain. First of all, in preparing for such future actions as Mordred's betrayal of Arthur, the poet has characteristically seemed to prefer subtle, ironic suggestions of these events rather than explicit statements about them as the chronicles record. It is perfectly plausible that he should choose the same form of ironic foreshadowing with the device of the prophetic dream. Accordingly, Göller (1981a) argues that the dragon and the bear, ironically, both represent Arthur in different parts of the poem.

The dream itself is, moreover, a narrative device that medieval poets typically used for just these ironic, frequently enigmatic, purposes. One can find it used in this way in narratives as different in style and subject matter as *Pearl*, *The Book of the Duchess*, *Piers*
Plowman, and the *Laxdæla Saga*. In some narratives like these the dream serves an even more sophisticated function of providing a gloss on the characters and actions of the story itself. In his perceptive study of the *Quest of the Holy Grail*, an anonymous French romance of the thirteenth century, Tzvetan Todorov (1977) describes how it embodies self-reflexive narration. After completing their adventures, Arthur's knights typically meet some hermit who interprets their experiences as signs for some other experience. The whole narrative, he continues, consists primarily of two kinds of characters and episodes:

The possessors of meaning form a special category among the characters: they are "sages," hermits, abbots, and recluses. Just as the knights could not know, these later cannot act; none of them participates in a peripety, except in the episodes of interpretation. The two functions are strictly parcelled out between the two classes of characters; this distribution is so well known that the heroes refer to it themselves: "We have seen so much, sleeping or waking," Gawain replied, "that we must seek out some hermit who might explain the meaning of our dreams." Should no such assistance be available, heaven itself intervenes, and "a voice is heard" which explains everything (p. 122).

This kind of narrative, then, is continually reflecting upon itself by the process of explicating the meaning of the actions it presents. The dream device provides a gloss upon the narrative's characters, images, and actions.

Taking his analysis of the romance's reflexive narration a step further, Todorov observes that the narrative exhibits in sharp relief two different kinds of logic to explain its actions:

*The Quest of the Holy Grail* is built on the tensions between these two kinds of logic: narrative and ritual, or, one might say, the profane and the religious. We can observe both in the first pages; the ordeals, the obstacles (such as King Arthur's opposition to the beginning of the
quest) derive from habitual narrative logic. On the other hand, Galahad's appearance and the decision to go on the quest—that is, the important events of the narrative—relate to the ritual logic (Todorov, 1977, p. 122).

These two different kinds of logic, furthermore, are the consequence of two conflicting conceptions of time:

Narrative logic implies, ideally, a temporality we might call the "perpetual present." Time here is constituted by the concatenation of countless instances of discourse; it is these latter which define the very idea of the present. . . . On the other hand, ritual logic is based on a conception of time which is that of the "eternal return." Here no event happens for the first or the last time. Everything has already been foretold, and now one foretells what will follow. The origin of the rite is lost in the origin of time; what matters is that the rite constitutes a rule which is already present, already there (p. 132-133).

To put it another way, the self-reflexive narrative presents actions simultaneously in both their terrestrial aspect and \( \text{sub species aeternitatis} \). This sort of narrative, moreover, is common in later fourteenth-century poetry in England. It is found in various forms in the works of some of diverse poets such as Chaucer, Langland, the Gawain poet, Gower, and a host of less important writers.

The particular content and placement of Arthur's first dream in the Alliterative Morte Arthure suggest that the poet is also using the dream of the dragon and the bear for similar self-reflexive purposes. Coming as it does on the eve of Arthur's movement into France to engage Lucius's forces, the dream underscores in mythic terms the gravity of Arthur's martial enterprise. Whatever particular meaning the poet intended the dream to have, it is clear from its fantastic content that it serves as an ominous revelation of an otherworldly agency operating
beyond human history. The particularly rich description of the combat between these two symbolic beasts—the dragon, an ambiguous image of both creative energy and destruction, and the bear, an emblem of ferocious bestiality—must have surely conjured up an archetypal struggle in the minds of a medieval audience, especially since such audiences were accustomed to the same symbolic use of these beasts in Isaiah, Revelations, and other prophetic books of the Bible (Gardner, 1971, p. 254).

The placement of Arthur's dream underscores its self-reflexive purpose in the poem. Up to this point the poem's action is firmly located in the realistic world of mundane events. The logic that explains the cause of actions and their relationship to each other is the ordinary kind based on probabilities. Everything that happens is thoroughly credible in our experience of the world. Neither we nor Arthur need to have the significance of events explained to us. Arthur's first dream, however, presents a vision that is not explicable according to the logic of ordinary experience. Everything that happens in it is thoroughly extraordinary. There is no apparent, narrative reason for the existence of these two fabulous monsters or for their death struggle in the fiery twilight landscape. As the abrupt, mysterious appearance of the beasts and the ritualistic nature of their combat suggest, their antimony appears preordained, an archetypal conflict operating outside the logic of ordinary, realistic narratives.

Terrified by the dream's ominous portent, Arthur calls for his philosophers to explain it to him. Serving no other purpose in the poem beyond that of interpreting Arthur's dreams, the philosophers, like the
sages, hermits, and abbots in the French romance that Todorov examines, belong to a separate category of characters in the poem. Unlike Arthur and his knights, the philosophers perform no actions aside from explicating Arthur's dreams. In the course of explaining the meaning of the characters and events of the dream, they also provide a gloss on Arthur's actions. For both Arthur and us their commentary appears to be a straightforward approbation of Arthur's military actions and a prediction of his success. The poem thus comments on its own actions.

At the same time the poet seems to be using the dream device to make an ironic statement about the limitations of human understanding. At this point in the narrative, the philosophers' interpretation of the dream appears reasonable. Having subdued most the Europe with his military campaigns, Arthur seems likely to triumph over the Roman threat. In retrospect, however, the philosophers' interpretation is highly ironic because it is ultimately short-sighted. They mistakenly explicate the dream on the basis of appearances. Observing an apparent resemblance between Arthur and the dragon—the regal splendor in their physical attributes—and the fierce nature of the bear and Arthur's adversaries, they choose the probable explanation of the dream as a premonition of Arthur's struggles with Lucius and other tyrants. As later events demonstrate, however, Arthur's success is not long lived. Mordred's disastrous treachery arises unexpectedly. Even Arthur's philosophers, reputedly the wisest men on earth, are unable to predict the subtle workings of supernatural forces directing human affairs, forces whose ominous presence is to be detected in dreams.
Last of all, even though its content and tone are manifestly fantastic, Arthur's dream serves the added purpose of authenticating his story, a purpose, Morton Bloomfield (1964) observes, all narratives must fulfill if readers are going to accept them as true. The dream, he points out, was one of the standard techniques medieval writers employed to verify the truth of their narratives:

It is perhaps hard today to think of the dream framework as an authenticating device, but as even a superficial study of dream theory shows, dreams, especially "in the morning," that is, late, after food has been digested, are bearers of revelation and true. The dream frame has been much misunderstood. For much of the past, it served to suspend disbelief and to obtain credence. The dream may be fantastic, but it really happened. The dreamer is also an "I" so that the basic credibility may be maintained. A man telling his own dream usually tells the truth. The dream framework gives us then two authenticating devices per se, the dream itself and an "I." The dream frame has other functions as well, for the tone established and the facts set forth to heighten the meaning of the dream itself, ironically or directly, but its chief function is in a very basic sense to establish the presumed reality and truth of the story (p. 184).

Along with such concrete descriptive passages as the banquet scene, the Roman envoy's arrival at Sandwich, and the departure of the English fleet for Barfleur, Arthur's dream is another episode that helps to create the poem's striking illusion of reality, the impression that we are privy to Arthur's personal experience as well as the narrator's account of his many deeds of valor.
CHAPTER 4

TRIAL

The War Between Arthur and Lucius (11. 831-3217)

The second macro-episode—the account of the battles and sieges that take place in the war between Arthur and Lucius—is composed of forty episodes that describe the steady escalation of the British and Roman war in France. Five of these episodes—Arthur's combat with the Giant of St. Michael's Mount (11. 1104-1151), Gawain's delivering Arthur's challenge to Lucius (11. 1299-1351), and the battle between Gawain's forces and the pursuing Roman forces (11. 1391-1530), Sir Cador's expedition of Paris (11. 1753-1891), and Arthur's battle with Lucius (11. 1950-2277)—must be labeled as integral episodes because they mark crucial points in the development of the narrative's action. Each of them raises important questions about the outcome of events, the particular direction the action will take. The other episodes describe in specific details the working out of the action that the integral episodes generate.

The inclusion of these five integral episodes in this section of the poem demonstrates once more the poet's adherence to a principle of logical coherence in the construction of the Alliterative Morte Arthure's plot. All five, Arthur's challenge to Lucius, Gawain's fight with the pursuing Roman force, Cador's expedition to Paris, and Arthur's final battle with Lucius, are logically motivated by the events of the
conflict between Britain and Rome. Each is directly generated by a preceding action. Since these events suggest a thoroughly credible course for the conflict to take, it is difficult to imagine the narrative continuing without them. Accordingly, we find these episodes--treated, of course, in slightly different ways--in the chronicles of Geoffrey (1929), Wace (1962) and Laamon (1978), as well as in the Alliterative Morte Arthure.

Apparently the episode dealing with Arthur's combat with the fierce Giant of St. Michael's Mount in all four narratives is not logically motivated by the events of Arthur's war with Lucius. The poet does not have, therefore, any obvious reason for including it in his version of Arthur's struggles with Lucius. The explanation that he incorporated the episode into his poem merely as fidelity to his chronicle sources is unsatisfactory for a number of reasons. First of all, he made a good many substantive changes in the form and content of the episode. Not only did he expand it, but he also changed its dramatic focus, transforming the episode from a three-man expedition in the chronicles into Arthur's single-handed struggle with the brute in the Alliterative Morte Arthure (Matthews, 1960, p. 24). Second, the poet's predilection for economical narration suggests that he would have excised, rather than included, an episode that did not serve some specific narrative purpose. To discover precisely what this purpose is, we must examine this episode's relationship to the episodes that immediately surround it.

As soon as the philosophers explain Arthur's dream of the dragon and the bear, the poet closes the temporal rupture that the
dream opened in the forward progress of the narration by continuing his narration of the sea journey that preceded the dream. Along with providing transition from the dream to Arthur's encounter with the Templar that follows, this narration of the sea journey also picks up the adventurous martial spirit that characterizes the British fleet's departure for war several episodes earlier. The high-spirited landing at Barfleur does not prepare Arthur for the sad tale of suffering he hears shortly from the Templar. The significance of this ironic reversal seems slight until we begin to see how it is part of the poet's overall narrative strategy of preceding sudden catastrophic revelations and events with placid scenes. The Roman envoy's sudden, unsettling disruption of Arthur's New Year's Day banquet, Arthur's startling dream of the dragon and the bear, and the Templar's message are early instances of disturbing events that are preceded by peaceful scenes. This particular pattern of joining episodes together is found repeatedly throughout the poem.

The unexpected appearance of the Templar, like that of the Roman envoy that interrupted Arthur's New Year's festivities, is unlinked to the previous episode. There is nothing in the preceding episodes of the poem to prepare us for the Templar's horrifying account of the Genoan giant who has raped and plundered his way across the countryside, devouring some five hundred of its people. The philosopher's suggestion that the bear in Arthur's dream may portray some giant he will fight in the future weakly motivates the Templar's appearance to tell Arthur about the Giant. Arthur obviously has to acquire this information some way, but the Templar is not the only avenue through which he
may learn of the Giant. Not only does the Templar's message announce the Giant's existence, but it also strongly motivates Arthur's combat with the Giant. After he describes the Giant's predations over the countryside as well as his abduction of Guinevere's cousin, the Duchess of Brittany, the Templar ends his message with a plea that Arthur fulfill his duty as a righteous king and avenge the pathetic misery of his subjects. Arthur's response is typically heroic. He expresses his chagrin at not being present to stop the abduction as well as his strong desire to be shown where he might find the Giant.

In addition to the development of Arthur's resolve to fight the Giant, this episode clearly defines Arthur's character. Up to now we mainly see the fierce and prudent sides of Arthur's character. Although Lucius's initial threat of burning the breadth of England (1.106) obviously has serious implications for Arthur's subjects, Arthur treats it as a personal conflict between himself and Lucius. Similarly, even his treatment of Guinevere and Mordred before he leaves England must be described as firm, practical. But when we see him in sorrow for his subjects' suffering, we observe his transcendence of his personal feelings of vengeance against Lucius, the motive that explains many of his actions in the first macro-episode of the poem. His compassion for his subjects reveals another facet of his character: his role as the champion of his people. At the same time this aspect of his character broadens the communal dimensions of the poem. Not only a proud, fierce monarch, Arthur is also the defender of his people, the source of their well-being and justice.
In the next episode Arthur weeps for his subjects' horrifying deaths and returns to his tent to consider his plan of action. While this episode clearly provides transition from Arthur's conversation with the Templar to his preparation for combat with the Giant, it also further develops Arthur's character. Specifically, it presents him as a modest, self-reliant hero. Rather than enlisting the help of Sir Kay and Sir Bedivere to fight the Giant and thereby endangering their lives in the confrontation, Arthur slyly requests them to be his armed escort on his secret pilgrimage "to seek a saint" on St. Michael's Mount. When he shows Arthur's reticence to discuss the combat, the poet is apparently building an even greater heroic stature for Arthur than he has in the chronicles. In these earlier versions of the combat, Arthur plans a fairly complicated military operation with Kay and Bedivere but insists that he fight the monster alone. They should enter the fight only if the Giant is about to kill him. In the Alliterative Morte Arthure, however, Arthur emerges not only as a completely self-sufficient hero but also as a hero possessing a wry sense of humor. The rapacious fiend he seeks is anything but a saint.

Arthur's decision to fight the Giant alone and secretly is, moreover, perfectly in accord with the modesty he demonstrates earlier in his conversation with the Templar. Rather than declare that he will rid the land of the monster or die in the attempt as most heroes boast, Arthur quietly asks directions to the crag where the monster lives so that he might speak with him "to trette with that tyrant fore treson of londes, / and take trewe for a tym, til it may tyde bettyr" (11. 878-879). When he links these two incidents of modesty together, the poet
appears to stress one of Arthur's particularly admirable qualities before his first confrontation with Lucius in Europe, thus he encourages us to feel sympathy for Arthur's plight. This addition of modesty to Arthur's character also greatly tempers the ferocity he displays in his first dealings with the Romans bearing Lucius's challenge. At this point in the narrative, Arthur exhibits poise. He has no difficulty striking a balance between his personal desires and public responsibilities.

After he arranges for the services of Kay and Bedivere, Arthur arms himself for the great ordeal with the Giant. This episode of course is a logical consequence of his decision to fight the Giant. At the same time the poet's description of the armor and Arthur's arming himself has a variety of other purposes. First of all, in giving us a detailed inventory of Arthur's magnificent armor, the poet is suggesting once again the opulence of Arthur's kingship. This descriptive catalogue, like that enumerating the rich variety of tasty dishes at his New Year's banquet, translates the splendor of Arthur's monarchy into physical details:

Attyre euesange, Sir Arthure hym selfen
Wente to hys wardrop and warp of hys wedez,
Armede hym in a acton with orfraez full ryche,
Abouen on bat a jeryn of Acres owte ouer,
Abouen rat a jesseraunt of jentyll mayles,
A jupon of Ierodyn, jaggede in schredez;
He brayedez one a bacennett, burneschte of syluer,
The beste rat was in Basill, wyth bordurs ryche;
The creste and re coronall enclosed so faire
Wyth clasppis of clere golde, couched wyth stones;
The vesare, re aventaille, enarmede so faire,
Voyde whithowttyn vice, with wyndowes of syluer;
His gloues gaylyche gilte and grauen at re hemmez,
With graynez and gobelets, glorious of hewe.

(11. 900-913)
Coming shortly after Arthur's dream of the dragon and the bear, this careful account for Arthur's battle dress underscores the philosophers' identification of the dragon as an emblem for Arthur. Whatever interpretation the poet intended for us to make of this identification—ironic or otherwise—both Arthur and the dragon shimmer in their splendid armor. This emblematic identification between Arthur and the dragon also avoids a simplistic equivalency between the two. Rather than representing each other point by point, Arthur and the dragon only resemble each other in certain physical and symbolic aspects of appearance and behavior. Because there exists only a resemblance between the two of them, we are later able to interpret the dream ironically.

This episode also has a ritualistic solemnity about it. Appropriately, Arthur starts arming himself after evening prayers, a perfect time for a Christian knight to prepare himself for a life-and-death struggle with a evil force. His ritualistic preparations—the way he quietly dresses himself in the ornate garments of warfare—underscore the gravity of his expedition, elevating it beyond the chance adventure a knight of romance might have. The serious tone of Arthur's preparations also smoothly restores the sober atmosphere of Arthur's encounter with the Templar after his jocular remark about seeking out a saint on St. Michael's Mount. When he uses this episode to provide coherence between episodes, the poet is obviously exploiting its aesthetic qualities as well. As befits his station in life, Arthur's armor is nothing short of magnificent.

After he gives us his expanded version of the arming scene, the poet suddenly departs from his chronicle sources with the added episode
of Arthur, Kay, and Bedivere riding through the pleasance on their way to St. Michael's Mount. In its general features this description of the landscape perfectly fulfills the requirements for the rhetorical topos of the locus amoenus (Curtius, 1953, pp. 195-220). Its three essential features—the luxuriant spring meadow, singing birds, and murmuring stream—suggest a special place, an otherworldly spot:

Than they roode by hat ryyer hat rynnyd so swythe, 
\( ^* \)are \( ^* \)e ryndez ouerrechez with reall bowghez; 
The roo and \( ^* \)e raynedere reklesse thare ronnen, 
In ranez and in rosers, to ryotte \( ^* \)am seluen; 
The fritez ware floreschte with flourez full many, 
Wyth fawcouns and fesantez of ferlyche hewez; 
All \( ^* \)e feulez thare fleschez that flyez with wengez. 
For thare galede \( ^* \)e gowke one greuez full lowde: 
Wyth alkyn gladschipe \( ^* \)ay gladden \( ^* \)em seluen; 
Of \( ^* \)e nyghtgale notes \( ^* \)e boisez was swette--
They threpide wyth the throstills, thre hundreths at ones; 
\( ^* \)a whate swowyng of watyr and syngyng of byrdez, 
It myghte salue hym of sore \( ^* \)at sounde was neuere. 

(11. 920-932)

All of these details combine to create an atmosphere of flourishing life and great natural beauty.

What is curious is the poet's apparent lack of motivation for including this calm episode in the narrative, particularly in the account of the events leading up to Arthur's fierce struggle with the Giant of St. Michael's Mount. Nothing prepares us for this idyllic interlude that momentarily disrupts the poet's narration of martial events. Its presence has been variously explained as a discordant romantic feature in an otherwise thoroughly epic poem or as a feature
that helps to define the poem as a romance. ¹ John Finlayson (1963, p.4) comes closer to the mark in describing the real purpose of the episode:

The function of the description is evidently that which we would normally expect of such a passage in a romance or dream allegory, namely, to set the atmosphere of an idealized or Other World. The later development of this episode makes it clear that the encounter with the giant, though possessing the formal structure of a roman d'aventure, is not an irrelevant addition to the heroic, tragic structure of the whole poem but that it transcends the limits of the aventure to form an integral part of this tale of the rise and fall of a great, Christian monarch.

Finlayson quite correctly describes the arming, pleasance, and combat episodes as comprising the traditional elements of the roman d'aventure, but he fails to explain why the poet describes the landscape across which Arthur rides as an edenic, otherworldly atmosphere. A more satisfactory explanation for paradisical landscape emerges when we consider the episode's specific placement in the chain of the plot's events.

To understand more completely the reason for the locus amoenus episode at this point in the narrative, we must consider its symbolic significance in relation to the descriptions of Giant's landscape that follow shortly. In the first of these succeeding episodes—Arthur's conversation with the mourning widow he meets on the way to challenge the Giant (ll. 933-1040)—the poet gives a clear description of the forbidding mountainside Arthur has to climb. The high, windy cliffs, the solitary path, and wild waterfall Arthur must negotiate to reach the Giant's fiery crag provide a sharp contrast to the locus amoenus and thus helps to change the narrative's tone from idyllic ease to danger.

¹See, for example, Elliott, 1961, pp. 66-67 and Baugh, 1967, p. 191 for the expression of these two views.
The poet underlines the treacherous atmosphere of St. Michael's Mount when he has Arthur come upon a widow weeping over a fresh grave mound. Her information that the Giant feeds upon the pickled remains of seven male children while three sorrowing ladies turn his spits with other grotesque meats extends the image of the dangerous landscape to portray it as a place of hellish death.

The episode that follows—Arthur's approach to the Giant (ll. 1041-1052)—largely serves to underscore the widow's sorrowful story with a concrete illustration of the Giant's fiendish appetites. Arthur has his first glimpse of the Giant as he lies obscenely among the butchered remains of men, children, and animals:

To he sowe of he reke he soghte at he gaynesthe,  
Sayned hym sekerly with certeyne wordez,  
And sydlyngs of he segge the syghte had he rechid,  
How vnsemly hat sott sowpand hym one;  
He lay lenand on lang, lugand vnfaire,  
He thee of a manns lymme, lyfte vp by he haunch;  
His bakke and his bewschers and his brode lendez  
He bekez by he bale-fyre, and breklesse hym semede.  
hare ware rostez full ruyd and rewfull bredez,  
Beerynes and bestaile brochede togeders,  
Cowle full cramid of crysmed childyre,  
Sum as brede brochede, and bierdez ham tournede.

(ll. 1041-1052)

As he gives us this gruesome vignette the poet is obviously characterizing the Giant as a thoroughly monstrous being who lives in a bestial state.

The composite image of the Giant's wilderness terrain that the poet offers—a windy, corpse-littered crag lit by a "bale-fire" over which weeping women turn spits of hideous meats—suggests, moreover, that it is an emblem of the Giant's moral obliquity. Derek Pearsall and
Elizabeth Salter (1973, pp. 52-53) point out that the wild wood or forest has the potential for this moral value in medieval literature:

It is a place of mystery, a place of testing, and always potentially evil, "a locus apart from society where the hero participating in adventures is liable to undergo supernatural ordeals." Hell in Dante is approached through a "selva oscura." Even where the forest appears to be a place of refuge, its harshness and alien nature makes it into a form of expiation or redemption through suffering. . . . In an age when forest still covered most of Western Europe, the "wild wood" could retain something of its horror and mystery, and could be an apt symbol, therefore, of the alien wilderness.

Located high in the wild lake country that the widow mentions (l. 960), the Giant's crag is certainly a wild place, "a locus apart from society." As he describes the scene of the Giant's carnage so graphically, the poet is unmistakably underlining its hellish aspects. It is a place of chaos, unrelieved suffering, and death.

The horrifying atmosphere of the Giant's terrain presents a dramatic contrast to the heavenly meadow through which Arthur rides on his way to St. Michael's Mount. More importantly, the contrasting landscape, littered as it is with dismembered bodies, reflects the moral disorder of his unbridled appetites. The spring meadow, on the other hand, clearly typifies a state of moral order. All of its forms of life--its reindeer, blooming flowers, and different species of singing birds--flourish in a state of perfect harmony. The joy of the place the poet tells us, is so great that "it myghte salue hym of sore rat sounde was neuere." In short, the spring meadow is a paradise on earth.

