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The Supernatural and the Limits of Materiality in Medieval Histories,
Travelogues, and Romances From William of Malmesbury to Geoffrey Chaucer

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

by

Matthew Theismann McGraw

December 2013

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The Dissertation of Matthew Theismann McGraw is approved:

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Supernatural and the Limits of Materiality in Medieval Histories,
Travelogues, and Romances From William of Malmesbury to Geoffrey Chaucer

by

Matthew Theismann McGraw

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in English
University of California, Riverside, December 2013
Dr. John M. Ganim, Chairperson

The supernatural, broadly defined as magic, marvels, wonders, and miracles, might at first seem to be wholly separate from material goods and the cultural practices surrounding material objects; miracles occur solely through divine grace, and magic would logically seem to involve making things happen without using physical force. Yet, in the depiction of the supernatural in medieval texts, miracles, marvels, wonders, and magic all depend in some way or another upon material goods.

At the same time, the supernatural has a recursive effect upon materiality in the texts in this study; it functions as an amplifier of signification. Objects become invested with more meaning because they are associated with supernatural power. Places, particularly in the travelogues and romances, become fraught with marvels and horrors that reflect the concepts with which the lands are associated. Kings and heroes exceed human limitations in ways that are both explained and authorized through their connection with supernatural power. In fact, the texts suggest that these objects, these kings and heroes, could not have the effect that they do without divine sanction or

magical intervention. The presence of magic becomes a means of defining the point at which unadorned materiality or unassisted humanity does not suffice.

This study seeks to explore the medieval concept of materiality, and of its limits, through these connections between the natural and the supernatural. By examining the various depictions of the material and the immaterial both in texts that are, to one degree or another, fictions and in texts that treat the supernatural forces as quite real, a hagiography, a bestiary, an herbal, and a text of ritual sorcery, this dissertation attempts to understand the period's view of the material world, the immaterial forces that affect it, and humanity's role in relation to both.

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Introduction

The supernatural pervades medieval and early modern texts. The histories are full of references to relics and to the divine support for kings. Travelogues present bizarre creatures, mystical locations, and wonder-working artifacts. Romances employ fantastic objects and otherworldly locales. Whatever the source or nature of the supernatural elements, one of the effects of the supernatural in the texts is the same; it extends the ability of material objects to convey meaning.

The presence of the supernatural serves to give added weight to the expression of concepts and relationships. Magic functions as an amplifier of significance. Aethelstan's sword in the *Gesta Regum Anglorum* is not merely a weapon; it is an expression of his ability to defend his country and of the divine favor that supports his reign. Bertilak's girdle in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, because of its purportedly magical properties, serves both as a preserver of life or virtue and a means of underscoring Gawain's failure. In romances, magical items and supernatural events expose the limits of human nature and interrogate the ways in which identities and relationships are explained and expressed by objects. In histories, they define the qualities of a people or a king and serve to reify the less tangible aspects of kingship and cultural identity. In the travelogues, they are able to define differences between lands, to add an exuberant quality that attempts to capture through hyperbole the wonder that can be found in the mundane encounters with different people, places and customs; magic in the travelogues can also be used to explore the variations in nature that make strange people and customs seem either monstrous or

fantastic. That reaction to difference is then, in a sense, concretized into magical things and effects.

That reification allows intangible qualities to be examined more easily, and, consequently, allows for an interrogation of the limits of materiality itself. For example, stories in which knights are supported by magical creatures or objects call into question the degree to which chivalric ideals could ever be made manifest in the world. Sir Launfal's ever replenishing purse in *Sir Launfal* calls attention to the dependence of nobility upon material possessions for their status and identity, yet his transformation into an apparently eternal symbol of chivalry through the intervention of the fairies calls attention to the limits imposed by material goods. The text implicitly asks to what degree mortal men, dependent as they are upon other humans for the production of their material goods and limited by the constraints of mortality could achieve the perfection required by the chivalric values. Likewise, the dog-headed men and other part human figures mentioned in the histories and travelogues call into question the distinction between the animal and human, particularly when they are shown to have the capacity for Christian salvation.¹ The texts dealing explicitly with magical rituals and effects offer similar kinds of confluences of the material and immaterial, particularly in the herbals and texts of ritual magic.

The latter texts, those dealing directly and specifically with the practices of magic and the descriptions of the supernatural, offer a special vantage point for considering the depiction of the supernatural in the histories, travelogues, and romances. The texts that explicitly describe the supernatural as real, without the distancing effect of an averted

gaze that is directed toward entertainment, the description of faraway places and people, or the crafting of a story of kingship, place the more canonical texts in the cultural and intellectual context of an on-going debate throughout the medieval and early modern period about the limits of humanities' capabilities and the nature of man's relationship with the immaterial.

While other studies have discussed the role of magic in medieval texts, particularly its role in romance, that subject has not been examined through the relationship between the material and the immaterial in quite the same way as it is presented in this study.² The issues of the supernatural surrounding the depiction of kingship in histories and the effects of the marvelous in travelogues have received more attention, but there, too, the manner in which the deployment of supernatural effects echoes the treatment of the supernatural in texts about magic has not been fully explored. The parallels between the narratives and the texts purporting to provide magical rituals suggest an underlying commonality in the understanding of the limits of the material world.

In order to examine the medieval conception of the material, this study will engage in an examination of the relationship between people and things and concepts that is at the heart of material culture studies. In literary theory, material culture studies embraces the structuralist approaches of Saussure and Lévi-Strauss in which the patterns of systems of signs and signifiers or code and message reveal both the function of individual acts of communication and the broader systems in which those acts take place, each informing the other. In this case, the depiction of relics both shapes our

understanding of a particular relic and the broader depiction of the relationship of all relics to the speaker and to the audience. It employs Foucault's interrogation of the location of power within those discourses to attempt to understand why certain texts are so insistent upon depicting supernatural forces in association with particular groups, especially kings, heroes, and saints, and Said's inquisition into the depiction of "the other" to explain why other texts are so seemingly horrified and enthralled by the possibility of the supernatural in lands outside of their own.

That ambivalence and concern over the location of power courses throughout medieval romances, histories, and travelogues, which are fraught with tension over the limits of materiality and the expression of immaterial power. They depict heroes who can literally be super-human through the power of a magic ring (with all of the reflexive anxiety such power would provoke in men who might find themselves tested in physically demanding combat). They show more orthodox religious discourses over the power and sanctity of relics and the way they are sometimes abused (in the case the beaten statue of Saint Nicholas). The narratives return time and again to a state of uncertainty about what the relationship between the material and the immaterial might mean.

This concern is not limited to the narrative texts. As Caroline Walker Bynum notes in *Christian Materiality*, "the Western discourse about images never completely lost an awareness that their physicality is a problem, that manifesting the divine in the material is at least a paradox, at worst an invitation to idolatry" (45). Bynum traces the history of the responses to the use of the physical to represent the divine through the

iconoclasm of the Byzantine empire and the Eastern “iconophiles” such as John of Damascus who declares that images “make manifest that which is hidden (qtd. in Bynum 46) and the nuances of the responses in the West that tend to focus upon the degree of appropriateness of various types of matter.

Part of that discourse appears in the histories, travelogues, and romances that use the supernatural in their narratives. These texts engage in a number of different ways in the discussion over the limitations of the material world and the significance of the intrusion of the supernatural, and many of the narratives’ depictions of those limits are intriguingly similar to those of the texts about the supernatural. That argument is by no means suggesting that the authors of romances, travelogues, and histories had ever read a book of ritual magic. However, the same cultural forces that shape the perception of the limitations of the material in herbals, lapidaries, works describing the *ars notoria*, and bestiaries shape the ideas that the authors of the more canonical works would have had about the role that magic could play in their writings. Setting the sets of works against each other allows both sets of texts to be considered within the cultural conception of function of the material and the immaterial.