The poet's reason for the addition of the paradisal meadow to his account of Arthur's combat seems to be to exploit its symbolic values of an earthly paradise; the pleasance also expresses, as Pearsall
and Salter (1973, p. 51) point out, "the ideal values of a chivalric society." Chief among these are the ideals of courtesy, social harmony, and justice, the primary values of any chivalrous society. The poet's addition of the pleasance at the beginning of Arthur's expedition to slay the Giant in single combat appears then to be a symbolic suggestion of the chivalric spirit of Arthur's action. The joyful harmony of the spring meadow recalls the cheerful festivities that accompanied the founding of Carleon at the opening of the poem. In his attempt to rid the countryside of the Giant's ravages, Arthur is endeavoring to restore moral order to his subjects' lives, an order based on the ideals of his chivalric society.

The poet's use of the locus amoenus, then, is primarily artistic. Rather than the characterizing some figure in the poem or developing of some line of action in the plot, the topos serves mainly to create a social context for Arthur's combat. It reminds us of the possibilities for a civil life on earth as Arthur starts his journey to St. Michael's Mount. The fact that its artistic function becomes clear only after we examine its relationship with subsequent episodes indicates that the poet has motivated it backwardly.

In the next two episodes of the poem--Arthur's challenge to the Giant (ll. 1053-1073) and the physical description of the monster (ll. 1074-1103)--the poet presents the Giant's spiritual aberrations in particularly vivid terms. In the first of these he castigates the Giant for his depraved appetites and challenges him to combat for his rape and murder of the young duchess whom the widow mourns. Aside from its few conventionally abusive epithets, Arthur's verbal attack on the
Giant is mainly couched in abstract terms that specify the Giant's sinful behavior. The concrete description of the Giant's physical grotesqueries suggests his spiritual malignity. In typical late medieval style the poet presents a composite portrait of the Giant's bestial nature by the enumeration of his hideous aspects in the form of similes. Not only does he grin like a greyhound with grisly tusks and trail a half foot of foam from his mouth, the Giant also possesses the horrifying traits of a number of wild animals:

His frount and his forheued all was it ouer,
Sd \( \text{at} \) fell of a froske, and fraknede it semede;
Huke-nebbyde as a hawke, and a hore berde,
And herede to the hole eyghn with hyngande browes;
Harske as a hund fisch hardly whoso lukes,
So was \( \text{at} \) hyde of \( \text{at} \) hulke hally al ouer.
Erne had he full huge and vgly to schewe,
With eghne full horreble and ardaunt forsothe;
Flatt-mowthede as a fluke, with fleryand lyppys,
And \( \text{at} \) flesche in his fortethe fowlly as a bere.
His berde was brothy and blake, \( \text{at} \) till his brest rechede,
Grassede as a mereswyne, with corkes full huge,
And all falterd \( \text{at} \) flesche in his foule lippys,
Ilke wreteth as a wolfe-heuede, it wraythe owtt at ones.
Bull-nekkyde was \( \text{at} \) bierne and brade in the scholders,
Brok-brestede as a brawme, with brustils full large,
Ruyd armes as an ake with rusclede sydes,
Lym and leskes full lothym, leue \( \text{at} \) forsothe,
Schouell-foted as \( \text{at} \) schakle, and schaylande hym semyde,
With schankes vnschaply, schowand togedyrs;
Thykke theese as a thursse, and thikkere in \( \text{at} \) hanche,
Greese growen as a galte, full gryslych he lukez.

(11. 1080-1103)

As it presents the Giant's unsavory physical characteristics, this description, as John Finlayson (1964) points out, also marks him as wild man, an especially malign creature living outside the bounds of normal human society. The Giant of St. Michael's Mount, Finlayson continues, fulfills all of the requirements for the wild man: he has a monstrous
appearance, is a ravisher of women, a brutal killer, and a cannibal. In addition the poet's comparison of the Giant's physical features with those of savage animals underscores his moral depravity.\(^2\)

Arthur's fierce combat with the Giant (11. 1104-1151), which follows directly after the poet's detailed description of him, translates the monster's moral threat into grim physical terms. The struggle that ensues between the two opponents establishes them as eminently worthy of each other. In his familiar concrete style the poet conveys the grisly bloodbath of their combat in particularly vivid terms, very likely reflecting the gory realities of medieval warfare. The Giant leads off with a vicious attack that Arthur gradually turns around to his favor:

Thane stertez he vp sturdely on two styffe schankez,  
And sone he caughte hym a clubb all of clene yryn;  
He walde hafe kyllede pe Kyng with his kene wapen,  
Bot thurghe pe crafte of Cryste ~it pe carle failede;  
The creest and pe coronall, pe claspes of syluer,  
Clenely with his clubb he crassched doune at onez.  
The Kyng castes vp his schelde and couers hym faire,  
And with his burlyche brande a box he hym reches;  
Full butt in pe frunt the fromonde he hirtez,  
That the burnyscht blade to pe brayne rynnez.  
He feyed his fysnameye with his foule hondex,  
And frappez faste at his face fersely peraftyre;  
The Kyng chaungez his fote eschews a lycyll--  
Ne had he eschapede peat choppe, cheuede had euyll;  
He folowes in fersly and festeness a dynte  
Hye vpe on pe hanche with his harde wapyn,  
That the hillid pe swerde halfe a fote large  
The hott blode of pe hulke vnto pe hilte rynnez;  
Ewyn into inmette the gyaunt he hyttez,  
Lust to pe genitales and jaggede ~am in sondre.

(11. 1104-1124)

\(^2\)A number of writers have noted the connection between grotesque physical features and moral depravity in medieval literature. In addition to Finleyson, 1964, p. 116, see also Berheimer, 1952 and Doob, 1974 for a detailed discussion of the wild man and his moral state.
After he sustains a number of other savage blows, the Giant finally throws down his club and seizes Arthur in a desperate attempt to squeeze him to death. This strategy almost succeeds until Arthur finally stabs him repeatedly with his dagger and kills him. The Giant's death convulsion, however, is so violent that he breaks three of Arthur's ribs.

The motivation for this episode in the poem is both obvious and subtle. On the simplest level Arthur's combat with the Giant is integral to the story. The future development of the plot—that is, what specific direction it will take—depends upon whether or not Arthur survives his fight with the Giant. At the same time the episode is a logical consequence of the Templar's earlier plea to Arthur to rid the countryside of the Giant. Once the Templar petitions the heroic king on behalf of his subjects, the other episodes of the sequence—Arthur's preparations for the fight, his journey to St. Michael's Mount, his conversation with the widow, and the description of the Giant—follow each other very naturally.

The poet's thematic reasons for including Arthur's combat with the Giant in the narrative are more difficult to explain. This difficulty arises precisely because of the episode's thematic relations to the episodes that immediately precede it. Some critics has failed to consider these thematic relations in their readings of the episode. William Matthews (1960), for example, suggests that the poet may have intended the episode to foreshadow Arthur's future rash behavior in battle but does not examine the wider context of Arthur's actions:

In making Arthur forego the help of the two knights who assist him in other versions, the poet may have had in mind to prepare for the rash self-reliance that Arthur
displays on later occasions, but the king's objective in this fight is admirable. He proffers his strength and puts his life in jeopardy for no other reason than to rescue the duchess of Brittany from the Giant's lechery and to set free the subject-kings who were victims of his tyranny (Matthews, 1960, pp. 129-130).

When he overlooks the political responsibilities that Arthur fulfills in facing the Giant, Matthews fails to consider Arthur's action as part of the poet's deliberate characterization of him as a champion of his people in this part of the narrative. The fact that Arthur takes on the Giant alone in the Alliterative Morte Arthure is not necessarily proof of his "rash self-reliance" any more than Beowulf's or Gawain's facing monsters alone is evidence of their arrogance. Arthur's solitary confrontation with the Giant may be merely part of the poet's strategy to bring Arthur to the forefront of the poem's action, a technique Matthews himself points out earlier in his analysis of the changes the poet made in the dramatic focus of the narrative. Arthur's mortal jeopardy to free his subjects from the Giant's tyranny is, furthermore, perfectly consistent with the poet's depiction of Arthur as a noble king, a true champion of his people. Last of all, it seems hard to read Arthur's thanks to God for the defeat of the Giant--

"Thankes God," quod he, "of his grace, and no gome elles, For it was neuer manns dede, bot myghte of Hym selfen, Or myracle of Hys Modyr, hat mylde es till all."

(11. 1209-1211)

--as anything other than an expression of Arthur's humility. Matthews' other theory about the poet's purpose for the Giant episode--namely that the Giant might possibly be the poet's symbol for tyrannical conquest--remains underdeveloped and unsupported by evidence from the poem.
Other critics argue for a broader thematic significance for the episode. John Gardner (1971, p. 242) maintains that Arthur's combat with the Giant prefigures his later struggle with Lucius. Basically, he argues that both the Giant and Lucius are villainous tyrants guilty of the same crimes:

The giant is a "tyrant," a "powerful master," a bad vassal . . . with whom Arthur says he will "treat for a truce," Lucius too is a tyrant, a rebel to Arthur's legitimate claim as overlord—if the claim is in fact legitimate—and he has the support of infidels and giants "engendered by friends" . . . . Lucius and the giant are guilty of the same crimes: Arthur fights both "by-cause of his people," i.e., to protect his people, and also because both seek tribute, Lucius a tribute of rents, the giant a more barbaric and shameful tribute, Arthur's beard.

Although Gardner's parallels appear striking at first, they do not stand up to closer scrutiny. There are, of course, broadly general similarities between both characters, but their differences are far more obvious and illuminating. The poet, moreover, makes no verbal parallels in his descriptions of the physical characteristics, emotional temperaments, actions, and habitations of both characters. They are simply different beings. Lucius, for instance, is not in any remote sense of the word a cannibalistic ravisher of young women and children, a grotesque, animalistic wild man, and an exile from the human community. He clearly belongs to the human race. The Giant does not. In his attempt to draw these thematic parallels between different episodes of the plot, Gardner does not pay enough attention to the specific content of the Giant episodes and their placement in the plot. Consequently, he oversimplifies the thematic significance of both characters.
John Finlayson, on the other hand, offers a more cogent explanation of the Giant episodes' artistic function in the plot. Arguing that Arthur's combat with the Giant is a good deal more than a conventional romantic incident, Finlayson maintains that its content and position in the plot completes the poet's characterization of Arthur as a hero. The Giant's especially malign nature removes Arthur's struggle with him from the realm of ordinary combat:

The particular attributes of the giant place him in the category of those animals and monsters inimical to Man, unlike the Herdsman in *Ywain* and *Gawain*: he is a cannibal, ugly, kidnapper of women, an *incubus* and a bringer of death, since he ravished and murdered the duchess (978-9). The giant in this poem is, therefore, a very potent symbol of Evil, the unnatural and death, and this combat, besides being dramatically interesting, establishes Arthur as at once the champion of Christianity against Evil, epic hero and redeemer of his people, defender of ladies in distress (1200-7), and generous monarch (Finlayson, 1964, p. 116).

After the poet's initial depiction of Arthur as a great conqueror, the combat, Finlayson adds, also establishes Arthur as a man of considerable personal stature throughout the rest of the poem, especially since Arthur makes relatively few important appearances until the final battle at the end of the poem.

Finlayson's assessment of the poet's use of the combat episode to characterize Arthur as an epic Christian hero defending his people against an evil force is essentially correct. The poet is certainly expanding the episode from its chronicle sources to present Arthur as a compassionate champion of his people, a man who both weeps for their suffering and risks his own life to slay the fiendish Giant. At the same time the poet is very likely employing the episode, as Finlayson explains, to contrast Arthur's even-tempered valor at this point in the
narrative with Cador's and Gawain's reckless bravery. Arthur's prepara-
tions for the combat—his solitary arming of himself, his gentle inter-
rogation of the sorrowing widow about the Giant, his reconaissance of
the Giant's territory, and his religious devotions—all demonstrate him
to be a provident, level-headed, and courteous hero. Up to this point
in the narrative Arthur is able to balance his public responsibilities
for the kingship with his personal desire for heroic accomplishments.

The placement of the combat episode at this juncture in the
narrative, moreover, helps to articulate the moral values of Arthur's
kingship, the ethos of the Round Table. Along with the nine other epi-
sodes composing the enclosed narrative of Arthur's encounter with the
Giant, the combat episode dramatically defines the Round Table's Chris-
tian code of behavior through the exemplary behavior of its chief
knight. After he modestly questions the Templar and widow about how he
might approach the Giant, Arthur searches him out alone and fights him
to the end, thus exhibiting the humility, courage, and faith in God that
characterize a true Christian knight. The two references to Christ's
intervention on Arthur's behalf during the combat—the authorial obser-
vation that Arthur would have been slain by the Giant's first blow had
not Christ protected him (I. 1107) and the Maiden's plea to Christ to
save his knight (II. 1138-39)—suggest that the poet intended us to see
Arthur fulfilling the role of a Christian knight. As such he of course
sets the moral standard for the rest of the knights of the Round Table.

The two episodes that follow Arthur's combat with the Giant—
Kay and Bedivere's rescue of Arthur from the embrace of the dead monster
(II. 1152-1192) and Arthur's distribution of the Giant's treasure and
dedication of a chapel to the martyred duchess's memory (ll. 1193-1221) --further characterize Arthur's noble behavior in more chivalrous terms. Once again the poet demonstrates his preference for dramatic exposition in these two scenes. In the first Arthur jokes with Bedivere about the unseemly "saint" he has just dispatched, thus illustrating his heroic good humor after grim combat. In the other he properly meets his responsibilities as a representative of God's law with a chapel to commemorate one of His martyrs.

As it completes Arthur's characterization as a heroic Christian monarch, this sequence of episodes about the giant also serves as a thematic prelude to Arthur's future combats on the uncertain fields of battle. The horrific figure of the Giant does not really represent either the bear or Arthur's first dream of Lucius. Nor is he necessarily a prefigurement of Arthur's bad moral character later in the poem. There is simply not enough evidence in the poem--that is, textual evidence such as verbal parallels in the poet's description of the Giant and these other characters--to warrant anything more than a general comparison between him and them. Although the Giant unmistakably represents an evil force, he primarily stands as a challenge to Arthur's kingship. Arthur's response to the Giant's hideous predations displays all of the essential features of the heroic code. Arthur exhibits a readiness to deal with emergencies. Once he learns of the Giant, he never shows the slightest hesitation about what course of action he should take. His allegiance to the heroic ideal of achievement dictates his choice: he must destroy the menace whatever the cost. He also typically takes the dangerous exploit upon himself, trusting to no one
but himself and divine providence for success. The sequence of episodes about the Giant thus provides a timely prologue to Arthur's perilous war against Lucius with the definition of Arthur's heroic code.

The next three episodes--the voyage from Barfleur to Whitechapel (ll. 1222-1230), the arrival of messengers reporting Lucius's invasion of France and Arthur's response to it (ll. 1231-1278), and the description of Lucius's camp (ll. 1279-1298)--provide transition between Arthur's combat with the Giant and the actual beginning of his campaign against Lucius. Once more the poet reorients us to the orderly progression of events in the story of Arthur's war with Lucius, thereby closing the rupture in the primary narration caused by the narration of episodes concerned with Arthur's encounter with the Giant.

The first of these episodes presents a rapid summary of Arthur's naval excursion. The language and brevity of the passage changes the tone of the narrative from the elegaic note of Arthur's obsequies for the slain duchess to the high-spirited emotions of heroic adventure. This shift in tone is of course essential since most heroic exploits traditionally begin on an optimistic note. The two transitional episodes that follow are more fully developed since they provide important exposition about Lucius's current activities. The first one, the messengers from the Marshall of France arriving with news of Lucius's invasion of France (ll. 1231-1278), is temporally linked to the previous episode by one of the poem's relatively rare references to time--"Onone afytre mydday, in the mene-while" (l. 1231)--thus reinforcing the continuity between events in the story of Arthur's war with Lucius.
This episode appears to be motivated by concerns about the construction of a unified plot since it underscores Arthur's resolve to fight Lucius. When he hears about Lucius's pillage in France—such deeds as the pillage of towns, the destruction of forests, and wanton murder of masses of people—Arthur is more interested than ever in destroying Lucius. He therefore immediately dispatches an embassy headed by Bors and Gawain to order Lucius to leave France or face him in single combat. The next episode, the description of Lucius's camp (ll. 1279-1298), is logically motivated by the arrival of the embassy at the Roman camp. The opulence of the Roman quarters also obviously characterizes the wealth and power of the Roman force as equal to that of Arthur's splendid army. The poet's repeated references to the magnificence of both armies throughout the poem moreover suggest the heroic nature of both culture's martial undertaking.

When Gawain, Bors, and their party ride up to Lucius's quarters and deliver Arthur's ultimatum, the poet finally gives the first scene of fierce combat in the poem. Gawain's insulting challenge to Lucius and his assembled lords and subsequent slaying of a Roman knight in their presence at once establishes Gawain as a knight of great valor. Gawain begins his formal challenge when he appeals to God's justice to stike down Lucius from his sinful position as Emperor of Rome, a title that he says justly belongs to Arthur. After he listens to Gawain's abusive remarks and recitation of his outrageous behavior in France, Lucius haughtily declares that he will do as he wishes in France. Sir Gayous, one of Lucius's proud knights, then insults Gawain, who responds by striking off Gayous's head. This action at once transforms Gawain's
visit to the Roman camp into a integral episode since the future direction of the plot depends upon what happens to Gawain. Blood has been spilled. Retribution must follow.

As it provides the motivation for the subsequent battle, ambushes, and sieges that develop out of this first violent act, this episode also fulfills the purpose of defining Gawain's character at a critically important point in the narrative. After the combat with the Giant, Arthur largely disappears from the foreground of attacks and counterattacks that make up the rest of the war with Lucius. When he changes his focus from Arthur's character development, which occupies a good deal of the first 1200 lines of the poem, the poet necessarily has to develop a number of important characters to conduct the war. As one of the chief knights of the Round Table, Gawain is an obvious choice. Gawain's errand of delivering the message to Lucius then becomes a timely action that defines him. Up to now Gawain, as well as several other knights who later play important roles in the action, remains an obscure character in the poem, making his only appearance at Arthur's New Year's banquet. But when he draws first blood and then battles his way back to Arthur's lines, Gawain demonstrates his virtues as the tireless champion of his king. The poet is obviously developing him into a central heroic figure in the poem's epic action.

The sequence of twelve episodes describing the military actions of the war and the funeral arrangements for the fallen of both sides exhibits a tight pattern of causal motivation. The whole sequence takes its direction from three integral episodes that are directly linked to each other by the logic of events: the battle between the British
forces and the Roman forces pursuing Gawain's party (ll. 1391-1530), the Romans' ambush of Cador's expedition bearing prisoners to Paris (ll. 1753-1891), and the final battle between Arthur and Lucius in Saxony (ll. 1950-2270). Seeing Gawain and his men fleeing for their lives from Lucius's camp, Boys, Bedwin, and Idrus Fitz Ewain rush with British forces to their aid, taking the Roman senator Peter and many other knights prisoner. Arthur orders Cador not to keep prisoners and consider their pleas for ransom, but to take them to Paris for imprisonment. In the course of his expedition to Paris, Cador learns of a Roman ambush and wages a dangerous battle with the Romans. Angered by his senators' news of great Roman losses in the battle against Cador, Lucius makes plans for a last desperate battle with Arthur in Saxony, which Arthur gladly joins. After the Romans are defeated, Arthur sends their dead to Rome with a stern message to the Roman senate and buries his beloved heroes. The nine other episodes of this narrative sequence largely present the minor actions that precede and follow these major actions: the arrival and departure of messengers, the challenges and counter-challenges that precede battles, a catalogue of the spoils of battle, and the preparation and burial of the dead. These minor actions are likewise motivated since they demonstrate perfectly credible and natural actions on the parts of men at war.

Although the poet is primarily concerned with describing the course of Arthur's war with Lucius in this sequence of episodes, he is also interested in using the events of the war for a number of thematic purposes. One of these is the definition of the nature of Arthur's heroic community. Several incidents illustrate the bond of loyalty
sustaining Arthur and his knights in their perilous campaign. All of
the other values of the Round Table—its justice, patriotism, courtesy,
and so on—derive from this primary ideal. In his characteristic mode
of dramatic exposition, the poet develops this theme of loyalty in
several dramatic scenes between Arthur and his knights, thus locating
the source of the Round Table's great heroic strength.

After the first battle with the Romans (ll. 1391-1530), a mes-
senger reports to Arthur that all of the British knights are sound of
body except for Ewain Fitz Henry, who was wounded in the side. At the
same time the messenger conveys the captive Roman senator's plea that
Arthur accept a huge ransom for his release. Arthur characteristically
responds that he is more concerned with Ewain's recovery than with
Peter's pledge of sixty horses loaded with silver: "Thare sall no
silver hym saue bot Ewayn recouer; / I had leuer see hym stynke on the
salte strandez, / Than the seegge ware seke hat es so sore woundede"
(ll. 1572-1574). Later that evening Arthur addresses his knights, re-
peating his gratitude toward them for their defense of the Round Table
against its enemies. He uses many of the same terms to express his bond
with them that he used before after the council of war earlier in the
narrative:

Than Sir Arthur, on erthe atheliste of orere,
At even at his awen borde awantid his lordez:
"Me aughte to honour them in erthe ouer all oer thynges
hat hus in myn absens awnters hem selfen;
I sall them luffe whylez I lyffe, so me our Lorde helpe,
And gyfe hem landys full large whare them beste lykes,
Thay sall noghte losse on his layke, yif me lyfe happen,
hat hus are lamede for my lufe by his lythe strandez.

(ll. 1593-1600)
Arthur's statement that it behooves him to honor them above all things unmistakably commits him to a code of behavior that places the welfare of his knights above all the rest of his concerns. The poet's reiteration of Arthur's heroic vow of loyalty to his knights at this point in the narration also constrasts sharply with his egocentric behavior later during his siege of Metz and his subsequent conquests in France and Italy. His vow to his knights ironically becomes a touchstone by which we measure how far he has strayed from his own heroic ideal.

In two other incidents--Cador's exhortation of his troops to overcome the superior Roman force that has ambushed them in a forest (11. 1724-1737) and his subsequent reprimand and forgiveness by Arthur for the risk of his troops against such great odds (11. 1920-1945)--the poet apparently demonstrates that Arthur's knights honor his faith in them by when they risk their lives for his honor. In the first of these incidents Cador responds to Clegis's question about whether he wishes to attack or flee the Roman force waiting in the forest with a strong statement of his desire to fight. In typically heroic fashion Cador then exhorts his men to remember Arthur's generous bounty to them:

Thynk on pe valyaunt prynce hat vesettez vs euer
With landez and lordchepezz, whare vs best lykes
That has vs ducheres delte and dubbyde vs knyghttez,
Gifen vs gersoms and golde and garwynes many,
Grewhoundez and grett horse and alkyn gamnes,
That gaynez till any gome that vndyre God leuez.
Thynke on riche renoun of pe Rounde Table,
And late it neuer be refte vs fore Romayne in erthe;
Feyne tow noghte feyntly, ne frythes ne wapyns,
Bot luke pe fygte faythefully, frekes, y sor selfen;
I walde be wellyde all qwype and quarterde in sondre,
Bot I wyrke my dede, whils I in wretche lenge."