That conception of the nature of the magical and the miraculous, and of the divine and the demonic, and their relationship to material reality is an issue of contention that stretches back through the medieval period to antiquity, and that nature forms a constant backdrop to the debate over the proper role of magic and certain forms of the supernatural in human life.

However, parsing that discourse can be difficult at times. In the course of the argument over the propriety of magic, the terms deployed to describe magic and the supernatural become fungible and contested. To call something “magic” was to place in a suspect category, potentially influenced by demons, a problem which some intellectuals of the period avoided by couching certain forms of magic as occult, hidden, aspects of ordinary nature. As Richard Kieckhefer points out such “[n]atural magic was not distinct from science, but rather a branch of science. Demonic magic was not distinct from religion, but was a perversion of religion” (9). Even that simple dichotomy becomes complicated when referring to actual practices, though. Kieckhefer notes that when discussing the formulae in the Wolfsthurn and Munich handbooks, people in the period might have called them “‘charms’, ‘blessings,’ ‘adjurations,’ or simply ‘cures,’ without calling them specifically magical (9). That set of distinctions does not begin to separate the use of Christian prayers in a ritualized fashion from invocations to pagan deities or to provide a term for a ritual that can either produce a vision of God or, if performed in a slightly different fashion, produce gold.³

For the sake of simplicity in this study, I employ the term “supernatural” as a catch all to cover all of the intrusions of immaterial forces to produce changes in the material world, recognizing as I do that the term does not cover the nuances of the vocabulary of the medieval period. “Immaterial”, too, can have a range of meaning, which I will employ both to discuss the “magical” forces the narratives depict and the social forces for which those supernatural events are often coded substitutes. I use “magic” when referring to the charms, blessings, and other ritualized attempts to

influence the material world through immaterial forces, recognizing that there is a considerable over-lap between those practices and prayers. Where it is possible, I employ the terms “wonder” and “marvel” that Augustine uses in *The City of God*. As Jacques LeGoff describes the term in *The Medieval Imagination*, a “marvel” was in a sense a natural form of the supernatural, a middle term between the divine supernatural (that is, the *miraculous*, which depends solely on God’s saving grace) and the diabolical supernatural” (12). It is, in effect, an intrusion of the divine will into regular workings of the world. The fact that such an ambivalent term exists as an ambivalent point between the processes of nature and a manifestation of God’s will outside of the normal workings of the world is an indication of the degree to which the intellectuals of the period wrestle with the dividing line between the material and the immaterial.

Perhaps the most prominent and influential writer on the subject, Saint Augustine of Hippo addresses the issue of that relationship in *City of God*. His thesis is that all things, natural, marvelous, and miraculous, stem from God's will; as Benedicta Ward puts it in *Miracles and the Medieval Mind* "Augustine argues that there is only one miracle, that of creation, with its corollary of re-creation by the resurrection of Christ" and that the miraculous occurs "not in opposition to nature but as a drawing out of the hidden workings of God within a nature that was all potentially miraculous" (3). Thus, all of the miracles, wonders, and marvels discussed in the following chapters could be thought of as “natural” in the sense that they are an aspect of the divine plan.

If that were the final comment upon the subject, it would seem to remove any possibility of dispute over the source of every material or immaterial quality. Not only

would the proper role of magic and divine intervention in life and narratives be addressed, but so would the proper basis and expression of virtue, gender roles, class identity, and chivalric status, limited and corrupted only by the failure of men and women to choose to follow God's will.

Yet, for all of Augustine's arguments, though they are logical and properly aligned with doctrine, the common conception of those immaterial qualities is most often expressed and defined through an uneasy relationship between material goods and concepts, not through reference to an unmediated expression of God's will. It is as though the real experiences of life defy Augustine's smooth intellectual ordering of the universe; with his arguments, Augustine papers over a critical divide between concepts that recurs throughout much of medieval literature.

That disconnect between the doctrinal understanding of the source of value and the quotidian experience of it drives the depiction of identity in the histories, travelogues, and romances. Knights, to take an example from the romances, are considered great as much because of their immaterial virtues as their physical prowess; their loyalty, their faith, their *gentillesse*, form the core of the narratives' explanation of their value as knights. However, they are defined through their physical deeds and possessions. Although the *Knight's Tale* praises Theseus' "wisdom and chivalrie" (865), the proof of those qualities, of his greatness is that "Ful many a riche contree hadde he wonne" (864). Sir Launfal is defined by his possession of wealth and servants or their lack of them. Gawain's worth as a knight stems from his virtue willingness to sacrifice himself for his duty, but it is demonstrated through the description of his armor and his participation in

the test in the Green Chapel. Yet, the unadorned social power of the actions of these figures is apparently insufficient for the narratives. In order to convey the full extent of their worth, the texts must also adorn them with emblems and expressions of supernatural power.

The medieval period is not alone in wrestling with this divide between the material and immaterial. Indeed, the function of the material in life and literature is an on-going question in the modern and post-modern world. Since it is such a central issue to many cultures, there are useful considerations in the works of certain anthropologists and linguists, even when they do not deal directly with medieval societies. This is particularly true of Marcel Mauss and John Frow in dealing with exchanges of physical goods, Geary and Miller in dealing with the conception of materiality and value, and Edward Said in the discussion of the treatment of foreign cultures and peoples.

In dealing with physical goods, modern linguistic and anthropological theories acknowledge that goods can be invested with additional social significance in addition to their physical presence. Objects serve as signifiers, as bearers of meaning, whether they are magical or mundane. That there could be an additional accretion of meaning through the imposition of the supernatural is a logical result of those theories.

That accretion becomes critical in discussing the exchange of goods in *The Gift*, where Marcel Mauss explains that there is no transfer of goods that is not also freighted with social meaning, to the extent that there really is no such thing as an altruistic act at all. When a gift is given, there is an expectation of reciprocity involved with it. Things exchanged are really giving a social force and energy to the relationship in addition to the

material effect of the goods themselves. The item being given, the wealth being exchanged, is almost secondary to the immaterial effect upon the parties involved.

Mauss describes shamanism as an attempt to exchange goods in return for services, drawing the spiritual into participation in the exchange of goods and obligation. In discussing religious practices in Northeast Siberia and West Alaska, Mauss notes that the exchanges between men "the 'namesakes' - the homonyms of the spirits, incite the spirits of the dead, the gods, things, animals and nature to be 'generous towards them'. The explanation is given that the exchange of gifts produces an abundance of riches" (14). A similar effect is found in medieval Europe through tithing. Goods are given, in that case, to "Holy Mother Church", the temporal stand in for God, and her agents, the clerics. Mauss claims that this desire to make an exchange of goods with spirits for economic benefits is "a natural one. One of the first groups of beings with which men had to enter into contract, and who, by definition, were there to make a contract with them, were above all the spirits of both the dead and of the gods" (16).

Expanding upon Mauss's earlier work, Frow in *Time and Commodity Culture* describes the way in which kula shells are exchanged within Maori society. In some ways, the kula serve as a form of money or any other type of material gift. They reinforce bonds of community and of social acceptance within and between groups. However, in the case of these shells, there is a personal quality to the exchange that goes beyond the function of simple material goods. The shells are individually identifiable. The givers know which ones have been given to them by particular people, and when they are passed on through the network of exchanges, that history is conveyed with the

shell. Shells that were owned by important or powerful people, that have the history of association with their lives, are more valuable. There is thought to be something of that person exchanged with the material object so that they convey the "patina" of association of their owners. In its more common usage, patina refers to the gloss or glaze created on the surface of an object through handling or through being buried for extended periods of time. Mauss and Frow use it metaphorically, though, to describe the social energy that becomes invested in an object through the belief that it is significant.