(11. 1726-1737)
As it rouses his men to action, Cador's speech likewise affirms the values of the heroic community that Arthur's knights vowed to uphold earlier during the council of war. Cador's pleas that the Round Table's renown never be taken from them by any Roman turns out to be ironical in the light of later events. No Roman ever does bring down the glory of the Round Table. Its fall rather occurs as the result of Arthur's sins and the obscure workings of fate.

The other episode that the poet uses to exemplify the heroic bonds that unites Arthur and his knights is Cador's report to Arthur after he wins his fierce struggle with the Romans and takes many prisoners (ll. 1892-1949). After he listens to Cador, Arthur berates him for risking so many men in the rash attack on the great Roman force. Cador's reply displays the selfless heroism typical of Arthur's knights throughout the campaign in France:

"Sir," sais Sir Cador, "we are kyng in pis kythe, karpe whatte sow lykys; Sall neuer vpbrayde me, bat to bi burde langes, That I sulde blyn fore theire boste thi byddyng to wyrche When any stirttez to stale, stuffe pam pe bettere, Ore thei will be stonayede and stroyede in Zone stratye londes. I dide my delygens todaye, I doo me one lordez, And in daungere of dede fore dyuerse knyghttez; I hafe no grace to bi gree, bot syche grette wordez--; ʒif I heuen my herte, my hape es no bettyre."

(ll. 1928-1937)

Obviously moved by the honesty and justice of Cador's words, Arthur overlooks his own anger and remembers his heroic obligation to reward Cador for his valorous actions in defense of the Round Table. Significantly, Arthur passes over his nephew Mordred to name Cador, or one of Cador's offspring, heir to the throne in the event that he and Guinevere
should never have children. Arthur clearly places supreme value in the heroic code as the cornerstone of his kingdom.

At the same time he illustrates the centrality of the heroic code in the Round Table, the poet also underscores the moral context of the heroic action throughout this sequence of episodes. In his particularly grim descriptions of battle's bloodshed, he likewise depicts the transience of a hero's life. A typical passage is his description of the aftermath of a skirmish during the last great battle in Saxony:

Than the Romaynes and the rennkkez of þe Rounde Table
Rewles them in arraye, rerewarde ande ðerør;
With wyghte wapnez of werre thay wroghten on helmes,
Rittez with raunke stele full ryalle maylez.
Bot they fitt them fayre, thes frekk byernez,
Fewters in freely one feraunte stedes,
Foynes ful felly with flyschande speris,
Fretten of orfrayes feste appon scheldez;
So fele fay es in fyghte appon þe felde leuyde,
That iche a furthe in the frithe of rede blode rynnys.
By that swyftely one swarthe þe swett es byleuede,
Swerdez swangen in two sweltand knytthez,
Lyes wyde opyn, welterande on walopande stede;
Wondes of wale men, werkande sydys,
Facez fetteled vnfaire in filterede lakes,
All craysed, fortrodyen with trappede stede;
The faireste on folde that fygurede was euere,
All ferre alls a furlang, a thosande at ones.

(11. 2135-2152)

This hideous spectacle of carnage reminds us that the glories of the heroic life are continually subject to the uncertain fortunes of battle. The universality of this passage is particularly compelling. Momentarily transcending his chauvinistic point of view, the narrator pays his respects to the slain of both sides, noting that the fairest men that were ever created are now strewn together the length of a furlong.
The pathos of this image remains as an enduring comment on the inevitable waste of the heroic life.

The other important use this sequence serves is the subtle preparation for the gradual change in Arthur's character. Up to the end of Arthur's combat with the Giant, the narrator clearly used the events confronting Arthur as a means to develop different aspects of Arthur's heroic personality. By the end of Arthur's combat with the Giant, Arthur emerges as a fairly complex hero. At the same time his character mirrors the usual virtues of a hero—great physical strength, pride, integrity, resourcefulness, self-reliance—it also exhibits the traits of modesty, prudence, and compassion, all attributes of a good monarch. Displaying this balance between his personal nature and public responsibilities, Arthur reveals no moral conflict in his behavior. After he has delineated Arthur's character by the beginning of the campaign against Lucius, the poet then temporarily moves Arthur into the background of the action to present the courageous deeds of Gawain, Cador, Bedivere, Idrus Fitz Ewain, and others. While he removes Arthur from the early actions of the war, the poet also veils the further development of Arthur's personality. He does, however, provide a significant clue that Arthur is starting to lose his moral perspective. After his triumphant victory over Lucius, Arthur suddenly reveals unwittingly that he is beginning to put too much trust in his own powers to control human events. When two Roman senators plead with him to spare their lives through the grace of Christ, Arthur rashly grants them mercy through his own grace instead:
"Twa senatours we are, thi subgettez of Rome,
That has sauede oure lyfe by peise salte strandys,
Hyd vs in þe heghe wode, thurghe þe helpyng of Criste,
Besekes the of socoure, as Soueraygne and Lorde;
Grante vs luffe and lym with leberall herte,
For His luffe that the lente this lordchiphe in erthe."
"I graunte," quod [the] gude kyng, "thurghe grace of my selfen:
"I giffe þowe lyffe and lyme and leue for to passe,
So þe doo my message menskefully at Rome,
That ilke charge þat I þow þiffe here before my cheeffe knyghttez."

(11. 2314-2324)

The context of Arthur's remark underlines its dangerous vanity. The senators' observation that Arthur owes his kingship to Christ's grace clearly suggests the spiritual perversion of Arthur's dispensation of mercy to them through his own grace. This episode obviously prepares the way for Arthur's subsequent divergence from the ideals of the Christian hero.

In the sequence of eleven episodes that conclude Arthur's military campaigns in Europe, the poet largely chronicles Arthur's subsequent success as a conqueror and traces his growing pride. Although this sequence is a series of episodes that the poet added to the story, (Matthews, 1960, pp. 28-29), it still displays, except for one episode, a thoroughly rational pattern of causality in the way its episodes are lined together. The direction of the sequence is likewise determined by a small number of integral episodes that raise questions about the survival of Arthur and his chief knights. These four episodes—Arthur's announcing plans for further conquests (11. 2390-2415), Arthur's arrogant parade outside the walls of Metz (11. 2416-2447), Gawain's combat with Priamus (11. 2513-2715), and the fierce battle between Florent's and Gawain's force and the Duke of Lorraine's army (11. 2752-2031)—
moreover define the excesses of behavior that characterize a deviation from the heroic ideal. The seven non-integral episodes of the sequence—Arthur's troops preparing for the siege of Metz (ll. 2448-2482), Arthur's ordering Florent to forage for food (ll. 2483-2512), Gawain's exhortation to his troops before his battle with the Duke of Lorraine (ll. 2716-2751), Arthur's destruction of Metz (ll. 3032-3061), his triumphant entry into the city (ll. 3062-3084), his conquest of France and Italy (ll. 3085-3175), and his grant of a truce to the cardinal from Rome a truce (ll. 3176-3217)—all give us essential information about the progress of events resulting from the four integral episodes.

Once again the poet's rationale for linking episodes together in this sequence is predominantly the logic of events: one event either directly leads to or prepares for another. Flushed with his victory over Lucius, Arthur decides to invade Lorraine, Lombardy, and Turkey to enlarge the domain of his power. Planning the siege of Metz, the chief city of Lorraine, Arthur rashly displays a foolish confidence in his ability to survive the physical dangers of war. Then in the midst of the siege, he sends Gawain, Florent, and a number of other noble knights on a foraging expedition to get fresh meat for his troops. During the hunting expedition in the wilds, Gawain suddenly rides into the forest to seek adventures, meets the lone knight Priamus, and engages him in deadly combat. The two knights inflict fatal wounds upon each other, but Priamus's magic salve heals them. They become fast friends. When he spots the mighty force of the Duke of Lorraine, Gawain convinces young Florent that they should attack and destroy the enemy to win glory for the Round Table. After they win the long struggle against the
enemy, Gawain, Florent, and the rest of their troop report their victory to Arthur, who, after he lavishly praises them, concludes his assault on Metz when he destroys it and spares its inhabitants. Having established peace in Metz, Arthur moves his army southward into Italy, easily taking Como, Milan, Tuscany, Viterbo, where he revels with his knights while he awaits news of a peace with Rome. A cardinal finally arrives with the Pope's offer to crown Arthur Emperor of Rome. Arthur joyfully celebrates with his knights and expresses a desire to wage a war in the Holy Land to avenge Christ's death.

At the same time it exhibits a strong pattern of rational motivation, this sequence of episodes also displays the narrator's shrewdly dramatic arrangement of events. Essentially, he draws a striking contrast between Arthur's and Gawain's characters by when he embeds Gawain's narrative of martial exploits within the larger narrative of Arthur's conquests. The narrator also organizes the entire sequence into a balanced tripartite structure that mirrors in miniature the structure of the entire poem. The embedded narrative of Gawain's martial actions accounts for two-thirds of it and is divided almost equally between the reports of Arthur's activities that frame the Gawain episodes. This particular arrangement of episodes serves a number of narrative purposes. First, the poet's narration of Gawain's exploits takes place while Arthur's army is besieging Metz. This arrangement removes the necessity to report the undramatic activity of Arthur's army waiting to storm Metz. We are left to assume the corresponding passage of time.

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3 Specifically, this sequence of episodes starts with line 2390 and extends to line 3217. Of the 827 lines in the sequence, the poet devotes 548 lines to Gawain's exploits.
The larger purpose the poet has for the embedment of the Gawain episodes is to contrast the character of Gawain's and Arthur's behavior. He begins to draw this contrast with Gawain's combat against Priamus. This episode suddenly introduces a romantic tone into the otherwise heroic narrative of Arthur's military enterprise. Everything about the episode belongs to the world of romance. First of all, the setting in which the adventure begins is conventionally remote and idyllic:

Now ferkes to ðe frythe thees fresche men of armes,  
To ðe fel so fewe, theis frescyliche byernes,  
Thorowe hopes and hymland, hillys and ðeper,  
Holtis and hare woddes with heslyn schawes,  
Thorowe marasse and mosse and montes so heghe  
And in they myste [of] mornyny one a mede falles,  
Mawen and vmmade, maynoyrede bott lyttyll,  
In swathes sweppen down, full of swete floures.  
Thare vnbyrdills theis bolde and baytes ðeire horses,  
To ðe grygynge of ðe daye, ðat byrdes gan synge,  
Whyls the sur of ðe sonne, ðat sonde es of Cryste,  
That solaces all synfull ðat syghte has in erthe.

(11. 2501-2512)

The wild landscape full of highlands, swamps, and misty, neglected meadows at once strikes the clear chord of romance. Gawain responds immediately when he rides off to seek wonders.

Unlike almost all of the other episodes in the poem, Gawain's adventure is completely unmotivated. There is no preceding action in the poem that prepares the way for his precipitous decision to abandon the hunting expedition in search of new exploits. The appearance of the lone knight Priamus in the forest is equally gratuitous by the poem's standards of rational motivation. After his weakly provoked combat with Gawin, Priamus explains that his father sent him to the forest with
sevenscore knights to test his courage and skill in war. Typical of other wandering knights of romance, Priamus is the well-born son of a Prince of Rome, the heir to a vast fortune. As such he is an appropriate opponent for a chivalric contest with the noble Gawain.

The other prominent romantic motifs in the episode are Priamus's magic salve and the miraculous healing of the two gravely wounded knights. In the other martial exploits of the poem, the poet adheres to a much more realistic narration of events. Knights simply get wounded and die. His inclusion of the miraculous recovery of Priamus and Gawain, particularly through the agency of the supernatural salve made from the nectar of the waters of Paradise, is therefore fundamentally different from his usual narration of the quasi-historical events that appear in his sources. The romantic elements of the salve and the miraculous recovery of Gawain and Priamus suggest that the poet is using the episode for thematic reasons that lie outside the narrative's rational causality.

The poet appears to have invented the Gawain/Priamus episode to contrast the different natures of Arthur's and Gawain's roles as king and knight. Even though Arthur's and Gawain's single combats are similar in many ways—both are introduced by idyllic images of the pleasance, both heroes bravely face their opponents far from the aid of fellow knights, both demonstrate considerable skill in combat, and so on—they are essentially different in purpose. When Arthur battles the

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4 In general this view is advanced by Fichte, 1981, pp. 106-116. He does not suggest, however, that the poet is contrasting Arthur's and Gawain's social responsibilities as king and hero as I do.
Giant, he does so primarily, as Finlayson (1964) was the first to point out, to rid his subjects of a deadly menace, thus fulfilling his public responsibilities as king. Gawain's battle with Priamus does not, however, serve any public function. It is merely a personal encounter that Gawain undertakes for the sake of adventure. In the presentation of these parallel combats the poet is really contrasting the responsibilities of the kingship with those of the knight errant. Although Gawain is of course responsible to the heroic code of the Round Table, he is free to undertake chivalrous adventures without risk to the well-being of the kingdom if he should lose his life. Arthur's actions, on the other hand, are necessarily circumscribed by the nature of his duties as king. He is continually forced to consider the public consequences of his actions. When Arthur tempts fate by parading before the bowmen of Metz without armor or a shield, Ferrier rightly reminds him of the communal dangers his actions might generate:

(11. 2424-2437)

Arthur's arrogant reply does not diminish the reasonableness of Ferrier's advice. When he risks his life foolishly, Arthur is
endangering the entire British force. His death would mean the destruction of the Round Table. His rash act contrasts sharply with his earlier chiding of Cador.

The next episode in the embedded narrative of Gawain's exploits returns to the heroic subject of Arthur's war of conquest. Once more the poet displays his predilection for linking episodes together rationally. After their wounds have healed, Gawain and Priamus report the presence of the hostile army of the Duke of Lorraine to their small force. In typical heroic fashion, Gawain exhorts Florent and the rest of the British party to attack the Duke's vastly larger force to win glory. Ironically, it is the inexperienced young Florent who argues for the more prudent course of flight from such a dangerous encounter. Gawain, however, convinces the assembled knights to fight. What follows is a series of interlocking skirmishes that serve to define the great heroism and skill of the small band of British knights and describe the grim details of battle, especially the death of Child Chastelain, Arthur's squire. The whole episode is conventionally heroic in its concentration on the physical and emotional details of battle. The narrator describes not only the gore of knights being slaughtered with lances and swords but also the grief heroes feel for the death of their comrades. After an indeterminate amount of time, the British band completely routs the Duke of Lorraine's great army and returns to Arthur's camp outside Metz with news of their victory. With their arrival the poet ends the embedded narrative of Gawain's exploits, thus returning to the chronicle of Arthur's conquests that the Gawain episodes temporarily displace.
The four non-integral episodes that conclude this macro-episode of the poem—Arthur's destruction of Metz (ll. 3032-3043), his chivalrous treatment of the Duchess of Lorraine and the people of Metz (ll. 3044-3083), his conquest of the rest of France and Italy (ll. 3084-3175), and his celebration after the Cardinal's offer of the crown of Rome (ll. 3176-3217)—give a rapid summary of Arthur's conquests in Europe. At the same time they present his brilliant ascension to the pinnacle of worldly success, they also dramatically trace the equally swift development of his overweening pride. Although the poet has foreshadowed Arthur's growing vanity, the rapid narration of Arthur's moral decline from a modest, even-tempered king to an imperious monarch is still compelling. The poet achieves this dramatic effect when he condenses a relatively long period of story time into a short narration. As we learn about the ease of Arthur's conquests in France and Italy in two summary episodes, we also see his changes in behavior juxtaposed in two dramatic scenes that follow his capture of besieged towns. The alternation of the two dramatic scenes with the swift summaries of Arthur's military triumphs suggests how Arthur is swept away by events.

After the summary episode that recounts Arthur's brutal pillage of Metz, the poet gives us a dramatic encounter between Arthur and the Duchess of Lorraine in which Arthur behaves in an exemplary manner. Moved by her plea for mercy, Arthur chivalrously honors her request when he grants his protection to all of the inhabitants of the fallen city (ll. 3044-3083). In the summary of action that follows, however, a radically different image of Arthur emerges. Fighting his way across
Tuscany, he displays a merciless demeanor in his destruction of everything in his path:

Into Tuskan he tournez, when pus wele tymede,
Take townes full tyte, with towrres full hege;
Walses he welte down, wondyd knyghtez,
Towrres he turnes and turmentez pe pople,
Wroghte wedewes full wlonke wrotherayle synges,
Ofte wery and wepe and wryngen theire handis;
And all he wastys with werre, thare he awaye rydez,
Thaire welthes and theire wonny[n]ges, wandreth the wroghte.
Thus they spryngen and sped and sparis bot lyttill,
Spoylls dispetouslye and spillis theire vynes,
Spendis vnsparelye hot sparede was lange,
Spedis them to Spolett with speris inewe.

(11. 3150-3161)

There is nothing in this action that recalls Arthur's chivalrous behavior with the people of Metz. His subsequent proud speech shows an even greater change in his character. Flushed with his victories in Tuscany and the prospects of his coronation in Rome, Arthur boasts about his plans for the future in his celebration with his knights:

Than this roy royall rehersys theis wordes:
"Now may we reuell and riste, fore Rome es oure aven!
Makeoure ostage at ese, risse auernaunt childryen,
And luk ye honden them all that in mys oste lengez.
The Emperour of Almayne and all theis este marches,
We sall be ouerlynge of all hat on the erthe lengez!
We will by ye Crosse Dayes encroche yeis londez,
And at ye Crystynmesse Daye be crowned theraftyre;
Rynge in my ryalltes, and holde my Rownde Table,
Withe the rentes of Rome, as me best lykes;
Syne graythe ouer ye grette see with gud men of armes,
To reuenge the Renke that on the Rode dyede."

(11. 3206-3217)

This speech masterfully concludes the first two macro-episodes of the poem. As it does so it exhibits a number of narrative purposes. First, it completes the plot of Arthur's struggle with Lucius with a summary of the consequences of Arthur's absolute victory over him and the mighty
Roman host, thus providing full closure for the original martial action of the poem. Elated by the offer of the crown of Rome, Arthur rejoices with his men at the prospects of the Roman Empire. The Round Table's glory has never been greater. Not only has the Round Table survived the threat from Rome, but it has also proved itself the most valiant fighting force in the world.

Simultaneously the scene fulfills the subtler purpose of describing the restless spirit of the hero. At the summit of his good fortune, Arthur is ironically unsatisfied with his greatest achievement. Even as he is exulting in the heady joys of victory, he is making grand plans to avenge Christ's death in the Holy Land. Arthur's desire to right the wrong done to Christ seems to be little more than a whim to carry out a vendetta for a fellow knight. The manner in which Arthur declares this new military campaign is likewise significant. His sudden announcement of it at the end of a list of other plans suggests that he now feels no need to ask for his knights' advice on matters of state as he did before the war with Lucius. Arthur has apparently lost the last traces of modesty belonging to a true knight of Christ.

Arthur's Dream of Fortune (11. 3218-3455)

At the summit of Arthur's greatest military achievement, the narrator temporarily disrupts the narrative's forward progress of marital events with a prophetic dream that symbolically explains Arthur's previous good fortune in war and predicts his catastrophic destiny. In contrast to the rational motivation that explains most of the other episodes' presence in the narrative, the sudden appearance of Arthur's
dream of Fortune in the poem seems irrational. Nothing that happens in the previous episodes prepares us for it. The poet's use of it, however, is anything but gratuitous. Although its imagery, characters, and actions are fantastic, the stuff of romance, the dream serves a thematic purpose when it describes the mysterious agency of fate.

The second dream, moreover, complements the first. The first dream, coming as it does at the early part of the narrative, appropriately intimates the cataclysmic struggle for temporal power with the highly symbolic images of the dragon and the bear locked in mortal combat on a twilight battlefield. At this point in Arthur's marital enterprises, the movements of destiny for him are mysterious, ominous. After the long campaigns in which he loses many of his beloved knights, the time is right for a more complete explication of the machinery of fate. The poet accordingly presents his tragic revelation in the more accessible form of Dame Fortune turning her wheel, alternately favoring and destroying the earthly possessors of worldly power. While the first dream darkly suggests the uncertainty of martial achievement, the second underscores its ultimate irony: the greatest world conquerors are still subject to Fortune.

In its general features Arthur's dream of Fortune closely resembles his dream of the dragon and the bear. First of all, it is full of the marvellous details of romance. It starts off with the horrific images of Arthur's terrified flight from predatory beasts he meets in a wasteland, a mysterious "wild wood":

[Further text not transcribed]
My thought I was in a wode willed myn one,
That I ne wiste no waye whedire that I scholde,
Fore woluez and whilde swynne and wykkyde bestez
Walkede in that wasterne, wathe to seche;
Thare lyouns full lothely lykkyde peire tuskes,
All fore laynyge of blude of my lele knyghtez.
Thurgh pe forste I fledde, thare floures whare heghe,
For to fele me for ferde of tha foule thyngez.

(11. 3230-3237)

Escaping from this nightmarish wood, Arthur finds himself in the equally fantastic setting of a beautiful enclosed garden, an earthly paradise beyond compare:

Merkede to the medowe with montayngnes enclosyde,
The meryeste of medillerthe that men myghte beholde.
The close was in compas castyn all abowte
With clauer and clereworte clede euen ouer;
The vale was enuerownde with vynes of siluer,
All with grapis of golde, gretter ware neuer;
Enhorilde with arborye and alkyns trees,
Erberis full honeste and hyrdez bervndyre;
All froytez fodderid was pe floreschede in erthe,
Faire frithed in frawnke appon tha free bowes;
Whas thare no downkyngge of dewe that oghte dere scholde:
With pe drowghte of pe daye all drye ware pe flores.

(11. 3238-3249)

Even more marvellsous than the lovely pleasance itself is the supernat-ural appearance of Dame Fortune and her spendidly bejewelled wheel:

Than discendis in the dale, down fra pe clowdde,
A duches dereworthily dyghte in dyaperde wedis,
In a surcotte of sylke full selkouthely hewede,
All with loyotour ouerlaid lowe to pe hemmes,
And with ladily lappes the lenghe of a boerde,
And all redily reuersside with rebanes of golde;
Bruchez and besauntez and oper bryghte stonyes
With hir bake and hir breste was brochede all ouer
With keele and with corell all clenliche arrayede,
And pe at so comly of colour on knowen was neuer.
Abowte cho whirllide a whele with hir whitte hondez,
Ouerwhelme all gyantely pe whele as cho scholde;
The rowell whas rede golde with ryall stonyes,
Raylde with reches and rubyes inewe;
The spekes was splentide all with speltis of siluer,
The space of a spere lenghe springande full faire
Thereone was a chayere of chalke-whytte siluer,
And chekyrde with charebocle, chawngynge of hewes.
Appon pe campas there clewide kyngis one rawe,
With corowns of clere golde pat krakede in sondire.

(11. 3250-3269)

These details immediately establish an otherworldly reality that far
transcends in emotional intensity and imaginative richness the less
exalted, daily world of heroic exploits in which the poem's main actions
unfold.

At the same time it conjures up a fantastic world of revelation,
Arthur's second dream also resembles the first because it fulfills
similar dramatic purposes: namely preparation for future action in the
narrative. The Worthies' accounts of their ill fortunes, as well as
Arthur's tale of his rise and fall on the Wheel of Fortune, predict a
disastrous outcome for Arthur. At the same time the dream's highly
symbolic imagery and actions also raise much suspense about what partic-
ular course Arthur's fall will take. Arthur is accordingly compelled to
seek the aid of his philosophers, who interpret the dream's mysterious
revelation and predict his catastrophic war with Mordred. Although it
does not generate Arthur's return to England any more than his first
dream directly caused his combat with the Giant of St. Michael's Mount,
the second dream prepares for the arrival of Craddock who brings Arthur
news of Mordred's predations at home. This preparation is a strong rea-
son for the dream's inclusion in the poem's sequence of dramatic epi-
sodes. Once again the poet demonstrates his predilection for a rational
pattern of motivation throughout the poem.
The thematic function of the second dream is, however, more complex. Not only does it exemplify the operation of fate with the emblematic image of Dame Fortune turning her wheel, but it also intimates with its symbolic settings the moral dimensions of Arthur's quest for worldly power. John Finlayson's perceptive observation about the poet's combination of them in the dream suggests their moral significance:

Though the separate parts of this dream-setting can quite easily be assigned to a tradition, their combination here is quite remarkable, providing a very effective contrast of the terror and disorder suggested by the 'wilderness' section with the lush fruitfulness and order of the dream meadow or Earthly Paradise. The nearest parallel in alliterative literature is Gawain's journey in Sir Gawain through Wirral and arrival at Bercilak's castle. In both alliterative poems, encounters with savage animals in a wild landscape are followed by arrival at a place of some splendor and beauty which, deceptively, appears to be a haven from the forces of evil and disorder (1967a, p. 23).

To put it another way, these two settings represent two different states of moral being. The wild wood infested with wolves, swine, and lions greedily lapping the blood of Arthur's slain knights suggests on one level the nightmarish world of the appetites while the paradisical garden, complete with silver vines and golden grapes, typifies a state of grace.⁵

As it contrasts these two different moral landscapes, the dream also reiterates symbolically the tragic nature of Arthur's heroic

⁵Although E. R. Curtius does not specifically mention silver vines and golden grapes in his account of the locus amoenus, it is certain that he means these sorts of details when he discusses the embellishments that poets added to the basic rhetorical model of the pleasance. See Curtius, 1953, pp. 198-199.
destiny first intimated in his dream of the dragon and the bear. In the struggle between these two beasts Arthur has his first suggestion of the tragic consequences of his military campaign. In addition to the terror he feels about the fierce combat between the two monstrous beasts, Arthur is also greatly disturbed, significantly, by the figure of the dragon who comes "dryfande ouer þe depe to drenschen hys pople" (l. 761). The philosophers' interpretation of the dragon's meaning ironically underscores Arthur's latent anxiety about his campaign against Lucius. When the philosophers explain that the splendid dragon represents Arthur and ignore the fact that he is destined to "drown his people," the tragic consequence of his heroic adventure begins to emerge. To achieve his personal ends as a mighty conqueror, Arthur will inevitably destroy his people. What the first dream suggests, the second makes explicit. In it Arthur's subconscious fears about the results of his political ambitions take the grotesque form of wild beasts harassing him, some of them even drinking his beloved knights' blood. The thematic point could not be clearer.

The paradisical garden to which Arthur escapes is located in the midst of the wild wood, thus fulfilling a common convention of medieval epic narratives. The poet's use of the locus amoenus in this

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6 The location of the paradisical garden in the wild wood was first noted by Curtius, 1953, p. 201. More specifically, Anke Jannsen develops the idea that the garden in Arthur's dream is a hortus conclusus. See Jannsen, 1981, p. 150.
particular context is, however, highly original. Earlier in the poem in an episode preceding Arthur's combat with the Giant, the poet employs the *locus amoenus* to contrast the moral order of Arthur's chivalric society with the moral disorder of the Giant's lair. In the two other instances of the *topos* in the poem before its inclusion in Arthur's second dream, the poet appears to be using it in the narrative for similar aesthetic reasons. Both times--first when Gawain rides with his men through a beautiful hidden valley to confront Lucius (ll. 2505-2512) and later when the gravely wounded Gawain and Priamus return after their combat to Gawain's men waiting in an idyllic verger (ll. 2671-2677)--the poet seems to be employing the *pleasance* mainly underscore the savagery of war. The juxtaposition of scenes of fierce combat with ones of idyllic peace heightens their individual values. By contrast the peaceful scenes appear more peaceful while the combat scenes seem more violent.  

At the same time all three *descriptio* suggest the existence of an otherworldly peace that transcends the martial activities of the combatants. As such they provide a spiritual perspective from which to view the martial exploits of men.

The *locus amoenus* of Arthur's second dream conveys all of the conventional meanings of the *topos*, but the poet appears to be using it for decidedly ironic purposes at this point in the narrative. Escaping

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7Jean Ritzke-Rutherford notes that the poet juxtaposes scenes of the *locus amoenus* with ones of fierce combat to achieve dramatic effects but maintains that the juxtapositions serve the thematic function of contrasting the stereotypes of romance with the realities of mass welfare. See Ritzke-Rutherford, 1981, p. 88.
from the terrifying beasts of the wood, Arthur is greatly relieved to find himself in an edenic valley enclosed by silver vines bearing golden grapes. Everything about this earthly paradise—its beautiful arbors, lovely flora and fauna, resting herdsmen, and fruit-laden trees—indicates that it provides a satisfying respite from the world's miseries. Its heavenly splendors, moreover, make it a fitting place into which the otherworldly duchess may descend with her bejewelled wheel.

At this point in the dream, however, the poet begins to suggest Arthur's moral culpability with a scene between Arthur and Dame Fortune that parodies the conventions of courtly love poetry. After listening to the sad tales of the Worthies, Arthur dreams on about his deceptively amiable relations with the lady. Hailing Arthur as her favorite conqueror, she begins to bestow her affections upon him by seating him on the privileged chair of her wheel:

Scho lifte me vp lightly with hir lene hondes,  
And sette me softely in the see, þe septre me rechede;  
Craftely with a kambe cho kembede myn heuede,  
That the krispane kroke to my crowne naughte;  
Dressid one me a diadem that dighte was full faire,  
And syne profres me a pome pighte full of faire stonys,  
Enamelde with azoure, the erth thereon depayntide,  
Serkylde with the salte see appone sere halfes,  
In sygne þat I sothely was souerayne in erthe.  
Than broght cho me a brande with full bryghte hiltes,  
And bade me 'Brandysche þe blade, þe brande es myn awen;  
Many swayn with þe swynge has the sw[e]tte leuede,  
For whills thow swanke with the swerde, it swykkede þe neuer.'

(11. 3340-3361)

Of particular interest in this passage is the highly symbolic image of the bejewelled apple with the map of the earth painted on it. The Duchess's act of offering it to Arthur is clearly an ironic parody of
Eve's tempting Adam with the apple of Paradise.  

Fortune's gift of an apple to her victims is, as H. R. Patch (1927) notes, a standard feature of the *topos*, but in adding the significant detail of the map of the earth to the apple, the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* poet uncovers the inherent theological meaning of the fruit in Christian myth.  

The fact that the apple is decorated with the image of the earth suggests the worldly nature of Arthur's ambition, an obvious indication of his moral obliquity. When he directs his aspirations to things of this world, particularly the crown of Rome, he is, as D. W. Robertson (1970) points out about other worldly heroes in medieval literature, unmistakably guilty of pride (pp. 22-24).

In the next part of the dream, the identification of the Duchess with the traditional image of the Goddess of Love in medieval dream visions is inescapable.  

The Duchess pursues her activities within the conventional enclosed garden replete with every imaginable variety of shrub, tree, and fruit and a wondrous well bubbling with wine and even resembles the Goddess of Love in behavior. After she combs Arthur's hair and gives him the emblematic apple and her magic sword, she further ministers to his pleasures when she bids the fruit-laden boughs of the

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8 That the word *pome* conveyed the idea of an apple is evident by the use of the term to refer to the fruit in books of husbandry in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries in England. See the *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. *pome*, sb., sense 1.

9 For more examples of fruit-bearing trees in paradisical gardens, see Patch, 1918, pp. 524-525.

10 In his discussion of the Goddess Fortuna, H. R. Patch describes how the personalities and descriptions of these two goddesses were frequently interchanged and sometimes confused by medieval writers. See Patch, 1927, pp. 90-98.
orchard to bend down and offer their fruit to him. The poet's description of her last benevolent action makes the Duchess's identification with Venus complete:

"Riste, thowe ryalle roy, for Rome es thyn awen! And I saill redily roll be roo at be gaynest, And reche the be riche wyne in rynsede coupes."
Thane cho wente to be welle by be wode euis, That all wellyde of wyne and wondirliche rynnes Kaught vp a coppe-full and couerde it faire; Scho bad me dereliche drawe and drynke to hir selfen.

And thus cho lede me abowe the lenghe of an owre, With all likyng and luffe pat any lede scholde.

(11. 3373-3381)

Arthur's amorous hour with the Duchess with "all the pleasure and love that any man should [desire]" is typical of J.overs' encounters with Venus.

Equally conventional in medieval representations of both France and Venus is the abrupt change in their humors. The Duchess in Arthur's dream exhibits this cruel fickleness when she unexpectedly whirs him to his destruction:

Bot at be myddaye full ewyn all hir mode changede, And mad myche manace with meruayllous wordez. When I cryede appon hire, cho kest down hir browes: "Knyg, thow karpe for noghte, be Criste pat me made! For thow saill lose this layke and thi lyfe aftyre Thow has lyffede in deleytte and lordchippes inewe!"
Abowte scho whirles the whole and whirles me vndire, Till all my qarters at whille where qwaste al to peces, And with that chayere my chyne was chopped in sondire!

(11. 3382-3390)

Significantly, Fortune alludes to her divine nature when she refers to Christ as her creator. Arthur's tragic fall, then, is ultimately ordained by Providence, who empowers Fortune to act. When he entrusts
his fate to Fortune, Arthur is, according to Lumiansky's (1968) Boethian reading of the poem, guilty of wrong thinking and therefore spiritually vulnerable (pp. 99-101).

Once again the poet ends Arthur's dream vision with the device of self-reflexive narration. Terrified by his horrific vision, Arthur turns to his philosophers for an interpretation of it. When they explain the significance of the dream's images and actions, they present a gloss on the nature of Arthur's predicament. At the same time they also make a commentary on his military career, thus giving us a moral perspective from which to judge his actions. Arthur's dream, they point out, signals that he has reached the pinnacle of his fortunes. He must now repent of his proud deeds of destruction because his death is now near:

"Freke," sais the philosopher, "thy fortune es passede; For thow sall fynd hir thi foo-frayste when the lykes. Thow arte at the heigheste, I hette the forsothe; Chalange nowe when thow will, thow cheuys no more. Thow has schedde myche blode and schalkes distroyede, Sakeless, in cirqytrie, in sere kynges landis. Schryfe the of thy schame and schape for thyn ende; Thow has a schewynge, Sir Kyngge-take kepe iif the lyke; For thow sall fersely fall within fyve wynters."

(11. 3394-3402)

They continue their analysis when they name the other kings who occupy various positions on Fortune's wheel and explain the meanings of the wild beasts in the wood. Since their identification of the heroes and beasts extends both into the past and into the future, it suggests that there is an eternal mechanism of rising and falling fortunes operating in human history. When they name the greatest heroes of the past and future as riders on Fortune's wheel—Alexander, Hector, Caesar,
Maccabeus, Judas, Joshua, David, Charlemagne, and Godfrey de Bouillon—and point out that the wild beasts symbolically refers to foreign troops currently ravaging his kingdom, the implication is clear enough. Human fortunes are always subject to the vicissitudes of a supernatural agency indifferent to men's merits and desires.

The philosophers' commentary also brings into focus the dramatic tension that exists between the two different kinds of time in the narrative: the mundane time of human exploits and the eternal time of providence. Throughout most of the narrative Arthur experiences life in the perpetual present. Everything that happens—his feast on New Year's Day, the Roman envoy's delivery of Lucius's challenge, and so on—occurs as part of the endless continuum of discrete moments. Each successive event replaces the previous one and moves toward a mysterious future. What Arthur experiences in his dream, however, belongs to an otherworldly reality, the timeless ritual of divine law. The various fates of the Worthies, widely separated in earthly time, nevertheless appear to him all at once in the symbolic image of Fortune's wheel. Similarly, his own destiny—his future struggle with the symbolic beasts that have invaded his kingdom, his past repose in Fortune's edenic garden, and his present ride on her wheel—exist simultaneously in his dream. Past, present, and future are coeternal in the turnings of Fortune's wheel.
CHAPTER 5

RETURN

Arthur's Return to England (ll. 3456–4346)

The concluding macro-episode—the account of Arthur's civil war with Mordred and subsequent death—is composed of thirty-two episodes that describe the final, tragic turn of Arthur's fate. Five of these episodes—Craddock's arrival at Arthur's camp with news of Mordred's usurpation (ll. 3468–3590), Arthur's sea battle with Mordred's Danish mercenaries (ll. 3652–3711), Gawain's death at Mordred's hand (ll. 3813–3863), Arthur's vow to avenge Gawain's death (ll. 3973–4008), and Arthur's combat with Mordred (ll. 4224–4253)—constitute the integral episodes in this section of the poem because they mark the critical points in its last major action. Each of these episodes raises suspense about what particular direction Arthur's remaining struggle with fate will take. The other episodes of the macro-episode, the non-integral episodes, not only fill in the specific details resulting from the integral episodes, but they also develop the poem's final themes about the nature of the heroic life.

The poet's use of these integral episodes in this final section of the poem underscores his preference for a rational plot. All five integral episodes are logically motivated by previous events. Although it cannot be said that Arthur's dream of Fortune (or the philosophers' interpretation of it) causes Craddock to bring news of Mordred's
treachery, it does prepare for Craddock's unhappy disclosure of political chaos at home in England. Arthur's decision to wage war against Mordred then generates the rest of the poem's action. These final events are, moreover, the working out of the fate predicted in Arthur's second dream.

Immediately after the philosophers explicate Arthur's dream, the poet closes the temporal rupture that the dream momentarily opened in the narration of martial events by presenting Arthur's sorrowful reaction to the philosophers' interpretation. The episode also serves a number of other narrative functions in the poem. First of all, it provides transition between Arthur's dream and Croddock's arrival with the report of Mordred's usurpation. Simultaneously and ironically, it characterizes Arthur as a great conqueror at the height of his worldly powers. After the philosophers leave him, Arthur rises from his bed and dresses himself in the magnificent clothing emblematic of his mighty stature in the world:

Thanrysez the riche Kyng and rawghte on his wedys,
A reede acton of rosse, the richeste of floures,
A pesane and a paunson and a pris girdill;
And one he hentit a hode of scharlette full riche,
A pauys pillion hatt, þat pighte was full faire
With perry of þe Oryent and precyous stones;
His gloues gayliche gilte and grauen by þe hemmys
With graynes of rubys full gracios to schewe.
His bede grehownde and his bronde ande no byerne ells,
And bownnes ouer a brode mede, with breth at his herte;
Futhe he stalkis a styne by þa still euys,
Stotays at a hey strette, studyande hym one.

(11. 3456-3467)

At the same time that it indicates Arthur's great wealth, this passage largely parallels the arriving scene before Arthur's combat with the
giant of St. Michael's Mount. Both scenes have a ritualistic solemnity about them and thus suggest that Arthur's actions have symbolic significance.

Both passages also serve the thematic purpose of presenting the loneliness of Arthur's position as king. In the first Arthur elects to face the giant alone: his solitary arming is that of a hero preparing himself for a deadly exploit. His behavior is truly noble. The second scene, however, offers a darker view of Arthur's solitary position as king. In this scene there is nothing ennobling about Arthur's behavior. When he couples the description of Arthur's opulent dress with Arthur's angry walk across the meadow, the poet clearly establishes the prideful nature of Arthur's private meditations.¹ The emphasis the narrator places on the magnificence of Arthur's appearance suggests that Arthur has become vain. Arthur's anger at the philosophers' explication likewise intimates that he feels unjustly constrained by fate. As he broods over the philosophers' prophecy of his fall, Arthur becomes absorbed with his troubles, a king temporarily estranged from his community of heroes.

In the scene that follows the poet develops the irony of Arthur's estrangement from his knights and sets the poem's final actions into full motion. At the end of his early morning walk, Arthur meets Craddock disguised as a pilgrim in tattered clothes rushing along the road to Rome. Rather than identify himself, Arthur whimsically decides

¹Matthews clearly suggests that Arthur's ostentatious dress is emblematic of his sinful pride. See Matthews, 1960, p. 136.
to impersonate a lord of Rome in his conversation with the man. Arthur's pretence and the contrast between his magnificent apparel and the pilgrim's rags underlines the decidedly worldly nature of Arthur's life at this point in the narrative. The real irony of the meeting between the two men, however, resides in the fact that neither recognizes the other. After explaining that he'll allow nothing to interfere with his pilgrimage to Rome, the pilgrim casually mentions his fealty to Arthur. When Arthur asks who he is, he identifies himself as Craddock, one of Arthur's most trusted knights:

"Fro qwyn come þou, kene man," quod ðe Kyne than, "That knawes Kyne Arthure and his knyghttes also? Was þou euer in his courte, qwyls he is kyth lengede? Thow karpes so kyndly, it comforthes myn herte. Well wele has þou wente and wysely þou sechis, For þou arte Bretowne bierne, as by thy brode speche." "Me aughte to knowe þe Kyne: he es my kydde lorde, And I calde in his courte a knyghte of his chambire; Sir Craddoke was I callide in his courte riche, Kepare of Karlyon, vndir the Kyne selfen: Nowe am I cachede owtt of kyth with kare at my herte, And that castell es cawghte with vncowthe ledys."

(11. 3503-3514)

The fact that both men are dressed differently from the last time they saw one another does not mitigate their failure to recognize each other. In his vain clothing Arthur obviously bears little resemblance to the king Craddock remembers. Arthur likewise appears to be so absorbed with his game of pretending to be a lord of Rome that he fails to see his kinsman in pilgrim's dress. Momentarily Arthur is isolated from his heroic community.

As it develops the theme of Arthur's alienation as king, this episode also motivates Arthur's return to England. Greatly disturbed by
Craddock's news of Caerleon's fall into the hands of barbaric plunderers, Arthur asks for information about his kingdom. Craddock obliges by giving Arthur a complete summary of Mordred's treasonous deeds in his absence. In addition to seizing the throne, dividing up the kingdom among his cohorts, and assembling an army of foreign mercenaries to pillage the land, he also wedded Guinevere and got her with child. Arthur responds immediately by vowing his vengeance:

Than the burliche kyne, for brethe at his herte,
And for this botelesse bale, all his ble chaungede.
"By pe Rode," said pe Roye, "I sall it revenge!
Hym sall repente full rathe all his rewthe werkes!"
All wepande for woo he went to his tentis
Wynly this wyesse kynge he wakkenysse his beryns,
Clepid in a clarioune kynge and othire,
callys them to concell and of pis cas tellys:
"I am with treson betrayede, for all my trewe dedis;
And all my traualye es tynt, me tydis no bettire!
Hym sall toferre betyde his tresone has wroghte,
And I may traistely hym take, as I am trew lorde. . . ."

(11. 3557-3568)

What is particularly interesting in this passage is the nature of Arthur's response to Mordred's villainous acts. After he received the philosophers' gloomy prediction of his declining fortunes, Arthur might well have resigned himself to suffering his fate without much of a struggle. True to his heroic nature, however, Arthur is anything but resigned. He remains a proud, valorous king heroically committed to exacting vengeance from his enemy despite the great odds against his success. At the same time the poet also tempers his characterization of Arthur as the vengeful king by balancing his anger about his betrayal and failing fortunes with his grief for his losses.
Up until this point in the narrative, Arthur possesses an incomplete understanding of his heroic enterprises. Winning battle after battle, he seems to lead a charmed life. His terrifying dream of Fortune, however, strikes the first dark note of catastrophe. The unexpected news of Mordred's predations at home then suddenly translates the philosophers' abstract prediction of disaster into a concrete reality. In the course of waging his desperate struggle for vengeance against Mordred, he watches some of his most beloved knights die and gradually acquires a truly tragic appreciation of the inherent ironies of the heroic life.

After he completes his report of Mordred's treasonous activities to the royal council, Arthur wastes no time returning to England to carry out his revenge. The next episode of the poem (ll. 3591-3600) is, accordingly, a brief summary of his rapid journey from Italy to Flanders where he sets sail for England with his most stalwart knights. The brevity of this episode is characteristic of many others in this final movement of the poem. In this part of the action the poet employs a higher percentage of summary episodes to narrate the events of Arthur's war with Mordred, thus apparently speeding up the passage of time and thereby suggesting the rapidity of Arthur's tragic fall. By comparison the other two macro-episodes—the account of the events leading to Arthur's departure from England to fight Lucius and the series of campaigns that Arthur wages across Europe—contain a greater number of dramatic scenes and therefore move more slowly. The contrast between these relatively slow-moving sections and the fast-paced final section of the poem moreover suggests the movement of Arthur's ride on Fortune's
wheel. While Dame Fortune is in a good humor, Arthur enjoys a leisurely ride on her wheel. But when her humor suddenly changes, she whirls the wheel around, quickly casting Arthur down to ruin. Arthur's dream once again serves as an analogy for his waking life, this time providing a guide to the speed of the narrative's development.

Arriving on the English coast at Southampton, Arthur finds himself immediately confronted by the sevenscore ships of Danish mercenaries that Craddock reported. At the same time the appearance of the Danish force is anticipated by Craddock, it in turn establishes the logical motivation for the beginning of the civil war between Arthur and Mordred. The fierce sea battle that follows (11. 3601-3711) is the first encounter between the antagonists in the civil war. Coming as it does after the philosophers' dark prediction of Arthur's catastrophe, this episode naturally raises a good deal of suspense about the outcome of the struggle.

Simultaneously it sets into motion the final actions of Arthur's life and thus helps to establish the credibility of the narrative. The physical details the poet gives us about the Danes and their ships and the preparations Arthur's men make for battle are vivid. Moreover, the wealth of concrete images the narrator reports throughout the sea battle—images of sailors' cries of casualties in the foreship, and of ships being smashed to splinters—greatly enhances the artistic illusion that we are privy to the narrator's personal experience of the events he is recording.

The poet's inclusion of these sorts of details also subtly alters the emotional perspective from which we view events at this
point in the story. In the three episodes that precede Arthur's return to England—his terrifying dream, his brooding walk after hearing the philosophers' interpretation of it, and his encounter with Craddock—the poet narrowly focuses the narrative on Arthur's private soul-searching. But with the summary episode of Arthur's return to England and the description of the sea battle, the poet gradually expands the focus of his narration to a panoramic view of the action, thus reminding us that Arthur's struggle with Mordred is an epic conflict, one that will determine the fate of an entire country.