This process of accretion applies to the creation of rituals and charms, such as those described in the *Lucnunga* and the *Liber Iuratus Honorii*. The former is an herbal, filled with recipes and rituals for preventing and curing disease, and the latter is a text of ritual magic. Both texts provide methods for separating a material object from its everyday context and to add some immaterial quality to it; space is given over to the process of sacred creation; time is sacrificed to the attempt to bestow supernatural. Most critically, though, material wealth is destroyed in order to influence the immaterial. For example, the *Lucnunga* describes a process of curing and preventing disease in cattle that requires the use of frankincense, samite, and the act of tithing what may be as much as a third of the value of the cattle.⁴ Similarly, one of the rituals of the *Liber Iuratus Honorii* that describes the process for creating a sigil of God for use in later rituals requires the suffumigation of the sigil with an incense composed of amber, aloe, and red and white rockrose resin, gum mastic, and frankincense, all of which would have been quite expensive.

It is in the use of material objects and wealth in particular that this exchange of things in return for power is most interesting. Time is evanescent already, and space is always subject to imposed meaning and the construction of social relationships.⁵ That wealth could be used to bridge the divide between the material and the immaterial suggests that there is some awareness of the connection between different types of power, that there is an implicit acknowledgement that those things that already contain the social power implicit in wealth should be capable of being exchanged for a different type of force that manipulates the world. In this sense, the processes of acquiring supernatural power parallels the processes of gaining military force (with its concomitant social control), either through the exchange of wealth for loyalty or through the promise of fealty (whether to a superior noble or to a demonic or angelic power) for support in ways that echo Mauss' interpretation of shamanism. The supernatural, in this sense, participates in some ways in the economic exchanges of medieval society, at least to the degree that it reflects the same kinds of issues and concerns that are present in other forms of exchange. It is not unreasonable to think, then, that the manner in which the supernatural is used in narratives would interrogate issues of social construction, of class, of gender, and the use and meaning of wealth that are addressed in more mundane ways; the presence of the supernatural allows those matters to be amplified through the addition of another perspective for commentary.

Other authors have noted similar kinds of exchanges of meaning between the material and the immaterial, though none have engaged in the examination of magic as a category of that type of transaction in quite the way that this dissertation does. For

example, Patrick Geary describes a similar kind of function at work in the production and distribution of relics in the medieval world in his chapter on "Sacred Commodities" in *The Social Life of Things*, in which he claims that the value of a relic depends solely upon the public. If they are believed to be effective, they have value. In his analysis, spiritual authorities enter the process at a later point; they may confirm the authenticity of relics and may attempt to reawaken belief in the power of the relics, but the value is created through a process of social exchange, through a willingness by believers to express belief in the putative power of the object in exchange for material effects (such as healing) or immaterial reward. He points out further that there is an additional social element to the way in which relics are employed in society when he states that the Church hierarchy exerted a great deal of effort to control the distribution and use of relics through the processes of legitimization of them and through the physical control over the objects, distributions that involve political and economic power.

That process of control is not dissimilar to the depiction of relics in some of the histories of the period. In that case, the authors act to reinforce the power of their contemporary present monarch by suggesting that there is an extended tradition of contact between God and previous kings. However, that same process extends a kind of control by proxy over a king's power by suggesting that his power depends upon his relationship with God as expressed through proper doctrinal behavior and through the presence of relics.⁶

Daniel Miller examines that investment of meaning in goods in the modern world in *Materiality*, though he emphasizes the point that the presentation of those two states

reveals a great deal about the modern and post-modern understanding of the relationships between the material and the immaterial.⁷ He asserts that it is the immaterial that occupies a privileged position in the attitudes of many cultures around the world, a position that influences beliefs about the relative importance of material goods, of spirituality, of relationships, and even of economics.

The desire to find a definition of humanity through material objects is an issue that runs throughout the texts in this dissertation. It is significant in the use of and transaction in relics in the histories, and that desire forms the basis of much of the treatment of magical goods in the discussion of the romances. However, the attempt to find humanity through its reflection in the world around the audience is most significant in the travelogues examined in Chapter Three. In those texts, the people and cultures encountered in the narratives are almost treated as objects, as things to be found, examined, and considered.⁸ They differences are often typified or reified into encounters with particular places, objects, or people, but the central question often returns to the question of humanity, of the degree to which those “others” are like the audience of the narrative.

Likewise, this same set of assumptions operates in the descriptions of kings in William of Malmesbury’s *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, where the relative worth of kings is defined by the number and quality of relics they have surrounding them. It affects the assumptions about magical objects carried by heroes and used in rituals; in the *Lucnunga*, for example, holy water forms the basis for a number of potions, as if the only way for a set of herbs to have power over disease is to combine them with something that is already

vested with supernatural authority, already in a liminal position between the material and the immaterial. Interrogating the assumptions that lie behind the depiction of these kinds of beliefs in the narratives and the practices surrounding herbalism and ritual magic can expose some of these underlying beliefs about the significance of the material and the immaterial.

In the medieval world, those anxieties regarding the status of the immaterial and the material are expressed in a multiplicity of ways, but the explicitly magical and supernatural objects offer a particularly trenchant entry point into the discussion. Magical techniques, such as using God's name in talismans or summoning circles, point to an area which provokes the kind of anxiety that Miller discusses, a question about how much what one does in the material world can affect the immaterial.⁹ That moment finds its literary parallel in the depictions of heaven in sermon cycles, such as John Mirk's *Festial*, where there is an extraordinary emphasis placed upon the description of worldly goods and their effects upon the souls standing to be judged. The converse, where the immaterial is brought into the material world also finds expression in the texts of the period. The anxiety over the treatment of the consecrated host and the depictions of the attempts by non-Christians, particularly Jews, to desecrate it is a reflection of the concern over the uses to which boundary-crossing goods and expressions of the immaterial can be put.

The first chapter of this dissertation, "Supernatural Texts and Material Practices" shall examine the ways that those issues of materiality appear in texts dealing with magical practices in the period. The chapter will principally focus upon the practices that

appear in the *Liber Iuratus Honorii*, a fourteenth century text of ritual magic, the *Lucnunga*, an Old English herbal which is usually dated to the late tenth to mid-eleventh century and which was apparently in use in various manuscript forms through the Early Modern period, the *Legenda Aurea*, a collection of stories about the saints and the miracles associated with them, and the *Physiologus*, a bestiary that presents strange and marvelous explanations of the lives of animals. The purpose of the examination is to expose the assumptions about the interaction of the material and the immaterial in the texts in order to serve as a basis for the analysis of the more traditional literary and historical narratives in the following chapters.

The second chapter, "Kingship, Relics, and the Implications of Supernatural Power", will take that treatment of objects, particularly of relics and the recipes for warding off disease and supernatural troubles, and extend them to an examination of certain histories, particularly William of Malmesbury's *History of the English Kings*, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*, and William of Newburgh's *History of English Affairs*. These texts offer the possibility of discussing the manner in which the association of magical objects with kings influences the definition of kingship and the understanding of the ways in which the idea of material rule is necessarily wedded to intangible qualities, such as the proper execution of law and to the supernatural forces that govern the world. Ernst Kantorowicz discussed the dual nature of kingship as early as 1957 in *The King's Two Bodies*, but that study, and those following it, have not exhausted the discussion of the issue and have not focused upon the

manner in which objects invested with the supernatural serve to reinforce the ruler's position as a mediating figure between the material and the immaterial.