Typical of his expressive style the poet devotes considerable space to the sea battle. He creates much of the episode's suspense by piling up many details about the ferocity of the fighting and withholding information about the success of either side. Finally, however, he reports that the British knights win the battle, hurling the dead and wounded Danes into the sea. But at the same time he carefully maintains the foreboding tone with which the last macro-episode begins by concluding the account of Arthur's victory with the gloomy image of Mordred's large army on land surveying the scene while Arthur estimates the strength of his surviving army. This concluding detail completely undercuts Arthur's victory and indicates the uncertainty of his attempt to defeat Mordred.

In the next three episodes the poet temporarily shifts our attention from Arthur's exploits to those of Gawain. Once again he does so for thematic reasons. In the second macro-episode of the poem, he focused on Gawain's activities to compare and contrast Gawain's and Arthur's roles in the action. In this final section of the poem, the
poet's purposes for narrating Gawain's exploits are apparently different. The main function of these three episodes is to develop the poem's elegaic and tragic themes. In the course of presenting Gawain's heroic attempt to slay Mordred, the poet is obviously preparing for Arthur's tragic suffering. In many respects Gawain represents Arthur's alter ego throughout the poem. As the proud, fearless knight who always responds to martial challenges, Gawain is the perfect embodiment of the heroic life, a life Arthur cannot fully embrace because of his public responsibilities as king. When Gawain falls in mortal combat, Arthur not only loses his most beloved knight but also the exemplary representative of the heroic life.

What is especially noteworthy in the first of these episodes is the apparent lack of any clear motivation for Gawain's dangerous exploit against Mordred's huge army. When Gawain suddenly strikes out with his small band of men against Mordred (ll. 3724-3744), he has neither been commanded to attack Mordred nor compelled by events to defend himself. The only readily available explanation for his initiative against Mordred is his rashness of character. Throughout the campaigns against Lucius and the Duke of Lorraine, Gawain displays the same impetuosity. As a hero he is naturally disposed to take up the gauntlet and lead fights against vastly superior forces. As this episode proceeds and Gawain exhorts his men to fight with their greatest skills, it becomes apparent that Gawain's attack is forwardly motivated: that is, the reasons for its presence in the plot are found in the episode.
itself rather than in the one that precedes it. We learn that Gawain attacks because he is incensed by Mordred's villainy against his be-
loved lord:

We sall fell ȝone false, þe Fende hafe theire saules!
Fightes faste with þe frape, þe felde sall be owres;
May I þat traytoure ouertake, torfere hym tyddes,
That this treson has tymbyrde to my trewe lorde.
Of siche a engendure full littyll joye happyns,
And þat sall in this journee be juggede full euen.

(11. 3739-3744)

Furthermore, this compound of loyalty and rashness that has always characterized Gawain's actions also typifies the code of the hero, one of the central concerns of the poem. This episode, therefore, also serves a thematic purpose in the poem.

The next three episodes—the account of Gawain's force approaching Mordred's army (11. 3745-3756), Gawain's challenging Mordred (11. 3757-3779), and Gawain's farewell to his men (11. 3780-3812)—act as a prelude to Gawain's tragic confrontation with Mordred in mortal combat. They are all logically motivated, thus illustrating the consequences of Gawain's decision to strike off on his own to slay Mordred. These three episodes also define in miniature the inevitable limitations of the heroic life. The hero's will is ultimately insufficient to meet the challenge of events. Despite his strength of character and arms, there always exists an insurmountable force that causes his ruin. Although his physical and spiritual powers are greater than those of his fellow men, the hero finally remains a man subject to his own mortality.

After he presents Gawain's landing on the beach, the poet rapidly gives us the account of the fierce fighting his men encounter at
the hands of the Danish mercenaries defending Mordred's main army. This brief description of the fighting is typically grim. As such it establishes the foreboding tone of Gawain's desperate enterprise. It does so, like other descriptions of battle in the poem, by recording the action from a more objective, depersonalized point of view. Gawain momentarily disappears from the foreground of the action. What the poet gives us instead are the relatively fragmented images of the deadly combat between the British and Danish forces. We see the glittering shields of men clashing in battle and hear the dreadful blows they deal out to one another. After littering the misty marshland with hundreds of Danish dead, Gawain's force finally wins the battle.

In addition to furthering the plot, this episode of fierce combat also indirectly helps to characterize Gawain's great zeal as a hero. Unable to restrain himself after this tiring struggle with the Danes, Gawain rashly strikes off (ll. 3757-3779). A more prudent man would have taken time to assess the strength of his forces and that of his adversary before initiating an attack. Gawain, however, is too full of anger to behave rationally. In true heroic fashion he takes the initiative by riding off from his men to attack a man in Mordred's middle guard. As he fights his way close enough to deliver the challenge to Mordred, Gawain unwittingly draws his small band of men into a trap that assures their ruin.

This unexpected entrapment of Gawain's force logically motivates Gawain's farewell to his men (ll. 3780-3812) before their last battle with Mordred's great army. Once he realizes that his zealous actions are responsible for leading his men to certain death, he expresses his
sorrow to them and urges them on to a glorious heroic death that will assure them a place in heaven:

Than Sir Gawayne grette with his gray eghen,
For greefe of his gud men that he gyde schulde;
He wyste that pay wondyde ware and wery forfoughtten,
And what for wondire and woo, all his witte fayled.
And thane syghande he saide, with sylande terys,
"We are with Sarazenes besett appon sere halfes.
I syghe noghte for my selfe, sa helpe oure Lorde;
Bot for to [see] vs supprysede, my sorowe es the more.
Bes dowghtty todaye, some dukes schall be soyres;
For dere Dryghttyn this daye, dreyds no wapyn.
We sall ende this daye als excellent knyghttes,
Ayere to endelesse joye with angells vnwynde."

(11. 3790-3801)

This episode also completes Gawain's characterization and defines once more the bond that joins the members of a heroic community. As a fierce, self-reliant knight, Gawain, like his king, is still a man who locates much of his own worth in his loyal men. The grief he feels at the prospect of falling before Mordred's forces comes not from the idea of losing his own life but from rashly causing his men's deaths. His concern for them at this moment of disaster tempers the characterization of Gawain as a self-serving hero. In his expression of grief he acknowledges his abiding affection for them as well as the belief that they will also share heaven as well as earth together. Gawain's grief for his men also prepares for Arthur's tragic suffering when he finds Gawain's corpse later.

Gawain's impassioned farewell to his men smoothly prepares the way for his final challenge and subsequent death. After this speech Gawain returns for a last time to the foreground of the action with his savage assault on Mordred's position (11. 3813-3863). In addition to
using this episode to complete the Gawain subplot, the poet also appears to be employing it for the thematic end of defining the wild nature of the heroic action. Gawain attacks Mordred's men with a maniacal and, as the image suggests, bestial fury. The poet seems to be building this impression by first suggesting that Gawain fights the enemy like a madman:

Than grymly Sir Gawayne gryppis hys wapyn;
Agayne þat gret bataille he graythes hym son:
Radly of his riche swerde he reghttes þe cheynys,
In he schokkes his schelde, schountes he no lengare;
Bot alls wæwse, wodewyse, he wente at þe gaynestes,
Wondis of þas wedirwyns with wraenful dyntys—
All wellys full of blode thare he awaye passes;
And þofe hyn ware full wo, he wondys bot lyttill,
Bot wreken at his wirchip þe wraete of hys lorde.

(11. 3813-3821)

But by the end of his charge Gawain fights like an animal, completely bereft of any human reason:

Fell neuer fay man siche fortune in erthe.
Into þe hale bataile hedlynges he rynys,
And hurtes of þe hardieste þat one the erthe lenges.
Letande alls a lyon he lawnyches them thorowe,
Lorde and ledars that one the launde houes.
Þit Sir Gawayne for wo wondys bot lyttill,
Bot wondwis of þas wedirwyns with wondirful dyntis,
Alls he þat wold wilfully wasten hym selfen;
And for wondsom and will all his wit failede,
That wode alls a wylde beste he wente at þe gaynestes.

(11. 3828-3837)

This account of Gawain's behavior, suggests the great dangers generated by a hero's obsessive concern for valor. Gawain is clearly over-whelmed by his desire to slaughter Mordred. The point is clear: an intemperate desire for valor transforms a man into a beast.
is, of course, pervasive in the narrative since one of the poem's central ideas is the matter of defining the right conduct for King Arthur and his heroes.

As he loses control over his reason, Gawain unavoidably causes his own death. When he makes his furious assault on Mordred, he seals his fate as well as Arthur's. A more cautious man, Mordred bides his time during his combat with Gawain and deftly stabs him at an opportune moment. Ironically, for all his prowess and zeal, Gawain fails to kill Mordred because of his own intemperate behavior. He allows himself to succumb to the promptings of his rash, proud nature. What is worse, he blindly sacrifices his own life.

In terms of plot, Gawain's death is very important. His death is an integral episode in the narrative because it raises serious doubts about whether or not Arthur will be able to win his struggle against Mordred. Throughout Arthur's campaigns, Gawain has always been his staunchest supporter, the mainstay of Arthur's martial and political strength. The deaths of Kay, Bedwar, Beril, and other of his stalwart knights have all diminished Arthur's power, but Gawain's death is the most severe loss to the Round Table, particularly at this crucial point of Arthur's fate.

The poet, however, delays answering the dramatic question of Arthur's fate after Gawain's death. He does so when he momentarily displaces the narration of Arthur's actions after the sea battle with an account of Mordred's and Guinevere's reactions to Arthur's return. This second disruption of the main narrative about Arthur's actions serves a
variety of narrative purposes. At the same time they report Mordred's and Guinevere's activities, these four episodes also create a realistic background against which to place the narration of battle scenes. We follow Mordred's and Guinevere's movements across the English countryside in flight from Arthur's wrath. This panoramic summary of geographical details momentarily enlarges our perspective of Arthur and Mordred's conflict. They locate the main characters in recognizable places, thus enhancing the poem's realism. Equally important, these four episodes build a good deal of suspense about the effects of Gawain's death on Arthur by withholding Arthur's response. Once again the poet demonstrates a fine dramatic sense in the way he constructs the plot of the poem. These four episodes, moreover, complete the characterization of Mordred and Guinevere.

The first of these episodes, Mordred's lament over Gawain's death (ll. 3864-3890), unexpectedly enlarges Mordred's character. After Craddock reports Mordred's treacherous activities to Arthur on the road to Rome (ll. 3468-3590), Mordred appears to be a thoroughly villainous man. His sudden grief for Gawain, however, greatly tempers such a simplistic view of Mordred. In mourning for Gawain he becomes a more complex character, a man possessing both good and evil qualities similar to those of his adversaries. Upon being asked by one of his mercenaries, Froderick of Friesland, to identify the fierce knight who just attacked their ranks with such skill, Mordred sadly praises Gawain's great character:
The thought of his role in destroying a man like Gawain then suddenly plunges Mordred into a deeper private grief:

\[\text{it pat traytour alls tite teris lete he fall,}\]
\[\text{Turnes hym furthe tite, and talkes no more,}\]
\[\text{Went wepand awaye and weries the stowndys,}\]
\[\text{pat euer his verdres ware wroghte sich wandrethe to wyrke.}\]
\[\text{Whene he thoghte on pis thynge, it thirllede his herte.}\]

(11. 3886-3890)

Although Mordred's momentary grief for Gawain does not mitigate against his truly villainous character, it does make him a more credible character. Mordred, like the other main characters in the poem, is not a stereotype. He has an internal life as do Arthur, Gawain, and a few other prominent figures in the action.

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2The interpretation of Mordred's character is the subject of controversy among students of the Alliterative Morte Arthure. Matthews points out that Mordred is a much more humane villain in the poem than he is in the chronicles. Renata Haas, however, offers a corrective to Matthews' kinder reading of Mordred's character. She observes that Mordred's lament only raises him "above the level of sheer wickedness." See Matthews, 1960, pp. 142-143 and Haas, 1981, p. 121 for a more complete discussion of these two interpretations of his character.
The poet's motivation for giving us this characterization of Mordred becomes clear when we analyze Mordred's relation to the poem's larger themes. Mordred's silent brooding about the events that lead to his killing Gawain underscores the tragic theme of fate that runs throughout the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*. In its own way Mordred's ruminations about his fate complement Arthur's gloomy meditations about his fate. Both hero and villain become victims of events because of their intemperate natures.

The next three episodes of the poem are logically motivated by Mordred's and Guinevere's fear of Arthur's wrath. Saddened by his rueful deeds and terrified by the prospect of Arthur's revenge, Mordred flees to Cornwall to wait for news of Arthur's plans (ll. 3891-3899). But even in this brief summary episode, the poet subtly begins to develop the elegiac tone that concludes the poem:

> For sake of his sybb blode sygheande he rydys;  
> When pat renayede renke remembirde hym seluen  
> Of reuerence and ryotes of pe Rownde Table,  
> He remyd and repent hym of all his rewthe werkes.

(ll. 3891-3894)

The poet's touch of having Mordred lament the passing of the Round Table is particularly poignant. If even Mordred can be saddened by its disintegration, its glory must have been truly splendid.

The last two glimpses the poet gives us of Mordred and Guinevere before Arthur returns to the foreground of the action characterize them as weak people who cannot face up to the consequences of their treachery. Wasting no time in preparing for his flight from Arthur, Mordred writes to Guinevere, instructing her to join him on the
western coast so that they might flee to safety in the mountain wilderness of Ireland (ll. 3900-3910). Guinevere, however, disregards Mordred's instructions, preferring to travel from York to Caerleon where she takes holy orders to hide herself from Arthur (ll. 3911-3918). Not only does he use these two episodes to provide essential information about two of the remaining principal characters in the poem, but the poet also employs them to locate Mordred and Guinevere for the final action of the plot. Guinevere in a nunnery is protected from Arthur's vengeance; Mordred hides on the Cornish coast.

What is particularly effective about these two episodes is the economical form they take. The poet's narration of Mordred's and Guinevere's preparations in the form of summary episodes perfectly enhances the frantic urgency of their actions. At the same time the paucity of emotional details in these episodes sharply underlines the terror and loss Mordred and Guinevere feel. Mordred, for example, "wraite vnto Waynor how the werlde chaungede" (l. 3903), and Guinevere "dighte hir ewyn for to dye, with dule at hir herte" (l. 3915). The poet's choice of this summary form of narration enables him to give an economical, yet moving account of Mordred's and Guinevere's activities without unnecessarily delaying the rapid movement of the action that characterizes the tragic conclusion of the poem.

After narrating Gawain's, Mordred's, and Guinevere's activities subsequent to Arthur's invasion of the English coast, the poet resumes the primary narrative of Arthur's actions by means of a flashback which returns us to the scene of Arthur's landing after the sea battle, and
thus closes the temporal rupture that the Gawain, Mordred, and Guinevere episodes opened in the narrative. The next six episodes solidly prepare for Arthur's deadly assault on Mordred's forces. As they carefully motivate Arthur's fervent resolve to destroy Mordred at all costs, these episodes also amplify the elegaic tone that accompanies the final destruction of the Round Table.

The first of these episodes--Arthur's grief-stricken discovery of Gawain's corpse (11.3919-3972)--is by far one of the most moving lamentation scenes in Middle English literature. As it provides the emotional climax for the entire poem, it also presents the final thematic statement about the spiritual ties that bind together the members of the heroic community. When he learns of Gawain's landing, Arthur hastily lands, wades through the surf, and then stalks among the slain to find his beloved cousin fallen face down on the battlefield. The terms he uses to express his grief for Gawain echo those he used to convey his bond of shared destiny with his men earlier during this council of war (11. 395-406) and after his first battle with the Romans (11. 1593-1600). He locates the source of all his strength in Gawain. When he loses Gawain he loses his whole kingdom, his reason for living:

Than gliftis þe gud kynge and gloypyns in herte,
Gronys full grisely with greteande teris;
Knelis down to þe corse and kaught it in armes,

---

Kastys vpe his vmbreere and kyssis hym sone,
Lokes one his eye liddis, þat lowkkide ware faire,
His lippis like to þe lede and his lire falowede.
Þan the corownde kynge cryes full lowde,
"Dere kosyn o kynde, in kare am I leuded,
For nowe my wirchipe es wente and my were endide;
Here es þe hope of my hele, my happyng of armes—
My herte and my hardynes hale one hym lengede,
My concell, my comforthe, þat kepide myn herts.
Of all knyghtes þe kynge þat vndir Criste lifede,
þou was worthy to be kyng, þofe I þe corown bare;
My wele and my wirchippe of all þis werlde riche
Was wommen thourghe Sir Gawayne and thourghe his witt one.

"Alas!" saide Sir Arthure, "Nowe ekys my sorowe;
I am vttirly vnдон in myn awen landes.
A, dowttouse, derfe dede, þou duellis to longe!
Why drawes þou so one dreghe? Thow drownnes myn herte."

Than sw[1]tes the swete kyng and in swoun fallis,
Swafres vp swiftely and swetly hym kysses,
Till his burliche berde was blody berown,
Alls he had bestes birteneede and broghte owt of life.

(11. 3949-3972)

Perhaps more than any other passage in the poem, this one gives the most precise expression of the spiritual values that support the heroic community of the Round Table. Chief among these values is the self-sacrificing loyalty the king and his knights bear one another. In dying for Arthur, Gawain has demonstrated the full measure of his loyalty for his king. Arthur accordingly is deeply moved and full of sorrow for the loss of Gawain.

At the same time it articulates this important theme, this episode also suggests the nature of Arthur's tragedy. In the disintegration of the Round Table, Arthur sees the destruction of his own life. He has no life outside the community of his loyal knights. When Gawain, the chief representative of the Round Table, dies, Arthur considers his
the child representative of the Round Table, dies, Arthur considers his life and hopes for the future finished. He is now ready for death.

Arthur's grief for Gawain's death provides strong motivation for the next episode: his vow to avenge Gawain (ll. 3973-4008). Advised by Ewain and other knights to accept Gawain's death because nothing can alter it, Arthur swears to forego the pleasures of hunting, reigning as king, and presiding over the Round Table until he has avenged Gawain. This episode becomes an integral episode because it raises a good deal of suspense about whether or not Arthur will be able to fulfill his vow at this point in the action. Gawain's death of course strengthens Arthur's resolve to kill the usurper, but his forces are further weakened by the destruction of Gawain's troops.

The esteem in which Arthur holds Gawain's memory logically prompts the next episode of the poem: Arthur's transfer of Gawain's body to Winchester to have it prepared for burial (ll. 4009-4024). Once again the poet conveys subordinate information--such as Guinevere's response to the news of Arthur's return (ll. 3911-3918)--in the form of a summary episode. Although the proper disposition of Gawain's body for internment is an important action that demonstrates Arthur's abiding love for him, it is not a crucial action in Arthur's war with Mordred. The poet, therefore, rightly avoids digressing from the poem's main action, thus keeping that action tightly focused.

The episode that follows--Arthur's adamant rejection of Wichere's advice to attack Mordred's greatly superior army at a more opportune time (ll. 4025-4051)--serves a variety of narrative purposes.
First, of all, it characterizes Arthur once more as an intemperate hero. Arthur's impatient desire to enter battle parallels Gawain's eagerness to attack the Danish force before Arthur's forces could aid him (ll. 3745-3756) as well as a number of other heroes' rash acts earlier in the poem. Once again Arthur seems to be courting danger deliberately as he did outside the walls of Metz. This time, of course, Arthur's reasons for doing so are vastly different. Instead of believing himself virtually invulnerable as he did outside the walls of Metz, Arthur now knows that he, too, is subject to the unpredictable turning of Fortune's wheel. He is eager, therefore, to accomplish his vengeance before fate denies him the opportunity. Still, he remains a man with an inordinate confidence in his ability to accomplish his desires. Arthur's reaction to Wichere's appeal to delay his attack on Mordred's army illustrates his overweening faith in himself:

"I praye the, kare noghte, Sir Knyghte, ne caste you no dredis; Hadde I no segge bot my selfe one vndir sone, And I may hym see with sighte or one hym sette hondis, I sall even amange his mene malle hym to dede! Are I of pe stede styre halfe a stede lenghe, I sall [stryke] him in his stowre and stroye hym for euer."

(ll. 4034-4039)

After this expression of heroic resolve, Arthur reiterates his vow about not resting until he avenges Gawain's death. In addition to emphasizing Arthur's firmness of purpose, this vow, as well as the previous one, suggests the tragic single-mindedness of Arthur's life at this juncture of the narrative. The list of activities Arthur swears to forego in this second vow suggests his emotional isolation from any human community:
"I sall neuer soiourne sounde, ne sawghte at myne herte,  
In ceté ne in subarbe sette appon erthe,  
Ne sitt slomyre ne slepe with my slawe eyghne,  
Till he be slayne þat hym slowghe, þif any sleyghte happen;  
Bot euer pursue the payganys þat my poplë distroyede,  
Qwylls I may pare them and pynne, in place þare me likes."

(11. 4042-4047)

His desire for vengeance has tragically circumscribed his life (Fichte, 1981, p. 114).

The next two episodes conclude Arthur's preparations for his battle with Mordred. The first—Arthur's march with his army to Cornwall to battle Mordred's forces (11. 4052-4071)—fulfills the narrative purpose of transition between dramatic scenes. After meeting his moral obligation to Gawain, Arthur is ready to seek out Mordred. This episode economically advances the plot by reporting Arthur's journey from Winchester through Dorset to Cornwall, where he finally locates Mordred's army in a forest near the Trent river. As it chronicles the arrival of Arthur's army, this episode also describes the movement of Mordred's great host on to the battlefield. Once again the poet underscores the uncertainty of Arthur's fortunes by pointing out the great disparity between the sizes of the two forces: Arthur's army of 1800 men opposing Mordred's host of 60,000. Arthur's battle against Mordred is typically a struggle against overwhelming odds, as were his battles on the continent.

The other episode before the start of the battle—Arthur's battle plans and address to his men (11. 4072-4104)—further develops the foreboding tone that accompanies Arthur's actions in the last macro-episode of the poem. After assigning knights to lead different elements
of his force, Arthur tells his men how to conduct themselves in the
coming battle. Arthur's sentiments and language clearly suggest that
he expects to die in his attempt to slay Mordred:

\[
\text{3if vs be destayned to dy todaye one this erthe,}
\text{We sall be hewed vnto Heuen, or we be halfe colde.}
\text{Loke se lett for no lede lordly to wirche:}
\text{Layes seone ladders love be the layke ende.}
\text{Take no tente vnto me, ne tale of me rekke;}
\text{Bes besy one my baners with soure brighte wapyns,}
\text{That they be strengely stuffede with steryn knyghtes,}
\text{And holden lordly one lofte, ledys to schewa;}
\text{3if any renke them arase, reschowe them sone.}
\text{Wirkes now my wirchipe, todaye my werre endys;}
\text{3e wotte my wele and my woo--wirkkys as sow likys.}
\text{Crist comly with crown comforthe sow all,}
\text{For 3e kyndest creatours that euer kynge ledde;}
\text{I gyffe sow all my blyssyng with a blithe will,}
\text{And all Bretowns bolde--blythe mote 3e worthe.}
\]

(11. 4090-4104)

Arthur's farewell to his men echoes Gawain's before his fatal attack on
Mordred's army after the sea battle. There is, however, an important
difference between the two speeches. Gawain continually refers to the
collective death of his force while Arthur unmistakably isolates him-
self from his men as a man destined to die. The poet is evidently con-
trasting these two episodes to reinforce the tragic theme of Arthur's
private destiny. When Arthur admonishes his men to work for his honor
because his war ends today, he intimates that he expects them to sur-
vive him.