This interpolation of kings as figures between the different states of being, between different types of power, is seen throughout the histories. In William of Malmesbury's *History of the English Kings*, for example, William's portrayal of English history firmly links the success of kings with their relationship with the divine. The kings begin to experience success with Oswald, who breaks with paganism, breaks the pagan idols, and embraces widespread Christianity. Perhaps not surprisingly for a text written by a monk, it is at this point that the connection between the divine and the regal becomes most explicit, for the relics of Oswald's body work a variety of miracles involving healing, connecting proper kingship with the manifestation of God's grace in the world. It is not enough for Malmesbury to say that Oswald is a good king, that Oswald introduces effective laws or defends his kingdom well. In order to convey the full sense of the greatness of the history of the English monarchy and the efficacy of this particular king, he needs to add an additional, immaterial set of qualities to the physical object that is his corpse.

The transformation of a ruler into a relic suggests potential parallels for further examination, both in the ways in which the acceptance of the power of relics and their position within a system of economic and social exchange mirrors the manner in which the immaterial political and social power becomes invested in kings and in the manner in which their power is called into question.

That investment of meaning occurs in different ways in the travelogues and the elements of the histories that deal with the monstrous. Chapter Three, "Known Lands and Distant Wonders", examines with the ways that John Mandeville's *Travels*, and Gerald of Wales's *Journey Through Wales* and *History and Topography of Ireland*, and Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* all depict foreign lands and peoples in ways that use the supernatural to interrogate the difference between the "self" and the "other". Figures such as the half man and half ox or the couple who are transformed into wolves in *History and Topography of Ireland* serve to raise questions about the degree to which those foreigners are really human, while the ways that other supernatural marvels of the land, ranging from dust that kills poisonous reptiles to an island in Connacht where corpses do not decay, interrogate the nature of the material world and the degree to which its rules can vary.

That same kind of explicitly supernatural material occurs in the medieval romances, and Chapter Four, "Magic, Identity, and the Boundaries of Possibility", examines the ways in which that genre employs magic, particularly in the depiction and exploration of noble identity and chivalric values. Chaucer's *The Franklin's Tale*, the Pearl Poet's *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and *Sir Orfeo*, and *Sir Launfal* all call attention to the expected behavior of knights and ladies, and magic places those qualities in starker relief than would be possible through more mundane goods and events. Sir Launfal's purse draws attention to the dependence of the nobility upon the production of wealth, the girdle forces Gawain to confront the limits of his honor, and the situations

made possible by conjured and quasi-material goods test loyalty and devotion in the stories of Sir Orfeo and Dorigen.

By involving the supernatural, though, the texts raise questions about the degree to which those virtues and values could ever be upheld by unaided humans. They are, in effect, challenging the degree to which immaterial ideals could be made manifest in the world by framing them in the context of the extraordinary and fantastic. Here, too, magic and the supernatural are thoroughly invested in the examination of the mundane world through the creation of difference. The characters in the romances become an idealized, heroic "other" against which the members of the audience would implicitly measure themselves.

The use of magic in romance has been discussed by other authors, though the subject is far from exhausted, and some of those authors explicate the effect of the presence of magic in ways that are usefully similar to my own. Jacques Le Goff describes the presence of the supernatural elements as a type of resistance to the "official ideology of Christianity" in *The Medieval Imagination*, a reading that can help to explain the similarity of the effects in literature of natural magic and divine intervention; the two forms of the supernatural are, in effect, contesting over primacy and occupying the same cultural space.

Geraldine Heng, in *Empire of Magic*, discusses the romantic elements in texts ranging from Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History*, through Chaucer's works, to Mandeville's *Travels*, making some rather important points along the way, especially in manner in which she likens the romantic elements of Mandeville's works to the medieval fascination

with relics, with the attempt to bring something distant in space and time into the presence of the bearer or the reader. This description of the way that the material presence of the text or the object can serve to convey meaning employs similar kinds of theoretical approaches, particularly in her concern with material culture, to those that form the basis of this dissertation, though I extend them in different, though related, ways.

Perhaps the authors whose focus is closest to my own, though, are Michelle Sweeney and Corinne Saunders. Sweeney describes some of the ways that magic is used to interrogate identity in *Magic in Medieval Romance*. While Sweeney makes a number of important points about the way in which magic challenges characters' roles in communities and relationship, she describes magic as a kind of gauge or governing test, a measure by which characters either succeed or fail at maintaining virtue, govern emotions, or fulfill their obligations of class and social position. Sweeney does broaden that discussion beyond the individual to discuss the role of magic in challenging constructions of identity, but she reaches some different conclusions than I do regarding the relationship between identity and materiality (particularly regarding Launfal's status at the end of *Sir Launfal*).

Saunders' article "Violent Magic in Middle English Romance" suggests a similar use of the supernatural to that of Sweeney, though her concern is with the additional possibilities the magic offers to the narratives. It allows the power of knights to be challenged by women, "to employ force, to abduct even the best of knights" (Saunders

235), thus allowing concepts of identity to be juxtaposed and interrogated in ways that would not be possible without magic.

Neither author connects the use of magic and magical objects to a discussion of the theories of materiality or the existential challenges that magic poses in the romances. After all, these knights in the romances are defined by their ability to confront titanic foes or their resistance (or failure to resist) temptation by supernaturally inflated threats to their virtues. Chivalric identity stands or falls by the actions of those who are supported or challenged by magical events and beings. A world without such foes simply does not allow space for much heroism, which calls into question a host of issues involving the limits of human life and of the opportunities offered by the material world.

This process of amplification of the virtues and foibles of the characters of romances, of the qualities of distance and otherness in the travelogues, and of the characteristics of kingship and governance in the histories allows the presence of the supernatural in the texts to interrogate the limits of the material world and the potentials of human existence. For all that it serves to highlight the difference between the audience's quotidian experiences and their dreams, the supernatural also speaks to the longing that everyone has for something more: for a more comforting and easily comprehensible explanation for why good and bad things happen to kingdoms, for an encounter with something strange and different that would allow the audience to more easily understand themselves, and for heroes and villains who press the limits of human existence and human nature to give the audience a sense of who they could be, if only that dividing line between the material and immaterial could be breached.

End Notes

¹ See Bartlett, Robert. *The Natural and the Supernatural in the Middle Ages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 71-110.

² Two studies of particular importance in this area are Michelle Sweeney's *Magic in Medieval Romance* (Four Courts Press, 2000) and Corinne Saunders' "Violent Magic in Middle English Romance" in *Violence in Medieval Courtly Literature: A Casebook*. (Routledge, 2004). The focus that these two critics take differs from my focus upon the ideas surrounding the uses and limits materiality, but their analyses of the purpose of magic in the texts are insightful and serve to illuminate some of the other functions of the supernatural in romances.

³ See my discussion of the *Liber Iuratus Honorii* in Chapter One.

⁴ This specific ritual will be addressed in greater detail in Chapter One.

⁵ See particularly Lefebvre *The Production of Space*.

⁶ This issue will be addressed in greater length in Chapter Two.

⁷ See particularly his discussion in his first chapter of the book.

⁸ Edward Said takes up this discussion extensively in *Orientalism*. See my discussion in Chapter Three.

⁹ The *Liber Iuratus Honorii* provides just this kind of instruction in its discussion of summoning "airy" spirits or spirits of the compass.

Chapter One: Supernatural Texts and Material Practices

At first glance, the supernatural would seem to be the antithesis of the material. Divine intervention, prayer, wonders of the natural world, spirits, and magical rituals have causes beyond the physical world and would seem to have little to do with material culture. In the medieval (and, to a degree, the modern) conception of the universe, God stands outside of temporal, transitory things, and it would seem logical that by implication all of those forces that are “beyond” nature would partake of that same immateriality.