At long last the great battle between Arthur and Mordred begins.
Predictably, Arthur leads the British force in the fierce fighting (11.
4105-4134). The narrative purpose the poet has for this episode is to
build tension about the outcome of the civil war. In a number of scenes prior to the battle, the poet indicates that Arthur's righteous cause is uncertain. This episode reiterates that uncertainty, this time with a pessimistic report about the course in the battle itself. The Britons' ferocity in combat is equally matched by that of the Picts and pagans in Mordred's army. To make matters worse, Mordred's force vastly outnumber Arthur's.

The fierce dedication of Arthur's troops in battle also smoothly prepares for the next episode: Idorus's sacrificing his father to honor his vow to protect Arthur (ll. 4135-4160). Seeing Ewain suddenly overcome by Saracens, Arthur commands Ewain's son Idorus to rescue his father. Idorus, however, refuses, explaining that he must not disobey his father's command to guard Arthur's life:

"He es my fadire, in faihte--forsake sall I neuer
He has me fosterde and fedde and my faire bretheren.
Bot I forsake this gate, so me Coke helpe,
And sothely al syyredym bot thy selfe one;
I breke neuer his biddyng for beryn one lyfe,
Bot euer bouxvm as beste bethely to wyrke.
He commande me kyndly, with knyghtly wordes,
That I schulde lelely one pe lenge and one noo lede ells;
I sall hys comandement holde, þif Criste wil me thole.
He es eldare tha I, and ende sall we bothen:
He sall ferkke before, and I sall come aftyre;
þiffe hym be destayned to dy todaye one þis erthe,
Criste comly with crown take kepe to hys saule."

(11. 4142-4154)

Arthur's response is equally moving. In one of his most tragic utterances, he angrily curses his fate of not being able to die for his beloved men who forsake everything to serve him:
In this very dramatic exchange between Idorus and Arthus, the poet defines once again the unalterable loyalty that is the spiritual foundation of the Round Table. But what makes this scene particularly remarkable is the subtle way he alludes to the source of Arthur's tragedy. In his sorrowful moment Arthur unconsciously equates the destruction of his beloved knights with his own political ambitions. He ironically observes that he would gladly give up a lordship as large as Alexander's for the privilege of dying to spare his men. The poet's suggestion is clear: Arthur's destructive ambition amounts to a form of disloyalty to the memory of the Round Table.

After this thematic interlude the poet quickly returns to the battle's action with a report of Ewain and Errake's splendid fighting (11. 4161-4172). This brief summary episode serves only the function of reminding us of the heroic British fighting. In giving us this episode the poet temporarily shifts the narrative's focus from the foreground of Arthur's exploits to the background of the battle's action. This shift of perspective also provides for the passage of time in the battle, thus making for a smooth transition from Arthur's exchange with Idorus to the next dramatic scene.
This next episode—Arthur's discovery of Mordred's disguise and Guinevere's secret aid to the usurper (ll. 4173-4208)—is motivated to characterize Mordred and Guinevere as weak, treacherous people. This episode begins with a flashback to the time when Mordred's force took its battle position as Arthur's army approached. Here again the poet closes the temporal rupture that the narration of Arthur's actions causes in the narration of Mordred's activities. He accounts for all of the time that passed for both men after Gawain's death. The flashback thus completes closure with the primary narrative of Arthur's actions.

The main focus of this episode does not of course give us a complete chronicle of Mordred's movements during the battle but describes his character more completely. At the beginning of the episode the poet details Mordred's self-concealment in the woods with a large personal guard while his main army takes a position on the heath to face Arthur's men. When he observes that Arthur's army appears to be spent, Mordred decides it is time to attack the king. To do so he cowardly changes his arms to hide his identity. Arthur, however, is not deceived by Mordred's disguise because he spots Mordred bearing Clarent, the royal ceremonial sword whose safe keeping he entrusted to Guinevere alone. Mordred's possession of it is, therefore, sure proof of Guinevere's complicity with his villainy. This detail, then, removes any ambiguity about Guinevere's role in helping Mordred to seize and maintain power. She has obviously thrown in her fortunes with Mordred's thus showing a moral weakness about the responsibilities of kinship similar to Mordred's.
Mordred's moral weakness, however, does not in any way impede his physical prowess. In the episode that follows--Mordred's combat with old Marroke (ll. 4208-4223)--the poet makes it clear that Mordred is a strong fighter and thereby dispells the possibility that Arthur will defeat him easily. The poet's motivation for placing this episode at this particular point in the plot is to maintain the suspense about the outcome of Arthur and Mordred's combat. When Mordred defeats Marroke, the poet underscores Mordred's great strength by noting that
"Sir Mordrede was myghty and [in] his moste strenghis; / Come non within þe compas, knyghte ne no oper, / Within þe swyng of swerde, þat ne he þe swete lduyd" (ll. 4221-4223).

After this episode the poet finally resolves the dramatic tension he has been building about the deadly combat between Arthur and Mordred. Spotting Mordred's combat with Marroke, Arthur wastes no time challenging the villain and engaging him in combat (ll. 4224-4253). The battle between the two of them is predictably fierce with each man delivering savage blows and severely wounding the other. After Arthur receives a deep wound that he knows is fatal, he suddenly retaliates with an attack that decisively ends the combat. Striking off Mordred's sword hand, Arthur quickly deals him a death blow. Arthur's last battle is finally ended. He has met his final challenge and prevailed, albeit at the cost of his own life.

After this dramatic climax, the remaining episodes of the poem form a dénouement to Arthur's heroic exploits. In these episodes the poet draws his narrative to a close by accounting for the fates of the
important remaining characters. Each of these episodes is strongly motivated by preceding events. This final narration also concludes Arthur's story with an unmistakably elegaic tone appropriate to the destruction of the Round Table's heroic community.

The first of these concluding episodes reports the aftermath of Arthur's victory over Mordred (ll. 4254-4262). Thrown into disarray by their commander's death, Mordred's remaining army flees into the forest near the battlefield only to be slaughtered to the last man by Arthur's surviving forces. Consistent with his economic style, the poet narrates the subordinate details of the battle's aftermath in the form of a summary episode.

The aftermath of the battle in turn naturally prepares for Arthur's final lament for the destruction of his community of heroes (ll. 4263-4290). This episode repeats one last time Arthur's particularly deep grief for the disastrous turn of events he has experienced. Crossing the battlefield, he finds the rest of his beloved knights dead and sorrowfully lays out their bodies in one place on the field:

With langoure in the launde thare he layes them togedire,
Lokede on theyre lighames and with a lowde steuen,
Alls lede pat liste noghte lyfe and lost had his myrthis,
Than he stotays for made and all his strengehe faylez,
Lokes vpe to be lyfte and all his lyre chaunges,
Downne he sweys full swythe and in a swoun fallys,
Vpe he coueris one kneys and kryes full often:
"Kyng comly with crowne, in care am I leuyde;
All my lordschipe lawe in lande es layde vndyre,
That me has gyfen gwerdons, be grace of hym seluen,
Mayntenyde my manhede be myghte of theire handes,
Made me manly on molde and mayster in erthe,
In a teneful tym this torfere was reryde,
That for a trytoure has tynet all my trewe lordys.
Here rystys the riche blude of the Rownde Table,
Rebukked with a rebawde, and rewthe es the more!"
I may helples one hethe house by my one,
Alls a waful wedowe pat wanttes hir beryn;
I may werye and wepe and wrynge myn handys,
For my wytt and my wyrchipe awaye es for euer;
Off all lordships I take leue to myn ende.
Here es pe Bretons blode brought owt of lyfe,
And nowe in pis journée all my joy endys.

(11. 4268-4290)

Arthur's soliloquy over his fallen knights gives the most complete expression of the tragic loss Arthur feels after his last battle against Mordred. Although Arthur has won the battle, he has lost his kingdom of the Round Table, his community of heroes. 4

What is particularly revealing in this passage are the terms Arthur uses to express his grief and whom he blames for the destruction of his kingdom. He identifies his knights as the source not only of his political power but also his very manhood. The simile he uses to convey his isolation—"I may helples one hethe house by myn one, / Alls a wafull wedowe pat wanttes hir beryn"—suggests that he feels unmanned, defenseless, by the loss of his comrades in arms. Equally interesting, he blames Mordred's disloyalty for the disintegration of the Round Table. In his eyes Mordred's treachery far outweighs his own intemperate behavior. This episode thus clearly serves a thematic purpose in the narrative.

Following their destruction of Mordred's fleeing army, Arthur's remaining troops return to their sovereign to hear him give thanks to

4 Haas makes this point particularly forcefully when she characterizes Arthur's final lament as a swansong in which he mourns the destruction of his world. See Haas, 1981, p. 127.
God for the victory over Mordred (11. 4291-4306). This episode largely fulfills the function of preparing for Arthur's journey to Glastonbury to die. At the same time it also develops the theme of fate that is pervasive in the poem. Arthur ultimately acknowledges God's will in the outcome of the battle if not in the fall of the Round Table:

I thanke þe, Gode, of Thy grace, with a gud wyll,  
That gafe vs vertue and witt to vencows þis beryns;  
And vs has graunteðe þe gree of theis gret lordes.  
He sent vs neuer no schame, ne schenchip in erthe,  
Bot euer sit þe ouerhande of all ðæter kynges.  
We haþe no layment now þese lordys to seke,  
For þone laythely ladde me lamede so sore;  
Graythe vs to Glasthenbery--vs gaynes non ðæter--  
Thare we may ryste vs with roo and raunsake oure wondys.  
Of þis dere day werke, þe Dryghtten be loued,  
That vs has destayneded and demyd to dye in oure awen."  

(11. 4296-4306).

Even this speech, however, reveals Arthur's undying devotion to the heroic life. Although he acquiesces in God's power, he continues thinking wistfully about heroic enterprises he could undertake with his remaining men. Only the fatal wound Mordred dealt him prevents them from seeking new conquests. They are going to Glastonbury only because fate has given them no other choice.

The episode that follows describes the last events of Arthur's life (11. 4307-4327). The poet's motivation for this episode is completely rational since it serves the purpose of reporting Arthur's last political acts and his death. Forced by his wounds to stop at the Isle of Avalon before reaching Glastonbury, Arthur dismounts at a manor and asks for his surgeon, who tells him death is near. After calling for his confessor to administer the last sacrament to him, Arthur names
his cousin Constantine his successor and orders his most trustworthy men to bury his fallen heroes and murder Mordred's children to prevent future strife. Forgiving Guinevere, he offers up his soul to God and dies. The poet has accounted for all of the significant events in the final hours of Arthur's life.

The penultimate episode of the narrative appropriately concludes the story of Arthur's heroic life with a description of his funeral (ll. 4328-4341). Along with bringing the narrative to a close, this episode also has the thematic function of ending Arthur's story on a thoroughly mournful note. There is nothing in the description of the funeral to suggest that Arthur triumphed over the events of his life:

    Throly belles thay rynge and Requiem syngys,  
    Dosse messes and matyns with mournande notes:  
    Relygeous reueste in theire riche copes,  
    Pontyficalles and prelates in precyouse wedys,  
    Dukes and dusszeperis in theire dule-cotes,  
    Cowntasses knelande and claspande theire handes,  
    Ladys languessande and lowrande to schewe;  
    All was buskede in blake, birdes and othire,  
    That schewed at the sepulture, with sylande teris--  
    Whas neuer so sorrowfull a syghte seen in theire tym.  

(ll. 4332-4341).

Arthur's life, significantly, ends with a scene of unrelieved sorrow, the likes of which had never been seen in his time.\(^5\)

In the last five lines of the poem, the poet returns to his direct address to the audience. He uses these lines to put his

\(^5\)Karl Heinz Göller gives the latest reading of the poem as an unmitigated tragedy. See Göller, 1981, pp. 28-29. Most students of the poem read its ending this way.
narrative into a historical perspective as he did with his opening lines requesting his audience to pay attention to his story (11. 12-25). In them we learn about Arthur's heroic lineage:

Thus endis Kyng Arthure, as auctors alegges,
That was of Ectores blude, the kynge son of Troye,
And of Sir Pryamous the prynce, praysede in erthe;
Into Bretayne the Brode, as pe Bruytte tellys.

(11. 4342-4346)

This concluding episode once again takes the form of a flashback from the present moment of the narration. The reach and extent of this flashback are similarly indeterminate. The narrator gives no indication of how long ago the Trojan founders of Britain came to its shores. In associating Arthur with these legendary heroes, the poet is imparting once again a timeless mythical quality to Arthur's exploits. His deeds, too, have truly transcended time.
CHAPTER 6

GENRE

Any substantive description of the Alliterative Morte Arthure's genre must begin with a definition of epic and romance, the two major genres of long medieval narratives. Although a precise definition of these two kinds of poems presents great critical difficulties, it is possible to make some general distinctions between them to start a discussion of the Alliterative Morte Arthure's genre. Of necessity these introductory observations must be relatively abstract and overstated to prepare for a more complete description of the poem's individual form. The subsequent description of the Alliterative Morte Arthure's particular structure, attitudes, and worldview will gradually yield a clearer understanding of its genre of epic tragedy.

Epic and Romance

In Epic and Romance, W. P. Ker (1908) initiates the modern discussion of the two genres. The distinctions he makes between them have largely shaped contemporary thinking about their artistic forms. In general he argues that the genres differ on the matters of fictional worlds, kinds of actions, types of societies, and narrative form. The fictional world of the epic, he begins, is essentially realistic as opposed to the imaginary world of romance:
Whatever Epic may mean, it implies some weight and solidity; Romance means nothing, if it does not convey some notion of mystery and fantasy. A general distinction of this kind, whatever names may be used to render it, can be drawn, in medieval literature, to hold good for the two large groups of narrative belonging to the earlier and the later Middle Ages respectively. Beowulf might stand for the one side, Lancelot or Gawain for the other (Ker, 1908, pp. 4-5).

To put it another way, an epic has a strong sense of prosaic reality about it while a romance intimates the existence of the marvellous in ordinary experience.

As they exhibit this metaphysical opposition, epic and romance display different kinds of plots. The epic, for Ker, characteristically tells the story of a communal struggle against a common enemy; a romance, on the other hand, presents the story of a lone knight's personal quest for adventure:

The two great kinds of narrative literature in the Middle Ages might be distinguished by their favourite incidents and commonplaces of adventure. No kind of adventure is so common or better told in the earlier heroic manner than the defence of a narrow place against odds. Such are the stories of Hamther and Sorli in the hall of Ermanaric, of the Niblung kings in the hall of Attila, of the Fight of Finnesburh, of Walter at the Wasgenstein, of Bryhtnoth at Maldon, of Roland in the Pyrennes... The favourite adventure of medieval romance is something different—a knight riding alone through a forest; another knight; a shock of lances; a fight on foot with swords, "racing, tracing, and foining like two wild boars"; then, perhaps, recognition—the two knights belong to the same household and are engaged in the same quest (Ker, 1908, p. 5).

The plot of the epic, then, typically focuses on the matter of a community's political emergency while that of the romance explores an individual's private search for adventure. While this distinction does
not, of course, exhaust all possible plots of epic and romance, it does indicate the general disparity of interests between them.

The third major point Ker makes concerns the fictional societies of both kinds of narrative. The epic's community is far less stratified than that of romance. The epic hero is not nearly so isolated from the common man as is his romantic counterpart:

The form of society in an heroic age is aristocratic and magnificent. At the same time, this aristocracy differs from that of later and more specialised forms of civilizations. It does not make an insuperable difference between gentle and simple. . . . The nobles have not yet discovered for themselves any form of occupation or mode of thought in virtue of which they are widely severed from the commons, nor have they invented any such ideal of life or conventional system of conduct as involves an ignorance or depreciation of the common pursuits of those below them. . . . The art and pursuits of a gentleman in the heroic age are different from those of the churl, but no so far different as to keep them in different spheres. There is a community of prosaic interests (Ker, 1908, p. 7).

The important point here is social cohesiveness, which also largely explains the communal nature of epic plots. Since both nobles and commons share similar interests, it is understandable that epic plots should be fundamentally political in nature. The romance, on the other hand, displays relatively little cohesiveness. Whatever else he is, the romantic hero is an individual essentially isolated from the common pursuits of his society. Romantic plots, therefore, characteristically deal with the personal exploits of an individual.

The other main distinction Ker posits between the two genres is their different breadth and depth of narration. The epic is a much more inclusive, dramatic form of narrative than romance:
Romance by itself is a kind of literature that does not allow the full exercise of dramatic imagination; a limited and abstract form as compared with the fullness and variety of Epic; though episodes of romance, and romantic moods and digressions may have their place, along with all other human things, in the Epic scheme (Ker, 1908, p. 33).

In addition to being a less ambitious form of narrative, the romance is further limited by the singleness of its point of view. Unlike the epic which presents a multitude of characters dramatically expressing a variety of sentiments and ideas, the romance offers only its story through the restricted vision of the narrator:

The difference between the greater and lesser kinds of narrative literature is vital and essential whatever names we apply to them. In the one kind, of which Aristotle knew no other examples than the Iliad and the Odyssey, the personages are made individual through their dramatic conduct and their speeches in varying circumstances; in the other kind, in place of the moods and sentiments of a multitude of different people entering into the story and working it out, there is one voice, the voice of the storyteller, and his theory of the characters is made to do duty for the characters themselves (Ker, 1908, p. 33).

The epic, then, is a more realistic, objective form of narrative than the romance because it gives a less mediated account of its story. Its story appears to be telling itself rather than being filtered through the subjective consciousness of the romantic narrator.

Although there are a number of particular points on which one might disagree with Ker, his remarks on the subject are useful for making some preliminary distinctions about the Alliterative Morte Arthure's genre. In its general features the poem meets Ker's basic requirements for an epic. First of all, it is a poem that possesses a good deal of substance. The poet continually takes pains to create a
strong impression of reality for the characters and events he depicts. The poem abounds in especially graphic details about the departure and arrival of Arthur's fleet, about particular features of medieval armor, the gory particulars of battle, and so on. The relatively few examples of mysterious, fantastic events the poem does contain—Arthur's two bizarre dreams, Gawain's encounter with Priamus, and a few others—are carefully rationalized and thus preserve the poem's strongly realistic atmosphere. The mystery of these episodes disappears when, for example, Arthur's philosophers explicate his dreams and Priamus identifies himself and explains his presence in the forest.

The Alliterative Morte Arthure likewise exhibits the plot, fictional society, and narrative form that Ker describes as characteristic of the epic. The poem's plot typically focuses on the two political emergencies that the Round Table has to face: Lucius's threat to invade Britain and Mordred's attempt to destroy the remnants of the Round Table when Arthur returns home from Europe. Throughout the poem the action repeatedly takes the form of Arthur's forces defending themselves in a narrow place against great odds. The society of the Round Table also fulfills the requirements Ker specifies for the epic. Arthur's court of noble knights is certainly aristocratic and magnificent without being isolated from the common people by any ideal vision of life or genteel mode of conduct. The knights of the Alliterative Morte Arthure, unlike those of chivalric romance, are almost solely interested in demonstrating their courage, physical prowess, and loyalty to their lord. Nowhere do they exhibit a concern for refined language, devotion to women, or other social virtues associated with courtoisie (Finayson, 1967a,
pp. 6-9). Last of all, the Alliterative Morte Arthure is thoroughly a
dramatic poem in which a great variety of characters express a multi­
tude of ideas and sentiments, thus giving us a full, complex view of
Arthur's struggle with destiny.

Although these sorts of distinctions suggest that the Allitera­
tive Morte Arthure should be classified as a species of epic, they do
not provide a precise enough description of how the poem works as an
epic. To appreciate how completely it is an epic poem, we must examine
its artistic structure more carefully.

The poem's macro-structure offers the clearest view of the
narrative structure of Arthur's heroic struggle with destiny. The
three macro-episodes--Arthur's departure from Britain to answer Lucius's
challenge (11. 1-831), his long campaigns of conquest in Europe (11.
832-3217), and his return to Britain to wage war against Mordred (11.
3218-4346)--exhibit a narrative structure Joseph Campbell, Erich
Auerbach, and other writers find to be universal in world literature:
the structure of departure, initiation, and return.

W. T. H. Jackson (1967), advances a particularly illuminating
analysis of how this formal structure informs the meaning of medieval
narratives. He begins his analysis by arguing that Auerbach's concept
of the "Quest motif" of departure, initiation, and return applies e­
qually well to the formal description of the narrative structure of
medieval epics and chansons de geste as it does for romances (p. 79).
Fundamental to Jackson's analysis of this narrative structure is his
concept of the epic center. The structure of every medieval narrative--
epic or romance—is determined by the hero's departure from and return to his homeland:

The writers knew that it was the true Recke, the man who left his homeland under compulsion and whose return, if it occurred at all, had to be a triumph, who provided the material of which epics were fashioned. Whether the hero returns or not, he carries with him the values of his homeland and he regulates his conduct by these values, not by those of the court or individual to whom he is attached (Jackson, 1967, p. 80).

Crucial to the meaning of the hero's actions is his relation to the central values of his homeland:

It was the recognition by writers of literature of the importance of such values which led to the presence in virtually all narrative poetry of what we may call the epic center. Such a center is rarely the principal scene of action, important decisions are not made there, nor does the center determine the details of the hero's conduct. It is rather a center of civilization, representative of the ethic which the hero recognizes as binding upon his own behavior, and the hero recognizes that it is to this center that his loyalty is due (Jackson, 1967, pp. 80-81).

A narrative's ultimate meaning finally depends upon the hero's measuring his conduct against the standards of the epic center:

Perhaps the most important characteristic of the epic center is that the hero recognizes that here alone can he obtain the approbation which makes his conduct fitting. In the more important narratives, the conduct of the hero invariably transcends the demands of the standards of the epic center, and the tension between those standards and those of the hero constitute the principal interest of the work, but this does not alter the fact that for the hero himself the standards of the epic center remain those to which he must conform, for without them he has no background, no home, no reason for existing (Jackson, 1967, p. 82).

That the Alliterative Morte Arthure exhibits this archetypal narrative structure seems obvious. The story of Arthur's last campaigns and death contains all of the basic structural and thematic features
Jackson identifies in his analysis. Compelled by Lucius's threat of invasion, Arthur departs from England to defend his nation against Roman tyranny. In the course of his great martial success against Lucius, Arthur attempts to transcend the values of his Round Table when he tries to establish himself as master of the world. At the height of his splendid achievement in Europe, Arthur, ironically, is once more compelled to act, this time to return home to face Mordred and suffer a catastrophic death amid the ruins of his society. At the same time that it presents this sequence of heroic actions involving the destiny of Britain, the poem also clearly defines the heroic conflict between Arthur's personal ambitions as king and the heroic standards of loyalty, self-sacrifice, and martial prowess that constitute the epic center of the Round Table.