Yet, in the texts of the medieval period, both the works of fiction and the texts that treat issues of miracles, spirits and magic in a serious fashion, the material and the immaterial cannot be so easily divided. Although the supernatural and the immaterial receive a great deal of attention and are presented as though they are superior to the material world, all of the encounters with the immaterial, the descriptions, and the effects that they produce are thoroughly enmeshed with objects, an entanglement that tells us a great deal about the medieval English understanding of the material world, about the period’s anxiety about the limitations of materiality, and about the frustrated desire to exceed those limits.

The magical rituals examined in this chapter, drawn from the *Liber Iuratus Honorii* (a fourteenth century manual of ritual magic) and the *Lacnunga* (an eleventh century herbal), all depend upon physical objects to produce supernatural effects. They require incense, gems, expensive cloths, tools, gestures, and locations, a vast array of physical vehicles for gaining access to non-physical power. Then, too, the effects that

they are attempting to create, even the mystical ritual to provide a vision of God in the *Liber Iuratus Honorii*, are enmeshed in physicality. As one prominent example, the vision of God the text promises is a physical vision, not an intellectual understanding or a spiritual embrace that transforms the soul of the worker.

Similarly, hagiography, which among other things, explores expressions of God's power, shows a deep affiliation between material objects and the divine. In fact, not only are expressions of divine power wedded to material things, but the very conception of God and the afterlife, which would seem to the point at which one would pass beyond the material entirely, depends upon physical goods.

It is not just the use of physical goods as analogies for the immaterial that forms such connections; the methods of employing divine power do so, too. Prayer, after all, is almost immaterial, and it might seem to be the vehicle for making a contact with the divine that should be least fraught with issues of materiality. Yet, in the hagiographical text examined in this chapter, *The Golden Legend*, prayer rarely appears without some physical object, whether the relics of the saints or the material embodiment of God through the crucifix, and it is always associated with physical effects in this text.

The final central text of this chapter, the *Physiologus*, approaches the issue of materiality from a different direction, though fantastic animals. In that text there are descriptions of creatures that push at the limits of physical forms, that are said to ascend to heaven and that can reshape and renew their material bodies. Although these creatures are in some ways part of the natural world, they have wondrous elements in their descriptions that challenge the limitations of mortality and capture the desire in the period

to probe at the edges of materiality. As stand-ins for humans, they express the audience's desire to push past the limits of mortality, even as they serve as reminders of the differences between both animals and men and the temporal and the immortal.

Those issues about the limits of the material world and the interwoven nature of the supernatural and the physical are echoed in the romances and the more fantastic elements of the travelogues histories. While those texts are treated in greater depth in later chapters, some of the consonances between the texts about the supernatural and the romances, histories, and travelogues are addressed here. There are moments of striking similarity in the treatment of wealth between the story of *Sir Launfal* and the *Liber Iuratus Honorii*. The treatment of sacred and supernatural places is similar in the *Lacnunga* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The peculiar qualities of men and beasts that are rendered as liminal figures, partaking in both the material and the immaterial, in *Physiologus* echoes displays of regal power in the *Gesta Regum Anglorum*. Even texts that would seem to hold antithetical attitudes toward man's ability to influence and control supernatural powers, the *Liber Iuratus Honorii* and the *Legenda Aurea*, offer a number of points of consonance in the treatment of the relationship between the material and immaterial, from the use of wealth as a signifier of the presence of the supernatural (or of the ability to influence such unseen powers) to the significance of objects that have a pre-established, socially imposed association with the immaterial, such as patens, altar cloths, church yards or graves.

These patterns of common elements running through the texts that are specifically about the supernatural reflect the broader understanding of the interrelationship between

the material and the immaterial world across the medieval period in England. They particularly point to the beliefs about the ways that the material world can control and influence the immaterial. At the same time, they demonstrate the perceived limits of the purely material. Those moments when the texts spend a great deal of effort describing the supernatural reveal states of anxiety over the limits of the physical world, over mankind's ability to control life and to face the challenges of living. The appearance of those same patterns throughout fanciful romances, travelogues, and histories is a strong indication that these states of anxiety are not limited simply to those audiences that are deeply and specifically invested in magical or religious practices but are, in fact, rooted in the concerns of the culture as a whole.

The texts presented in this study certainly do not offer an absolutely comprehensive view of all of the attitudes toward the material world, and the breadth of the genres of texts about the supernatural does not guarantee that the audiences of the romances, travelogues, or histories would have agreed entirely with the treatment of materiality in all of the texts, especially not obscure ones such as the *Liber Iuratus Honorii*. There are dangers in making broad generalizations about texts even from the same period, and there may be variations not only among different audiences of a work but also within similar audiences reacting to different expressions of an idea. Even among the religiously sanctioned expressions of the supernatural, there are some moments of resistance to belief in the power of particular sites and relics.¹

Despite the potential differences in belief among and within audiences, there are striking similarities between the most apparently disparate texts. While it might seem

strange at first that a book of magic rituals and a collection of stories of saints' lives would offer similar kinds of warnings against recklessly engaging in the attempt to influence supernatural forces, the *Liber Iuratus Honorii* opens with a description of the ways that Satan has influenced Popes, Cardinals, bishops and prelates (I.1-8) and later describes the dangers of pagan magic (16-18), while the *Legenda Aurea* provides the story of a saint who apparently causes the death of an innocent man through his expulsion of seven demons and who has to correct error (15).² These are not identical sets of dangers in the two texts, yet they share an attitude of wariness regarding the attempt to actively influence the supernatural.

There are significant differences of nuance among the texts, of course. Where the *LIH* employs exotic goods simply as another set of tools for invoking the supernatural, the *Legenda Aurea* evinces an ambivalence toward wealth, for riches are often depicted a source of corruption and dangerous materiality even though rare perfumes and rich clothing are a sign of God's presence (as in the visions of Saint Agnes). In both cases, immaterial potency, for good or ill, is figured in material terms and is, to a greater or lesser extent, located within the material objects themselves, yet the understanding of what those goods are and what role the material world ought to have in human life is somewhat different.

The differences among texts are not the only potential problem in drawing inferences about patterns of beliefs and the understanding of materiality. In addition to the breadth and varieties of audiences, there are inherent dangers of conflating attitudes in different centuries of the medieval period. The treatment of sacred and magical objects

in the eleventh century may not be the same as it is in the fourteenth, particularly given the changes in the treatment of social class and the various treatments of wealth in other genres in that time frame.³

There, too, though cautious parallels can be drawn among the texts in certain areas. The similarities between the *Liber Iuratus Honorii* and the much earlier *Lacnunga* in terms of the ritual destruction of expensive goods and the use of ecclesiastical objects and other goods that have a prior association with the supernatural suggest that the *Liber Iuratus Honorii* may be drawing upon a shared set of traditions and concepts of the material. It is possible that there are some broadly held and reasonably constant attitudes toward the supernatural from the eleventh through the sixteenth centuries, even though there are necessarily distinct differences between and among times spanning centuries.

The point of examining the parallels among the texts of this chapter and between the *Liber Iuratus Honorii* and some of the romances of the period, or *The Golden Legend* and the treatment of kingships, or the *Physiologus* and the travelogues, and the *Lacnunga* and all of the texts, is not to find absolute concurrence of ideas and attitudes. It is to note broader patterns of belief about the material and the immaterial, to find points of consonance among the texts that are specifically about the supernatural and those texts from other genres.

Generally speaking, there are similar types of belief expressed about the means by which a person or a thing can transcend the apparent limits of the material world and partake in greater power or significance. The use or presence of objects of associated

with wealth and social status is one of the most stable of these connections. It is as though the symbols of social power represented by wealth translate into symbols of spiritual power. This transformation varies from the use and, indeed, destruction of expensive ingredients for incense while summoning spirits in the *Liber Iuratus Honorii*,⁴ sacrifice of goods for healing and the creation of protective charms in the *Lacnunga*,⁵ and the burning of special ingredients employed during the resurrection of the phoenix in the *Physiologus* to the somewhat more stable presence of gold and gemstones in reliquaries and in the descriptions of saints and God in *The Golden Legend*. As discussed in the introduction, the anthropological theories of Marcel Mauss describe this process as a kind of shamanic technique in which the transaction between the material world and the immaterial one is mediated by the same kinds of exchanges that occur between men.

That simple process of an offering and a response does not fully explain the reason why such exchanges can occur, though. That is, it is seemingly strange to think that a material object could be used to affect an immaterial thing. John Frow's elaboration of Mauss's ideas helps to explain the reason for this belief. The goods in question already possess a kind of immaterial potency because of their use in the social transactions between men. In everyday experience, gold and other forms of currency (such as the kula shells the Frow describes in *Time and Commodity Culture*) possess the ability to change men's minds, to alter friendships, to convince others to part with goods, to shift the dynamics of power between people.⁶ That power helps to explain why it is that *expensive* ingredients are required for these rituals, these processes of material and

immaterial exchange. The costly goods already possess a kind of liminal status; they partake in both the materiality of objects and the immateriality of men's desires.

This liminal nature also explains the repeated presence of social status as a significant factor in the ability to create immaterial effects. All four of the texts call for the presence or the actions of men who are separated from common life in some fashion. The *Liber Iuratus Honorii* requires the assistance of a priest to hear the ritual worker's confession and to sing three offertories and say a mass for him, during which he must recite specific prayers.⁷ The sheer amount of time required by the text to conduct the required rituals and the need for elaborate rituals of purification also require the ritual worker to possess considerable resources, including social class and the ability to be separated from distractions, which are markers of a kind of social power that separates the potential wonder worker from the quotidian before the rituals even begin. Similarly, the *Lacnunga* requires the use of the Eucharist and blessed objects for certain cures and the recitation of a mass for others. The martyrs of *The Golden Legend* are clearly marked figures through their devotion and their willingness to sacrifice their bodies for their faith and for God's glory. The liminal status of saints, martyrs, and confessors is further reinforced in the case of the kings of the history texts; when good and effective kings are not described as actual saints, they are still associated with the divine, often through the presence of relics. Even the *Physiologus*, a text which might more naturally seem to focus upon marginal places and beasts, also includes a reference to men who stand removed from the quotidian; in various versions of the phoenix myth, a priest of Heliopolis is required either to assist the bird in its preparations for rebirth or to be

present after its conflagration.⁸ The social status of the men involved in the rituals, a status which gives men the ability to influence other men, appears to be equated with the ability to influence supernatural forces.

Objects, locations and times that are separated from the norm in some fashion form a similarly demarcated common element among the texts. The Eucharist is the principal medieval example of this type of material, since it is quite literally the dual-natured object at the heart of Christian faith. Yet, certain times and places have a similar kind of ambivalence attributed to them, either through ecclesiastical sanction (such as the canonical hours) or through other forms of association with the supernatural. Places such as churchyards and graveyards are marked as locations of liminality, a connection that calls to mind similar locales in the narratives, such as the eeriness of Gawain's journey through the wilderness and arrival at the Green Chapel in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. These are locations that are marked by otherness, that are already freighted with more than material significance, and the texts about the supernatural seem to use them as a kind of bridge between common life and supernatural power.

The descriptions of fantastic places and strange beasts function in a similar fashion. They demarcate the limits of man's understanding of himself and his role in the world; where the presence of death in graveyards or the unfamiliar beasts and people in foreign lands appear, man's anxiety over his understanding and ability to control his life is increased. That fear that such places and animals may be beyond man's control just as they are outside of his knowledge may be the driving factor behind attributing mysterious power to those things. In effect, the supernatural powers ascribed to faraway places and

to strange animals is a reification of the power of fear. It may be that this anxiety is part of the demand for magic that, for the ability to influence the supernatural through *human agency*, that flourishes despite clerical condemnation.⁹

Otherness is not the only factor that marks the potential power of material objects to control the immaterial, though some of the other elements of the list might make it appear to be so. In fact, one of the most potent, fungible, and easily overlooked means of negotiating the apparent distance between the material and the immaterial and gaining that kind of control over the supernatural would be quite familiar to the audiences of the various texts: literacy and the use of writing. Writing is often used to harness the power of the ineffable in the rituals and descriptions of the texts of the chapter. In *The Golden Legend* where scripture is used to considerable effect and where written lists of sins are mysteriously erased through the intercession of saints. Books of magic appear in the histories and the narratives, where the texts are the means by which the characters gain knowledge and influence over the immaterial.

The most obvious point, that all of these sources are books and that they necessarily participate in the transfer of knowledge through the material presentation of ideas, should not be ignored. They inherently bridge the divide between the mysterious and the familiar and between the material and the immaterial by containing concretized ideas. Books themselves acquire a kind of supernatural potency because of the potential power of the knowledge they contain. Whether they are books about magic, about foreign lands and strange customs, or about the lives of saints, writing itself becomes the locus of supernatural potency through their association with the immaterial.

The Power and Limits of Human Agency in the *Liber Iuratus Honorii*

Of all of the texts that are specifically about the supernatural, the *Liber Iuratus Honorii* is in many ways the most deeply invested interrogating the physical limitations of the world and exploring the ways that the apparent divisions between the material and the immaterial can be challenged. Yet, the text contains a seeming contradiction. The *Liber Iuratus Honorii* is nominally mystical and ascetic in focus, but most of the operations described by the text involve techniques for gaining various forms of temporal power. This apparent inconsistency, and the elaborate system of names and associations that form the basis for the magic that underpins the rituals, make the text ripe for an examination of the definition of materiality in the period.

The *Liber Iuratus Honorii* (hereafter, the *LIH*) itself is a text of unknown authorship and geographical provenance, although Gösta Hedegård and Richard Kieckhefer have made arguments that locate it to no earlier than the twelfth century. In his introduction to the critical edition of the text, Hedegård dates the oldest surviving manuscript to the first half of the 14th century, though he points to evidence that limits its production to no earlier than the twelfth century (12), largely agreeing with Kieckhefer's dating of the text, though not the specific basis for Kieckhefer's analysis (250 – 265).¹⁰ In his critical edition of the *LIH*, Hedegård provides a description of the texts and a thorough editorial apparatus for the different versions as well as several arguments

surrounding the likely dates for the versions of the Latin texts and the early sixteenth century English translation.¹¹

The important issue for this discussion is the fact that this is a text that is in circulation in England by the early 14th century, during the period of the composition of most of the romances considered in this study and at least Mandeville's *Travels* from the travelogues. Again, this is not to say that any of the authors would have agreed wholeheartedly with the text in its aims, or, even less likely, that they would have ever come into contact with a book about ritual sorcery. However, at least for those texts, the *LIH* represents some of the ideas that were present in the period regarding the limits of the material world and the means by which those limits could be surpassed.

Those limits are directly addressed by the ritual that is nominally the focus of the text. It promises to grant the ritual worker a vision of God while the worker is still alive, to make the immaterial (God) perceptible to the material speaker, to bring the participant to the limits of the material world and to allow him to peer beyond it. Yet, much of the text is devoted to potential variations of the ritual. Those variations putatively allow the ritual worker to ask for and gain permission to control spirits of various types, such as the planetary angels and spirits (CIII-CXI). Those spirits, in turn, are supposed to provide the worker with wealth and the power to control the physical world: to know all sciences, to know the hour of one's death, and even to know the means of mixing and transmuting bodies and elements (CIII.4, 7), so that while the *LIH* is nominally about the highest of spiritual aspirations and the removal of the ritual worker from the apparently corruptive

influences of the mundane world, the focus of most of its attention is reflexive, directing the reader back to the material.