As one reads the Alliterative Morte Arthure more closely, the dramatic form Arthur's heroic conflict takes in individual sequences of action is everywhere apparent. Throughout the poem there is a relatively regular alternation between episodes of action and episodes of reflection. Arthur's fierce struggle with the giant of St. Michael's Mount, for example, is followed by his reflection on its significance; the deadly combat between Mordred and Gawain is juxtaposed to Mordred's mournful reflection on Gawain's great worth as a noble knight. The tension between these two opposite kinds of episodes suggests one of the central structural components of the epic which Thomas Greene (1961) has described in especially useful terms. For Greene the epic is a form of narrative ultimately concerned with defining a hero's character:
Epic narrative then is a series of adjustments between the hero's capacities and his limitations. His life as a hero is devoted to informing his name with meaning. . . . He is impelled to act, and action among men is agonistic; it plunges him into a contest of arete, virtus, capacity, a struggle to impose his being on the world (Greene, 1961, p. 199).

Greene finds this process of definition expressed structurally in two different kinds of episodes. He labels them pathetikos and ethikos, the "pathetic" ("what happens") and the "ethical" ("the speech of a well-informed person"):  

The first kind of scene or episode lays stress upon activity and movement; it contains the agon, the struggle between capacity and limitation, and whatever other vital cruxes of the narrative are to be presented. . . . It contains the crises in which violence occurs, arete is tested, the deed accomplished, the terror confronted, the name enhanced. . . . The second kind of episode depends primarily upon dialogue, though dialogue is a misleading term, for . . . speech in the epic is ampler and more formal than common speech; it is the vehicle by which the political and symbolic associations of an action or image are commonly revealed, and by which they are situated in an historical context. It is concerned with the significance and consequences of violence (p. 202).

Whatever we might choose to call these two kinds of episodes, they do represent the main components of the epic plot.

Although something of the same sort of structural tension between action and reflection is present in romance, the thematic focus is significantly different. The romance, which focuses primarily on the individual rather than the national meaning of heroic action, puts a different emphasis on these two kinds of episodes. The action of a romance is not restricted essentially to the physical struggle between heroes for the control of a political territory as it is in an epic. A romantic hero may, for example, struggle in single combat with a giant for the control of a mountain, but his action mainly serves to prove or
reaffirm to himself his own worth as a true knight to his king. His desire for self-knowledge remains the important issue, not his struggle to exert control over the mountain as it is in an epic narrative.

In other actions the romantic hero must prove himself the possessor of a variety of social and spiritual graces that the epic hero is rarely called upon to demonstrate in his behavior. Typically, as A. C. Gibbs (1966, pp. 6-11) observes, the romantic hero must prove himself worthy of the affections of ladies, of championing the righteous cause of the weak and disaffected, of serving God, and so on. The epic hero, on the other hand, must demonstrate only his physical prowess, courage, and loyalty to his lord. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight provides an excellent illustration of this difference in focus. If it were an epic poem, Gawain's struggle with the Green Knight would take on an entirely different character. He would be forced to answer the Green Knight's challenge to Arthur's court with bloodshed, most likely on the spot. Since the poem is a romance, Gawain's response is far different. The elaborate narrative that follows takes the form of a test of his social and spiritual prowess and ultimately measures his faith in God. An epic rarely, if ever, deals with these spiritual concerns. Its interests lie elsewhere in the world of politics.

Except for a few romantic episodes devoted to thematic purposes, the focus of the Alliterative Morte Arthure is clearly on the agonistic actions of Arthur and his heroes as they attempt to impose their wills on events. The senator's delivery of Lucius's ultimatum to Arthur immediately establishes the political nature of the plot. The actions that follow in the rest of the poem give us the results of Arthur's and
his knight's struggle between capacity and limitations. One emergency after another tests their resolve to overcome any challenge to the Round Table, to reaffirm Arthur's great reputation as conqueror of the world.

The most convincing argument for classifying the Alliterative Morte Arthure as a species of epic, however, is the analysis of its motivational structure: that is, a study of the poet's apparent strategy in linking together the poem's narrative episodes into a particular kind of plot. Throughout the analysis of the poem's temporal arrangement, it becomes apparent that the poet prefers a rigorously rational design for the poem's plot. Everywhere in the Alliterative Morte Arthure there is abundant evidence that the poet has taken great pains to provide a rational plausibility for what happens in the plot.

This idea of a rational plot is extremely significant for the description of the central structural difference between epic and romantic narratives. Morton Bloomfield (1970) provides a particularly helpful analysis of the different formal and thematic intentions of the two kinds of narrative. He begins by contrasting the worldviews of epic and romance. First of all, an epic is a rational form of narrative:

When we call epics "rational," we do not mean that they are "realistic." None of these early stories is realistic or naturalistic. They all deal with mythologized history not history. They claim historicity, but they are not historically exact. They reflect a movement from myth to history (p. 105).

In appropriating mythological materials for their narratives, epics adopt an essentially rational approach to experience:
They are matter-of-fact in their approach to the unknown. There is an unknown, of course, to which we are all subject, but it does not usually take onto itself the meaning of the actions and events. The world is unmanageable or manageable on its own terms; it is not arbitrary or mysterious to the human observer of its irrationalities. Its actions however dark in their ultimate meaning are yet open in some fashion to human understanding and planning and some kind of control of them is possible. The hero may go down in defeat, but we know the steps and causes of his decline (Bloomfield, 1970, p. 105).

The epic expresses its essential rationality most basically at the level of episode. Although the epic may contain symbolic depths in certain features of story, we have no difficulty understanding the motivation for what happens in the plot:

These epics have their symbolic dimension, of course, but at least on their primary level there is little doubt how to interpret them. We may be puzzled by the poet's attitudes toward his figures, but they encounter and endure explicable opposition of a natural or marvelous sort. The motivation within the story is usually clear; the motivation of the author may not be (Bloomfield, 1970, p. 105).

The epic, in short, displays a thoroughly rational pattern of motivation. We are able to understand characters and what happens to them solely from the details of the story itself.

One may, Bloomfield continues, distinguish the epic from the romance precisely on this matter of motivation. What is missing from the usual epic is an unmotivated episode, "the opening out to the unexpected, the encounter with the unknown" (p. 106). It is the absence of this sort of episode that separates epic from romance on the level of plot structure. Both kinds of poems require motivated episodes if they are to be intelligible, but the romance characteristically exhibits the unmotivated episode as part of its plot:
The matter-of-fact attitude of the typical epic never entirely died out; there is indeed much of it particularly in the later medieval romance. Unless a story is to be completely irrational, it must have some motivated episodes. Most episodes in romance fall into this category, but there are some, often of the highest importance, which seem unmotivated or weakly motivated within the story—inexplicable events which seem to have their center above and beyond the poem (Bloomfield, 1970, p. 106).

The presence of these irrational episodes greatly contributes to the sense of the marvelous we experience in romance:

The irrational episode, the adventure, when properly used, reinforces the sense of mystery which is often inherent in the subject matter of the tale. Unlike the mystery and marvel of the epic, the mystery of the romance is truly a mystery in terms of the narrative line. Something is happening about which we cannot be clear. In the eyes of God, in another dimension, all these episodes are no doubt explicable, but to human eyes, in the human dimension, something puzzling is going on. The center of the story is not within the tale but beyond it. The "meaning" of the action is not self-explicable but dependent upon the unknown (pp. 106-107).

Unlike the epic then, the romance suggests that the world is full of mysteries beyond the ken of man.

This basic difference between the epic and romance worldviews—the one essentially rational, the other essentially irrational—is, furthermore, directly attributable to different narrative techniques. Unlike the epic poet who is not primarily interested in telling a tale of wonder, the romantic poet deliberately creates a sense of mystery in the way he joins together the episodes of his narrative:

Marvels and the unusual are part of both epic and romance; but they are handled differently in each. Besides their greater frequency, the marvels of the romance are more truly marvels and their irrationality is emphasized and exploited artistically. This exploitation is partly obtained structurally by deliberately neglecting in one way
or another motivation in episodic action at crucial points. This neglect helps to create a sense of the mysterious and to suggest another realm of meaning beyond human ken (Bloomfield, 1970, p. 111).

In his desire to present and explain the meaning of heroic actions, the epic poet, on the other hand, aims for a full, rational account of events. The motivational structure of the epic, therefore, is complete. This difference in narrative techniques helps to explain the apparent differences in the motivational structures we observe in epics and romances: "the motivational structure of the romance is often deep and below or above the surface; the motivational structure of the epic is shallow and on the surface" (p. 112).

The motivational structure of the Alliterative Morte Arthure perfectly fits the description Bloomfield gives for that of the epic. If we compare the motivational structure of romances like Amis and Amiloun, Tristan and Isolde, and Sir Orfeo to that of the Alliterative Morte Arthure, it is apparent that the latter's is indeed "shallow and on the surface." There is nothing in the Alliterative Morte Arthure that compares, for example, to the fairies' mysterious abduction of Heurodis in Sir Orfeo. The poet characteristically keeps this episode mysterious by offering no explanation for the sudden abduction of Heurodis or the manner in which the fairies secretly seized her in plain sight of Orfeo and his vigilant knights. The Alliterative Morte Arthure poet, by contrast, provides easily discernible reasons for almost everything that happens in his poem. As he motivates the major actions of the poem—Arthur's war with Lucius, his attack on the Duke of Lorraine, and his war with Mordred—the poet is also careful to suggest
within the narrative plausible reasons for relatively small incidents such as Mordred's initial reluctance to serve as regent during Arthur's absence to wage war against Lucius (ll. 682-688). The analysis of the poem's temporal arrangement establishes this pattern of rational motivation throughout the poem.

The few times the poet gives us episodes that have the mysterious, marvelous character of romance—Arthur's dream of the Dragon and the Bear (ll. 756-805), Arthur's combat with the Giant of St. Michael's Mount (ll. 1074-1151), Gawain's adventure with Priamus (ll. 2513-2715), and Arthur's dream of Fortune (ll. 3218-3455)—he carefully rationalizes their use in the poem and thereby maintains its heroic tone. Arthur's dreams, first of all, are decidedly romantic. They present terrifying glimpses at a bizarre reality far removed from ordinary experience.

The poet never explains the mysterious presence of the dragon, bear, and Dame Fortune in these dreams or their motives for action. The landscapes of the two dreams are also appropriately sinister, bizarre. In the first dream the dragon and the bear carry on their deadly struggle against the backdrop of a flame-lit sea and a blood-drenched earth; in the second Arthur flees in terror from blood-lapping beasts in a wild wood into an enclosed paradisical garden where he meets the supernatural Dame Fortune descending from the sky in bejewelled splendor.

The poet, however, rationalizes his use of these otherworldly episodes in two ways. First, he presents them as dreams, not as waking experiences. When he narrates them as dreams, he effectively displaces them from the primary, rational narrative of Arthur's heroic struggle with his opponents. In a thoroughly romantic narrative, these episodes
could be presented as real experiences. One has only to compare the Alliterative Morte Arthure poet's handling of these supernatural episodes with the handling of similar ones in romances such as Sir Orfeo to see how he has rationalized their irrational qualities. The other technique the poet uses to rationalize the dreams is that of providing commentary to explain their significance. When he has the philosophers explicate the dreams, he largely explains away their mystery, their irrational nature.

Two other episodes—Arthur's combat with the Giant of St. Michael's Mount and Gawain's encounter with Priamus—are patently romantic in character. Both take the typical form of the aventure of chivalric romance: the knight sets out alone to seek some trial of physical prowess to prove his worthiness as a knight. In the first Arthur instructs Kay and Bedivere to wait for him while he seeks out the "saint" of the mountain; in the second Gawain deserts his men to ride off one morning in search of adventure. The opponents Arthur and Gawain encounter are characteristically formidable. Only after the greatest struggle does Arthur slay the Giant and Gawain immobilize Priamus. Middle English romance abounds with similar episodes of single combat.

Romantic as these two episodes are, they do not appreciably alter the epic tone that characterizes the Alliterative Morte Arthure. Unlike the aventure of chivalric romance, Arthur's and Gawain's are anything but gratuitous. The poet's arrangement of these episodes in the plot suggests that he is using them for thematic purposes. Arthur's combat is not merely a fortuitous event that suddenly presents itself to Arthur while he is out looking for adventure. When Arthur fights the
Giant, he does so not for his personal glory, but to rid his French subjects of a deadly tyrant. Although no such claim can be made for Gawain's combat with Priamus, it, too, is not entirely gratuitous. Juxtaposed with Arthur's combat with the Giant, it serves to contrast the public responsibilities of a king with the private ones of a knight. When Gawain rides off alone into the forest, he is seeking personal fulfillment. When Arthur climbs the mountain to kill the Giant, he is attempting to rid the countryside of a monster who is slaughtering his subjects.

John Finlayson basically supports this reading of these two episodes. When he compares them to similar episodes in Ywain and Gawain, he argues that we must ultimately interpret them in the larger context of the whole work:

Where these [generic] properties [of romantic and heroic poetry] overlap—as in the areas of individual combat and encounters with the unnatural—their function will tend to be different, as we can see by comparing the Gawain-Priamus episode in Morte Arthure with Ywain's encounter with the guardian of the Magic Spring in Ywain and Gawain, or the giant Harpin in the latter with the giant of Mont St. Michel in the alliterative poem. In other words, certain episodes in Morte Arthure seem to belong to the world of romance, if judged simply within the context of the incident. Placed in the larger context of the whole work, however, their meaning and value can be seen to be very different from their apparent romance significance (Finlayson, 1967a, p. 11).

This view seems particularly justified in the light of Ker's (1908, p. 33) observation that the epic is a form of narrative capable of accommodating the less ambitious mode of romance within itself.

Finally, the arrangement of episodes in the Alliterative Morte Arthure suggests the strongly unified structure we experience in the
Joachim Bumke (1959) has described this sense of structural coherence for the *chanson de geste*. His description of it applies equally well for the epic. Unlike the romance, the *chanson's* plot is tightly constructed:

The *chanson* presents a coherent relation between one event and another, the romance a series of episodes that are, as far as their content is concerned, completely independent of one another. For the *chanson*, therefore, the surface development of the action is far more important than it is for the romance. . . . In the beginning there is an event that sets the action in motion; the action then runs its course almost on its own, autonomously, and the poem closes at that point where the chain of events . . . comes to an end. Every single episode has its fixed place in the totality of the action; it cannot be arbitrarily omitted or moved to another place without disturbing the progress of the action. . . . In the romance, on the other hand, each appears to be governed by coincidence and arbitrariness. . . . Its aesthetic unity is to be grasped not in the surface action but in the agent, the hero (Bumke, pp. 57ff).

That the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* exhibits a rigorously unified plot is apparent throughout the poem. The Roman envoy's disruption of Arthur's New Year's banquet with Lucius's bellicose message immediately sets off a chain of events that eventually leads to Arthur's martial struggles and death. Once Arthur and his knights make the decision to wage war against Lucius, one action after another impels them to still other actions. What prevents the plot from becoming an incoherent chronicle of marital actions is the clear focus the poet maintains on the interaction between Arthur's character and the challenge of events. Along with being a thoroughly vigorous battle poem, the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* is also a serious meditation on the nature of the heroic character and his world.
Epic Tragedy

Although the classification of the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* as an epic is in the main accurate, it does not really account for our experience of the poem's particular form and content. At the same time it gives us the saga of Arthur's wars and untimely death, the poem also makes a serious commentary on the nature of heroic fortunes in this world. From this perspective the story of the rise and fall of Arthur's fortunes takes on the unmistakable character of tragedy.

The suggestion that the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* should be read as a tragedy is not, of course, a novel one. William Matthews (1960) has argued, as did Karl-Joseph Höltgen (1957) before him, that the poem is best described as a medieval tragedy of foturne. Basically, Matthews contends that the poet adopted the iconography of Fortune's wheel—specifically the four different positions a king occupies in the course of his ride on the wheel—as the model for his narrative structure in the poem (pp. 106-107). To fulfill this new design for his story, the poet radically altered the form and content of his materials as they appeared in the chronicle sources to create a complex balance of moods in the pyramidal structure of Arthur's rise and fall (pp. 109-111).

The primary source of Arthur's tragedy, Matthews (1960) continues, is his sinfulness (p. 118). Citing Chaucer's Monk as an authority on medieval attitudes toward tragedy, Matthews maintains that human failings rather than irrational forces lead to the downfall of great men in medieval tragedies of fortune (p. 120). Since the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* was composed during the general period in which this
attitude toward tragedy prevailed, he contends that it is reasonable to expect that Arthur and his knights deserved to suffer the catastrophe that befell them (Matthews (1960, p. 120). From this premise he goes on to argue that Arthur's tragedy is ultimately the result of his overweening pride that causes him to carry on unjust wars of destruction for which he must suffer (pp. 132-135).

Although Matthews has performed a good service in offering a tragic reading of the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, his analysis of the poem's structure and meaning is inadequate to explain its considerable complexities of effects. It is, of course, undeniable that the poem presents the rise-and-fall pyramidal structure that Matthews indicates, but this description of its structure is too reductive. The rise-and-fall structure Matthews adopts from *de casibus* tragedy to explain the poem's form will with minor adjustments just as easily describe the plot structure of many other kinds of narratives. Many narratives—beast fables, fabliaux, romances, and so on—build a conflict to a climax which then leads to a falling action.¹ To build his argument that Arthur's dream of Fortune provides the poet with a structural model for the whole poem, Matthews largely ignores the part Arthur's dream of the dragon and the bear plays in the poem's structure. Although the dream of Fortune clearly encapsulates the poem's tragic meaning in the iconography of Fortune and her wheel, the first dream is

¹One has only to compare Matthews' idea of the poem's rise and fall structure with Gustav Freytag's diagram for plot structure in drama to appreciate the generality of Matthews' remarks. A more adequate discussion of the poem's structure demands a comprehensive analysis of how its various episodes are joined together to form macro-episodes.
equally important in structuring the poem's action. The poet's placement of the two dreams—the first after the first 800 lines of the poem, the second before the last 800 lines of the poem—strongly indicates a tripartite structure for the poem's action. Matthews offers no such evidence from the text itself to support his argument about the poem's pyramidal design. Rather he argues from analogy. Since the Alliterative Morte Arthure gives the account of the rise and fall of a great man, its structure is easily explained by comparing it to representative medieval tragedies—particularly Boccaccio's De casibus virorum, Lydgate's Fall of Princes, and Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde (1960, pp. 105-109). This sort of general analysis ignores more than it explains.

The other major difficulty with Matthews' reading of the poem is the disproportionate emphasis he puts on Arthur's sinfulness as the source of his tragedy. The evidence he advances is far too slim to support this rigidly moralistic interpretation of Arthur's tragedy. Basically, he uses five passages—the poem's opening prayer (11. 1-11), Arthur's prideful behavior before the walls of Metz (11. 2424-2447), his savage campaign of mass destruction in Tuscany (11. 3150-3162), the philosophers' urging him to repent for his crime of spilling innocent blood (11. 3397-3400), and Arthur's lament over Gawain's corpse (11. 3981-3986)—to prove that the poet intends us to see Arthur's fall as the result of his sinfulness (pp. 125-137). Only two of these passages—the philosophers' admonition to Arthur to repent and Arthur's grief-stricken remark over Gawain's body ("He es sakles supprysede for syn of myn one!")—actually refer to Arthur's sin. Arthur is, of course,
guilty of the sin of pride in words and deeds (especially in his
Italian campaign after Lucius's death), but the poet simply does not
seem to be emphasizing this aspect of his tragic fall as Matthews would
have us believe. This less didactic view is shared by some of the main
(1966), and John Finlayson (1963) all argue that the poet's obvious
admiration for Arthur throughout the poem strongly calls into question
a narrowly moralistic reading of Arthur's catastrophe.¹

A more satisfactory reading of the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*
demands that we abandon Matthews' (1960) moralistic interpretation of
Arthur's actions for a broader statement of its tragic vision, which
Larry Benson (1966) suggests when he points out that the poem's central
dramatic tension derives from a fundamental moral ambiguity:

The tension in a work like the *Morte Arthure* is thus not
between good and evil, between the "excess" of earthly
kingship and the virtue of renunciation; the tension is
between two goods, between the Christian detachment that
is necessary for ultimate happiness even on this earth
and the complete engagement with an earthly ideal that
is necessary for heroism. That is why we finally admire
the medieval tragic hero for the very qualities that lead
to his fall. One could wish that Macbeth had been less
ambitious or Hamlet more resolute, but who could wish
that Troilus were a less perfect lover, Arthur a less
noble king (pp. 80-81).

This sort of ironic sensibility much better accounts for the poem's
particularly elegaic treatment of Arthur's tragic fall and the destruc-
tion of the heroic society of the Round Table.

¹In particular, see Newstead, 1962, p. 119; Finlayson, 1963,
p. 76; and Benson, 1966, pp. 82-83 for the expression of this view.
The deeply tragic nature of the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* becomes a good deal clearer when we consider its vision of the world and the kind of hero it gives us. Unlike the typical epic spirit of the *Chanson de geste*, that of the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* is much more somber in tone. Throughout the poem the poet develops an especially serious meditation on the inevitable consequences of living the heroic life. One main source of this tone is the essentially secular attitude it adopts toward the relationship man has with destiny. The poet offers no real theological explanation for the shaping of characters' destinies. The anxious references Arthur and his knights make to destiny and fate throughout the action underscore their uncertainty about its operations. Although they all proclaim, at least nominally, a faith in God and his justice, it is evident that none of them believes himself exempt from sudden disaster.

This vulnerability is especially apparent in the case of Arthur's fortunes. The cosmic revelations he has in the form of dreams are either too mysterious or come too late to save him from disaster. He is unable to understand the first dream's ironic warning about the catastrophic destruction of himself and his kingdom even with the help of his wise philosophers. The second dream of fortune comes far too late for Arthur to prevent the tragic losses predicted by the first dream. All he can do is follow the philosophers' advice to do penance for his sins and prepare to die. The events that will bring his downfall have been set in motion some time before this second dream.
This particularly secular explanation of events is, as Richard Sewall (1954, pp. 349-350) observes, one of the distinguishing features of tragedy:

Tragedy is primarily humanistic. Its focus is an event in this world; it is uncommitted as to questions of ultimate destiny, and it is non-religious in its attitude toward revelation. But it speaks, however vaguely or variously, of an order that transcends time, space, and matter. It assumes man's connection with some supersensory or supernatural, or metaphysical being or principle, whether it be the Olympians, Job's Jehovah or the Christian God; Fate, Fortune's Wheel, the "elements" that Lear invoked, or Koestler's "oceanic sense", which comes in so tentatively (and pathetically) at the end of Darkness at Noon. The first thing tragedy says about the cosmos is that, for good or ill, it is . . . .

In its characteristically realistic form of narration, the Alliterative Morte Arthure presents this sort of vision of Arthur's story. The poet's focus is almost entirely on events of this world, the world of ordinary experience. The revelations that the dreams present likewise posit a metaphysical principle that explains the rise and fall of men's fortunes rather than providing some religious orthodoxy for them. Arthur's tragedy, the dream of Fortune would have us accept, is ultimately the result of the metaphysical principle of change embodied by Fortuna and her wheel.