In this, the *LII* shares a great deal in common with the romances of the period in which knights and kings are motivated by their regard for their honor, loyalty, or duty, even while the expression of those noble principles is dependent upon material possessions and power. For example, Sir Launfal's plight is defined by his lack of material possessions, and he is only redeemed through the supernatural production of wealth and martial assistance. Aurelius of *The Franklin's Tale* is driven by material desires, yet lacks the power to fulfill them without resort to magic. Sir Orfeo's plight is perhaps the most significant of all. The abduction of his wife represents a challenge to his personal honor and a threat to his status as a king; after all, his subjects could hardly believe that he is capable of defending his kingdom and asserting his power over them if he is unable to protect his wife. Sir Orfeo's identity is thus dependent upon his ability to control the physical world around him, and in many ways, his descent into the underworld is an attempt both to restore his identity as a king and as a husband and also to gain control over the most terrifying aspect of the division between the material and the immaterial, namely the end of life when we (we hope) pass from being physical beings with a knowable, manifest reality to an uncertain state.¹²

Like the narratives, the *LII* promises a means of reaching around the obstacles between the material and the immaterial, of gaining control over the ungovernable. It promises potential wealth and control over the material world, of a glimpse past the end

of material existence, and of a means of separating oneself from an ordinary (and limited) life and of operating in the realm of the fantastic.

Another of the striking characteristics that the *LIH* shares with the narratives is the degree of distinction that the narratives draw between the worthy participants and the quotidian folk. While for the romances, the heroes are, in part, set apart through markers of noble or chivalric status, the *LIH* uses a different set of characteristic signs, closer to those found in the *Legenda Aurea*, focusing upon qualities that are more in keeping with the scholarly or religious life than those of the martial heroes. It demands an ascetic life, a devotion to the pursuit of knowledge, a particular kind of piety.

Yet, there are points at which the two sets of demands in the *LIH* and the romances overlap, at least in some of the narratives. Sir Orfeo is set apart from the quotidian by the power of his musical ability, by the strength of his devotion to his queen, and, to some degree, by his royal status. The *LIH* demands similar strength of devotion to a cause, an equal skill in a kind of craft (in creating magical signs and repeating lengthy prayers correctly), and an almost hermit-like state in the potential practitioner. King Horn is likewise marked by spiritual potency as well as physical and martial prowess, as the *LIH* asserts that a magician must be. Just as Gawain's confrontation with the Green Knight is preceded by a journey through wilderness and by overcoming natural obstacles and monsters, so too does the *LIH* demand that the would-be magician face a transformative, winnowing process.

That process is quite extensive. Gösta Hedegård summarizes the ritual in his introduction to the text, pointing out that the procedure for acquiring "divine permission

to obtain a beatific vision of God" consists of a series of purifying and preparatory prayers and rituals, including confession, abstinence from contact with women and people who are ill or wicked (29-31). Hedegård notes in passing that eight of the prayers are preparatory, "where as the ninth (XV) is the first prayer intrinsic to the operation" (31). Taken together, the description of these rituals instructs the person intending to conduct the operation "to spend well-nigh all his time praying, fasting, and going to mass for 75 days . . . to perform the proper ritual" (35).

Richard Kieckhefer discusses that lengthy process of purification in the *LIH* in his essay, "The Devil's Contemplatives". While acknowledging the possibility that the rituals of purification could be read in a mechanistic fashion, as a set of purely external actions necessary for the operation of the ritual, Kieckhefer takes "more seriously the occasional suggestion that the magicians' asceticism did transform them, by giving them more intense spiritual energy, a higher spiritual voltage, as it were" (251).

Although Kieckhefer does not specifically identify those suggestions, he may have been referring to the injunctions to avoid corruption and to align one's self with holiness. In the *LIH*'s discussion of avoiding the corrupting influences of women, it claims that Salomon [sic] said, "It is safer to stay in a cave with a bear and a lion than with a wicked woman" (V.2).¹³ Not only is the operator enjoined to avoid such "bad things", but the injunction is given divine sanction through the reference to the preeminent scriptural magician of the Old Testament, Solomon. That statement is followed by an injunction to "always and continuously petition God through these most holy prayers, which follow, because it is said, [it is] 'The blessed servant, who, with the

coming of the Lord, is found to be vigilant” (V.7).¹⁴ These are not temporary measures to be discarded after the operation; these are transformative injunctions that set the magician apart from common people, to give them, as Kieckhefer would have it, a different “voltage”.

Spiritual potency aside, those injunctions serve to limit those who can properly possess magical power. Women are excluded from the use of the rituals (they could hardly abstain from contact with themselves), as are those who do not possess the wealth or social power to abstain from contact with “wicked” people. Those are not the only set of limitations, though. Those who wish to obtain supernatural power through the rituals of the text must possess the proper religious identity and the correct kind of knowledge

The third chapter of the first book of *LIH* promises to those who are proper Christians that through these workings they shall know all things, present, past, and future. Pagans, it claims, are unable to constrain the loyalty of spirits of the air and the planets, “for those who have the wrong faith, have their works come to naught (III.16-18).¹⁵ Similarly, Jewish magicians are excluded because they do not follow the Christian faith and promises that their invocations cannot come to effect because of that deficiency” (III.22).¹⁶

That passage assures the would be Christian magician that he is the heir of former knowledge, providing a kind of transfer of authority from the past that is roughly equivalent to the process of justifying royal power and cultural identity through reference to the deeds of Brutus and Aeneas. The *LIH* makes that claim by stating, “*Nam magus per se philosophus Grece, Hebraice scriba, Latine sapiens dicitur*”, for it is said that the

wise man becomes what he is through the Greek philosopher, the Hebrew scribe, and Latin wisdom. The *LIH* continues, *Sic ars magia a 'magos' dicitur, quod est 'sapiens', et '-ycos', quod est 'sciencia', quasi 'sciencia sapientum', cum in ipsa efficiatur homo sapiens, et per hanc sciuntur omnia presencia, preterita et futura"*, that the art of magic is called great or wise [- from either magis or magus], because it is similar to 'knowing', and '-like',¹⁷ because it is 'knowledge', just as "wise knowledge, with in itself it makes a man wise, and through this they are able to know all things past, present and future.

This set of claims really does several things simultaneously. It justifies the text's assertion that power can be found in the knowledge that it provides through its association with the wisdom of past generations. It limits power to those who can read and gain knowledge from the sages of the past (though the fact that the text is in Latin does a fair job of creating that limitation already). It provides a means of drawing distinctions even between the simply literate and those who seek to control the material world by gaining knowledge of the entirety of its workings through its promise of granting access to all knowledge, past, present, and future.

Again, this quality of distinction between the common run of folk and those who wrestle with the limits of the material world are found in both the *LIH* and the narrative romances. Gawain, Launfal, and Orfeo are not simply knights. They are willing to sacrifice themselves in ways that put them outside of the run of ordinary noblemen. Gawain is the only one of Arthur's knights who steps forward to defend his lord and the honor of the court (even if he hesitates). Launfal takes an oath to keep silent. Even if he later breaks that pledge, he still places his reputation and his life in jeopardy, running a

risk from which many men might shy away. Significantly, he does not reach his true apotheosis until he literally leaves this world behind to become a kind of eternal chivalric figure.¹⁸ Orfeo's decision to leave his throne, to wander desolate, and eventually to enter the underworld is, in many ways, the epitome of this kind of transformation. He is literally willing to do that which no one else will or can do.