Arthur's dreams, moreover, suggest two other essential features of the tragic world: the cosmic mystery of experience and the limitations of human knowledge and power. 3 Both dreams, first of all, give

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3 Sewell concisely locates these two elements--cosmic mystery and human limitations--as important sources of the feeling of awe we experience in tragedy. Arthur's two dreams respectively provide concrete illustrations of these ideas and the feeling of awe that results from them. See Sewall, 1954, pp. 350-352.
us the spectacle of unfathomable forces working beyond the appearance of things. Although the philosophers offer an explanation for the symbolic significance of the dragon and the bear, they do not begin to account for the circumstances of the fierce battle between the two supernatural beasts. We are merely given the fantastic vision of their struggle in the otherworldly landscape of Arthur's dream. The same is true for the second dream. It, too, gives an essentially mysterious glimpse into the obscure workings of supernatural forces, into the forces that shape men's destinies in the paradisical landscape of dream. The descent of Fortuna into the enclosed garden and her strange behavior and violent changes of mood are never explained. Arthur, as the philosophers point out, has had a "shewyng," a revelation into the mysteries of life. Both of these dreams suggest a mysterious cosmic realm of experience that is usually hidden from man.

These two dreams and the subsequent action of the poem intimate, furthermore, the limitations of human knowledge and power. Throughout the poem Arthur and his knights as well as their opponents act as if they understand life and are largely able to control their lives. As the plot unfolds, however, they all gradually discover that they are subject to limitations of capacity and understanding. All of the principal figures in the action--Lucius, Gawain, Mordred, Arthur--find out that life is full of unexpected dangers and that no man is able to survive all of the trials that the heroic life presents him. This perception is truly tragic because it intimates that all human lives are circumscribed by limitations. The stories of Oedipus, Job, Lear,
Macbeth, and many other tragic characters are the same on this point. Each of these tragic figures suffers because he fails to comprehend the complexities of life and his own natural frailities of character. Arthur suffers from the same sort of innate deficiencies of knowledge and power in his struggle with events.

The other source of the poem's deeply tragic nature is its depiction of Arthur as a paradoxical hero. Unlike the uncomplicated hero of the usual epic or *chanson de geste*, Arthur is a man of contradictions. At the same time that he is a great conqueror, he is also merely a man; a being who possesses freedom of choice and who yet suffers enslavement when he exercises this freedom; a creature who is both wise and ignorant about the conduct of his own life. In the course of the narrative the poet gives us numerous examples of these oppositions in Arthur's character and situation. After he presents a summary of Arthur's widespread conquests before the action begins, the poet also devotes the whole second macro-episode to a detailed catalogue of Arthur's present martial triumphs. At the same time, however, we see Arthur exhibiting fits of anger, sorrow, and other decidedly mortal displays of emotion and weakness. While there is a greatness about him that lifts him above other men, that greatness is tempered by less admirable traits.

While Sewall is in the main correct in this observation, there are many heroes of epic tragedy who display a good deal of complexity of character and outlook. I am thinking of such figures as Galgamesh, Achilles, and Roland.
Arthur is also a man whose judgement is mysteriously flawed. During the course of his wars in Europe, he acts with considerable soundness of mind. During his siege of Metz, however, he inexplicably begins to act irrationally. During his Italian campaign he continues to display signs of rashness and uncharacteristically cruel behavior. With his second dream we find out the nature of Fortune's wheel: one has the freedom to ride the wheel but not to control its destructive movement. This insight, however, does not illuminate Arthur's reason for riding the wheel. His character remains essentially mysterious. He is, as Sewall (1954, p. 352) says of the tragic hero, "no child of God; yet he feels himself more than a child of earth. He is not a plaything of Fate, but he is not entirely free."

At the same time Arthur is also both wise and ignorant about the conduct of his life. While he acts sensibly about most things, he also appears unable to realize when he is behaving imprudently. He will, for example, provide for his own safety when he fights the Giant of St. Michael's Mount by having Kay and Bedivere nearby in the event of serious danger, but later on he tempts fate by riding without armor near the besieged city of Metz. The metaphysical law that the wheel of Fortune exemplifies is that human fortunes are transitory. In his ignorance Arthur illustrates this law's validity by carrying on his disastrous campaign of conquest after he defeats Lucius. Once he learns about his mistake of riding Fortune's wheel, it is too late to correct his error. He cannot undo the past just as Adam, Oedipus, and Macbeth cannot undo their tragic deeds. Arthur, like them, is typically tragic because he unwittingly precipitates his own destruction.
Arthur, finally, is the paradoxical tragic hero because of the ambiguous nature of his pride and the character of his suffering. The pride that he displays may not be dismissed simply as arrogance or vanity. Arthur's particular position as head of the Round Table demands that he exemplify the heroic code of his community. To do so he must place a high value on personal honor and act accordingly. Simultaneously, however, Arthur frequently exhibits arrogance and pettiness in his behavior. An example is his attack on Ferrier when Ferrier rightly advises Arthur not to endanger the British campaign by foolishly risking his life before the walls of Metz. But at the same time Arthur's pride is the source of both his strength and weakness, his magnificent achievements and tragic fall. We cannot imagine Arthur without his pride any more than we can imagine Oedipus without his.

It is this pride, moreover, that is in part responsible for his special kind of tragic suffering. As an exemplary man he possesses an especially acute sense of loss in his tragic fall. His honor recoils at the thought that he should be forced to accept this new state of affairs. Consequently, as Sewall (1954, p. 353) has observed of the typical tragic hero, he is, "more than usually aware of the mighty opposites in the universe and in man, of the gulf between desire and fulfillment, between what is and what should be." The knowledge that he alone is responsible for this new tragic situation compounds his grief, his feeling of alienation from his community. Arthur experiences all of these reflections in the last macro-episode of the poem when he finds himself lamenting the deaths of his beloved knights and blaming
himself for their deaths. Like all tragic heroes Arthur achieves a wisdom and, characteristically, only through suffering.

The broadly tragic nature of the Alliterative Morte Arthure suggests that the classification of it as an epic is inadequate. The poem's somber attitudes toward the values of the heroic life, if not antithetical to the epic spirit, as least present a criticism of its martial ethos. But at the same time the categorization of the poem as a medieval tragedy of fortune does not begin to account for its communal focus on events and the fullness of its narrative details. A more accurate and satisfying description of the Alliterative Morte Arthure's true nature is one that defines the specific kind of tragedy that results from the destruction of the epic hero: in short, the genre of epic tragedy.

The argument for the existence of the genre of epic tragedy has been forcefully advanced by Stanley Greenfield (1963). Observing that critics of the epic have often described certain characters and actions as tragic, Greenfield posits the existence of epic tragedy as a separate genre of narrative poetry. More specifically, he demonstrates how epic tragedy differs from dramatic tragedy in the depiction of its social community, its tragic hero, and the tragic emotions that

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5 Greenfield, 1963, pp. 91-112. As the following references indicate, I am deeply indebted to Greenfield for his analysis of epic tragedy. In my analysis, however, I attempt to extend Greenfield's observations about the epic tragedy of Beowulf with specific points about the Alliterative Morte Arthure, a very different sort of epic tragedy than Beowulf.
accompany his fall. The Alliterative Morte Arthure's treatment of its story is best appreciated if we read it as an epic tragedy.

One of the most distinctive features of the Alliterative Morte Arthure as a species of tragic narrative is the strong sense of community that exists between Arthur and his knights of the Round Table. Unlike the Arthurian romances that are contemporary with it, the Alliterative Morte Arthure maintains an almost exclusive focus on the martial exploits Arthur and his men undertake and the consequences of their struggles. As a result the poet clearly establishes the social bond that unifies Arthur and his men in the common purpose of maintaining the honor and well-being of the Round Table. Everything that happens subsequently in the poem is concerned in one way or another with this shared ideal.

The poet begins to establish the heroic bond between Arthur and his knights in the opening summary episode of the poem. After he catalogues Arthur's conquests through Europe and Scandinavia, the poet gives us a scene of Arthur and his men hunting in Wales followed by a reference to Arthur's founding of Caerleon as the seat of the Round Table. These details at once suggest that the Round Table is a cohesive social community centered around Arthur. The actions that follow in the rest of the poem--the Roman challenge to Arthur's sovereignty, the council of war Arthur convenes to decide whether or not to wage war against Lucius, the British departure for Europe, the various campaigns Arthur carries out in France and Italy, and so on--all trace the unwavering devotion that Arthur and his men feel for one another as they
battle for the preservation and prestige of the Round Table. As the
noble founder of the Round Table, Arthur not only epitomizes its values
of physical prowess, honor, and loyalty to one's fellows, but he also
represents its hope. As long as Arthur presides over the Round Table,
the British social order flourishes.

As the chief representative of British culture, Arthur's tragic
fall profoundly affects the fortunes of his entire nation. Unlike the
fall of the hero of dramatic tragedy—the fall of Agamemnon, Oedipus,
Lear, and many others—Arthur's catastrophe signals the destruction of
an entire civilization. The poet presents this idea very forcefully in
the scene of Arthur's reckless behavior outside the walls of Metz.
Frightened by the prospect of Arthur's death, Ferrier admonishes him to
take care of himself for the sake of the Round Table.

"Sir," said Sir Ferrer, "a foly thowe wirkkes,
Thus naked in thy noblaye to neghe to pe walles,
Sengely in thy surcotte, this cete to reche,
And schewe pe within, there to schende vs all.
Hye vs hastylye heyynne, or we mon full happen,
For hitt they the or thy horse, it harms for euer."

(11. 2432-2437)

The civil war that concludes the poem translates Ferrier's fear into a
reality. The circumstances of Arthur's death seals the Round Table's
fate. Caerleon has been destroyed by Mordred's mercenaries, Arthur's
knights have been slaughtered in battle, and Arthur dies without off-
spring. Although Arthur does live long enough after he kills Mordred
to order the deaths of Mordred's children and appoint Constantine his
successor, the poet gives us hope for the future of the kingdom. He
makes no allusion to Arthur's future return. "The death of Arthur," as
Greenfield (1963, p. 95) puts it, "carries in its wake the end of the Round Table and the way of life it symbolized."

At the same time that he is bound to his heroic community by sharing common interests and ideals with his knights, Arthur is also bound to the cosmic forces of fate and fortune. Throughout the poem Arthur repeatedly expresses the belief that all human actions are controlled by God's will. A typical example is his reply to a messenger who has just informed him that Ewain Fitz Henry has been wounded in a skirmish with the Romans:

"Crist be thankyde," quod the Kyng, "and hys clere Modyre, That ȝowe comforthed and helpede by crafte of Hym selfen; Skilfull skomfyture he skiftez as Hym lykes; Is none so skathlye may skape ne skewe fro His handez. Desteny and doughtynes of dedys of armes, All es demyd and delte at Dryghtynez will. . . ."

(11. 1559-1564)

These sorts of speeches, ironically, carefully prepare for Arthur's prophetic Dream of Fortune, which contains the archetypal image of the wheel. Arthur's ride on the Wheel of Fortune, especially at the mercy of Fortune's unpredictable moods, is unequivocably an image of his bondage to cosmic forces. When he makes the tragic decision to place himself on Fortune's wheel, he dooms himself.

The particular form that Arthur's bondage takes is also characteristic of epic tragedy. Arthur's tragedy does not estrange him from the world in exactly the way the dramatic hero's does him. Greenfield has described this important tonal differences between the epic and dramatic hero's tragic fate:
Although all epics do not present an identical relationship between man and cosmic forces, they reveal a hero who, however much he may, like Gilgamesh and Adam, rebel, is conscious of his bond with the sometimes bondage to those forces. Destiny seems to brood over the vast abyss of epic life and subsume human will to its purposes. Tragic drama, on the other hand, while informed by a cosmic sense, denies, it seems to me, an intimacy between the universe and its hero. The hero's rebellion is against unknown or immeasurable powers (Greenfield, 1963, p. 96).

This distinction, moreover, explains the relatively calm note on which the Alliterative Morte Arthure ends. Although Arthur has watched the Round Table destroyed in the civil war with Mordred, he is still able to die fairly peaceably because he is able to discern and accept God's hand in his fate:

"I thanke þe Godes, of Thy grace, with a gud wyll, That gafe vs vertue and witt to vencows þis beryns; And vs has graunteðe þe gree of theis gret lordes. He sent vs neuer no schame, ne schenchipe in erthe, Bot euer þit þe ouerhande of all ðer kynges. We hafe no laysere now þese lordys to seke, For one laethely ladde me lamede so sore; Graythe vs to Glasthenbery--vsegaynes non ðer-- Thare we may ryste vs with roo and raunsake oure wondys. Of þis dere day werke, þe Dryghtten be loued, That vs has destayned and demyd to dye in oure awen."

(11. 4296-4306)

This passage along with Arthur's repeated references to God's destiny shaping events points to another important feature of Arthur's tragedy: we do not have to explain Arthur's disaster as the result of evil or sin (Greenfield, 1963, p. 98). Unlike dramatic tragedy which devotes considerable time to developing the hero's hybris, the Alliterative Morte Arthure spends relatively little time establishing Arthur's moral
imperfections. Although he presents Arthur's proud display outside Metz and wars of conquest in Tuscany, the poet does little more than allude to Arthur's moral shortcomings. He focuses most of his attention on Arthur's continual struggle with events. Arthur is, of course, guilty of pride, but his pride hardly accounts for his tragic fall in the poem. Arthur falls, as the poet takes pains to demonstrate, as a result of his desire to ride Fortune's wheel and the cosmic principle of change symbolized by its movement.

In the absence of any strong indication of moral obliquity, the cause of the epic hero's tragedy is found, ironically, in his devotion to the positive ideals of the heroic code (Greenfield, 1963, p. 100). Unlike the hero of dramatic tragedy who largely acts contrary to the social code of his society, the hero of epic tragedy devotes his life to his social code. Antigone, Macbeth, and Alceste all suffer because they violate their societies' codes of behavior. Hector, Beowulf, and Roland, on the other hand, all suffer precisely because they honor theirs. The source of Arthur's tragedy, ultimately, is this latter sort of behavior. In devoting himself wholeheartedly to the heroic code that demands a life of honor, devotion to one's comrades in arms, and continual martial exploits, Arthur fails to consider the cosmic law of transitoriness that demands his eventual destruction on the field of battle.

It is this sense of evanescence, last of all, that gives the Alliterative Morte Arthure the elegiac tone of epic tragedy. In the long course of the poem's action, the poet provides numerous scenes that
treat the themes of man's mortality and the brevity of his accomplish-
ments (Greenfield, 1963, p. 102). As they emphasize the inevitable
waste of human life in heroic exploits, these scenes also strike an
undeniably tragic note in the poem. A typical one is the poet's moving
description of the dead and dying combatants in the midst of an early
battle between Arthur and Lucius:

So fele fay es in fyghte appon pe felde leuyde,
That iche a ruthe in the firthe of red blode rynnys.
By that swyftely one swathe pe swett es byleuede,
Swerdez swangen in two sweltand knyghtez,
Lyes wyde opyn, welterande on walopande stedez;
Wondes of wale men, werkande sydys,
Facez fetteled vnfaire in filterede lakes,
All craysed, fortrodyn with trappede stedez,
The faireste on folde that fygurede was euer,
Alls ferre alls a furlang, a thosande at ones.

(11. 2143-2152)
What is particularly telling in this scene is its universality. When
he describes the carnage that the young men of both armies suffer, the
poet is intimating that the glories of the heroic life are short-lived
and ultimately full of misery.

The fullest tragic expression of these themes, however, appears
in Arthur's decline in fortunes in the last macro-episode of the poem.
In one episode after another Arthur gradually experiences the full
tragic consequences of living the heroic life. His initiation into
the transitory nature of his great achievements comes when he discovers
the corpse of his beloved Gawain. It is in this episode that Arthur
realizes that he owes his accomplishments to Gawain, the source of his
strength and comfort in his world:
"Dere kosyn o kynde, in kare am I leuede,
For nowe my wirchip es wente and my were endide;
Here es þe hope of my hele, my happynge of armes—
My herte and my hardynes hale one hym lengade,
My concell, my comforthe, þat myn herte.
Of all knyghtes þe kynge þat vndir Criste lifede,
þou was worthy to be kynge, pofe I þe corowne bare;
My wele and my wirchipse of all þis wyrld riche
Was wonnen thourghge Sir Gawayne and thourghge his witt one."

"Allas!" said Sir Arthure, "Nowe ekys my sorowe;
I am vttirly vndon in myn awen landes.
A, dowttouse, derfe dede, þou dueillis to longe!
Why drawes þou so one dreghe? Thow drownnes myn herte!"

(11. 3956-3968)

A further irony, of course, is Arthur's reflection that he should
suffer his tragic loss in his own land rather than on a foreign battle-
field.

The most complete statement of Arthur's tragic loss, however,
is his final lament for his fallen men. In this soliloquy Arthur ex-
periences the full weight of the transient nature of man's life and
heroic accomplishments. When he loses his men, Arthur has lost his
kingdom, his life. He feels himself isolated, helpless, a weak creature
exposed to the elements:

Than he stotays for made and all his strenghe faylez,
Lokes vpe to þe lyfte and all his lyre chaunges,
Downne he sweys full slyther and in a swoun fallys,
Vpe he coueris one kneys and kryes full often:
"Kynge comly with crowne, in care am I leuyde
All my lordchipes laue in lande es layde vndyre,
That me has gyfen gwerdons, be grace of Hym sel en,
Maytenyde my manhede be myghte of theire handes,
Made me manly on molde and myaster in ethe,
In a tenefull tym this forfere was reryde,
That for a traytoure has tynte all my trewe lordys.
Here rystys the riche blude of the Rownde Table,
Rebukkede with a rebawde, and rewthe es the more!
I may helples one hethe house by myn one,
Alls a wafull wedowe þat wanttes hir beryn;
I may werye and wepe and wrynge myn handys,
For my wytt and my wyrchipe awaye es for euer;
Off all lordchips I take leue to myn ende.
Here es þe Bretons blode broughte out of lyfe,
And nowe in þis journde all my joy endys."

(11. 4271-4290)

This expression of grief is wholly characteristic of epic tragedy. The core of the hero's experience in epic tragedy is the sense of community he shares with his fellow warriors in battle and peace. When he loses them, he loses his reason for living.

The funeral scene that concludes the Alliterative Morte Arthure underscores the elegiac character of Arthur's story. His burial like those of Enkidu, Hector, Beowulf, and many other noble heroes is the scene of unrelieved sorrow:

The baronage of Bretayne thane, bechopes and othire,
Graythes them to Glasthenbery with gloppynande hertes,
To bery thare the bolde kynge and bryng to þe erthe,
With all wirchipe and welthe þat any wy scholde.
Throly belles thay ryngge and Requiem syngys,
Dosse messes and matyns with mournande notes:
Relygeous reueste in theire riche copes,
Pontyficalles and prelates in precyouse wedys,
Dukes and dusszeperis in their dule-cotes,
Cowtasses kneelande and claspadhe theire handes,
Ladys languessande and lowrande to schewe;
All was busked in blake, birdes and othire,
That schewede at the sepulture, with sylynde teris--
Whas never so sorowfull a syghte seen in their tym.

(11. 4328-4341)
GLOSSARY

Aesthetic Distance: the psychological relationship that the writer has with his narrative, particularly the perspective he has toward it as he contemplates it dispassionately as a work of art.

Closure: the art of filling up a gap or space of unnarrated time left between two narrative segments in a narrative.

Completitive: a term that refers to the narrative function of a flashback or flashforward: a flashback or flashforward is completitive when it fills in gaps in the narrative.

Episode: a relative term that refers to "any natural unit of action, any section into which a plot may be with some reason divided." The non-critical term "incident" refers to an episode.

Episode, Macro: an enlarged unit of narrative content composed of a number of episodes.

Episode, Integral: an episode that is essential to preserve the causal necessity of the plot, the rationale for how events unfold.

Episode, Non-Integral: an episode that is not, strictly speaking, necessary for preserving the plot's causal necessity. Non-Integral episodes frequently serve the purpose of artistic embellishment in a narrative.

Extent: the duration of the action or dramatic situation of a flashback, flashforward, or parallel narration.

External: a term used to designate the temporal relationship of a flashback or flashforward with the primary narrative. A flashforward or flashback is external if its extent is entirely outside the temporal boundaries of the primary narrative.

Flashback: a movement of the narrative into the past for the purpose of recalling an action or dramatic situation earlier than the present moment of the narrative.

Flashforward: a movement of the narrative into the future to evoke an action or dramatic situation that will occur after the present moment of the narrative.
Incident: see Episode.

Internal: a term used to describe the temporal relationship of a flashback or flashforward with the primary narrative. A flashforward or flashback is internal if its extent is entirely inside the temporal boundaries of the primary narrative.

Linkage: a term referring to the state or manner in which two units of narrative content are joined together.

Motivation: the variety of narrative relationships that bind together episodes, macro-episodes, and passages of description and commentary into a particular plot.

Motivation, Artistic: the use of an episode, macro-episode, or narratorial comment for an artistic effect other than those of furthering the action of the plot.

Motivation, Backward and Forward: these two terms describe the way in which the reader learns the reason for two episodes' being linked together. In any two consecutive segments of narrative, when the first segment motivates the second, the linkage is called forward motivation. If, on the other hand, the reader must wait until the second segment to discover the motivation for the first, the linkage is called backward motivation.

Motivation, Plot: the inclusion of an episode, macro-episode, or narratorial comment in the narrative for the purpose of constructing a unified plot or for describing a character of his actions.

Narration: the writer's artistic manipulations of the details of his story, e.g., the way he orders the episodes and macro-episodes of the plot, the amount of space he devotes to narrating different events and describing characters and settings, the patterns of imagery he develops, and so on.

Narration, Parallel: the temporary displacement of the narrative to narrate a separate but simultaneous action or dramatic situation.

Narrative: a series of real or imaginary intercalated episodes and macro-episodes bound together with passages of description and commentary into a particular order by various causal, temporal, and thematic relationships.
Narrative, Primary: the main story line of a narrative, its central action presenting the protagonist's shaping of events.

Narrative Segment: a general term referring to any discrete unit of narrative. A narrative segment may be an episode, a macro-episode, or a passage of description or commentary.

Narrator: the voice or presence relating a narrative.

Narrator, Absent: a narrating medium that has no apparent personality. An absent narrator creates the impression that the narrative is unfolding by itself.

Narrator, Covert: a speaking voice whose personality remains undisclosed, whose opinions and attitudes about the narrative are ambiguous or unknown.

Narrator, Overt: a speaking voice that possesses a distinct personality and reveals clear opinions and attitudes about the narrative.

Plot: the writer's discriminatory selection and arrangement of the details of a story, along with his own additions and modifications, into a particular order to achieve certain artistic effects. A plot should have a beginning, middle, and end.

Point of View: the physical or ideological perspective from which a narrative is narrated.

Reach: the amount of time that a flashback or flashforward moves away from the present moment of the narrative.

Reiterative: a term that refers to the narrative function of a flashback or flashforward. A flashback or flashforward is reiterative when it repeats a part of the narrative already presented.

Story: the incomplete accumulation of logically, thematically, or temporally related incidents and details about a particular event or the actions of a character concerned with that event.

Structure: the general framework of a literary work, the outline of its component parts.

Structure, Macro: a term referring to the conception of a literary work as a framework or macro-episodes, the work's few major actions.
Theme: the central, unifying idea of a literary work, the abstract concept that is represented concretely in action, character, and image.

Voice: the form of expression a narrative takes, the patterns of speech used to communicate its events and dramatic situation to the audience.
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