That those who would want to be magicians should wish to be set apart in the same kind of way that narrative heroes are is, perhaps, not overly surprising, either. In imitating the distinctions of class and status reserved for chivalric heroes, the putative mages might hope to gain the social power reserved for that elite group. That tendency is shared in the few depictions of magicians that can be found in narratives. The narrator of *The Franklin's Tale* states that "yonge clerkes that been lykerous / To reden artes that been curious / Seken in every halke and every herne / Particuler sciences for to lerne" (1119-1122), as though it were a common practice for clerks and scholars to seek power and distinction from non-material sources when "were he ther to lerne another craft" (1127). Then, too, the "maister" of natural magic produces scenes of "knyghtes justyng in a playn" (1198), of hunting, of Aurelius's lady, of, that is, all of the things that the mage, or the man hiring the mage, might want and be *excluded from* (either as a clerk or, in the case of Aurelius, one who is so love struck that he cannot fulfill his usual role). In both texts, mages want some distinction, some suggestion that their difference is as valuable as the difference between knights and commoners or between the most worthy knights and their less potent peers.

That both types of texts, the romances and the book of ritual sorcery, share this quality of setting a life apart from the ordinary in order to gain influence over the immaterial world suggests some significant elements of the medieval attitude toward the nature of the difference between materiality and the immaterial. The immaterial is privileged as the source of material excellence, yet the various texts stress the exceptional nature of contact with, much less control over the supernatural. Such contact is uncommon and difficult to achieve, which has the concomitant effect of increasing the value of achieving the ends set forth by the text. Difficulty and scarcity increase the apparent value of any act, and the lengths to which one must go to be the perfect hero or to use the rituals of the *LIH* further reinforces the primacy of the immaterial.

Yet, that superiority does not necessarily create an absolute division between the two states. The immaterial is difficult to control and govern. To do so requires tools, physical elements. This reliance upon the material to bring about a change in immaterial power suggests a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between the two states than it might first appear. It is worth remembering that, as much as the Church repeatedly stresses the fallen nature of the material world, the idea of salvation also requires materiality. It is only through Christ's physical incarnation that man is redeemed. Thus, while the world is corrupt, it is also the means by which man is raised to a state of glory.

That attitude appears to be reflected in the underlying assumptions about the interaction between the physical and the spiritual in the *LIH*. Rather than simply

privileging the immaterial, the magical practices seem to be focused upon narrowing the divide between them.

In fact, writing is not simply a means of drawing distinctions between those who are worthy of reaching past the limits of the material world. It is also used as a tool of eliding the differences between the immaterial and the material. As noted above, this is not an unreasonable concept; writing takes immaterial thoughts and the perceptible, though still impalpable, act of speech and turns it into an object. It is quite reasonable, then, to think that the reverse could be possible, that the act of writing could cause a material object to have immaterial potency.

In this, the *LIH* shares a great deal with other texts about magical and mystical practices in the medieval period.¹⁹ In fact, there is a branch of “magical” arts devoted specifically to gaining knowledge and spiritual power through writing, the *Ars Notoria*. Hedegård describes it as “a method of gaining knowledge about things human or divine from God and his angels by means of mystical prayers, invocations, and magical figures”(10). Generally speaking, the practices of the *Ars Notoria* involved the creation of certain patterns of writing, upon which the scribe would meditate in order to gain the desired effects. As would seem to be appropriate for a technique that would be limited to the literate, the object of the *Ars Notoria* is itself distinguished by social markers involving class. Michael Camille points out in “Visual Art in Two Manuscripts of the *Ars Notoria*”, these figures were all designed to promote knowledge of the liberal arts (110-139). He further states, “Whereas much medieval magic involving the inscribing of images or signs and the rituals surrounding them were spells or charms for the usual

humdrum list of human needs – love, health, and harming one’s enemies – the Notory Art was used for a far more elevated purpose than ‘to keep bugs out of the house’” (115). Clearly, this means of attempting to gain supernatural power is of the greatest use to those who do not *need* to resort to magical rituals to keep “bugs out of the house”, those whose basic needs are met and who have the time to pursue issues that are not directly related to survival. It is of use, in other words, to the wealthy.

The creation and maintenance of class distinctions is not the sole purpose of writing in the *LII*, though that issue is certainly present. Writing is primarily used as a means of creating a connection between the material and the immaterial. The act of inscribing the names of God into the “Divine Seal” is one of the principal means by which writing is used to influence the supernatural world. In this case, the purpose of the act of writing is two-fold. It brings God’s presence and power into the ritual through the inscription of his various names, and it uses that power as an instrument for manipulating other supernatural forces.

The practice of using God’s name or names in ritual sorcery has a lengthy history in the medieval and classical world. Julien Véronèse discusses that history in “God’s Names and Their Uses in the Books of Magic Attributed to King Solomon” and notes its use in the practices of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim magical practices. Most significantly, though Véronèse describes the manner in which those names are used. They are not simply acts “of communication: these names embody the Verb par excellence, the creative and efficient language, fragments of which were revealed to

certain people in order to cement a special relationship between them and the divinity” (30).

This idea that the inscription of the names is not simply the equivalent of a prayer or other act of communication is reinforced by the way that the divine name is employed. The description of the ritual for inscribing the names is quite elaborate, unnecessarily so for simple communication. It is worth bearing in mind that the most elaborate rituals in the Church usually involve the celebration of the Mass, itself a means of making God manifest in the world through the Eucharist. It is not unreasonable, then, to think that magical practices influenced by that religious structure would follow a similar pattern. Then, too, the manner in which the *LIH* describes the use of names suggests that such knowledge provides for a means of control over them. The *LIH* draws a distinction between the kinds of spirits that can be commanded, in fact, based upon that kind of knowledge, stating, “Therefore, since it would be impossible to constrain the superior angels the without knowledge about them, we make the names of airy spirits and of the winds of higher priority [for the operation], in order for their superiors to be clearly comprehended, and by which one could be able to subjugate anyone he pleases” (CXVII.1-3).²⁰ While this is not an absolute statement about the power gained by writing a name, it is highly suggestive about the kind of power that names possess. The phrasing in the text is not entirely clear, but the *LIH* seems to imply that either the knowledge of the names of spirits of the air and winds would allow one to gain control over the spirits themselves or would lead to the ability to gain knowledge of higher orders of spirits. In either case, the text does makes the acquisition of names a clear necessity for those who

are attempting to gain control over the immaterial world, and it suggests that the act of writing the name on an object is more than a demonstration of that knowledge.

Such a reading would echo similar practices in other texts about magic. In the *Lacnunga*, one of the rituals calls for the use the paten as a writing surface for the text of a scriptural passages designed to ward off the influences of elves and the temptations of the devil,²¹ furthering the connection between the presence of Christ in the Eucharist and the power gained, transferred or attracted through the act of writing. Veronése quotes a passage from the *De quatuor annulis* that cites that describes the way that names can be added to material objects by adding names, citing, for example, the tops of rings which are inscribed “‘most holy names’ that can, if we have faith in them, bring to heel infernal powers” and the “divine names on the crown-miter that [a] magister has to craft based on the tiara of Aaron”, upon which, “At the very top must be the name “Tetragramaton,” as well as a pentaculum, a graphic sign similar to a seal symbolizing God’s “‘most high name” (41).

As in the *De quatuor annulis*, the creation of the seal in the *LIH* is an essential element in the act of making the connection between God and the material world concrete. It does so through the physical act of inscribing his name makes the immaterial immanent in the world, providing a basis for manipulating the supernatural through physical objects and effects.

Although writing acts as a far more explicit tool for magical practice in the texts about the supernatural, particularly in the *LIH*, writing and texts serve to bridge the gap between the material and the immaterial in the histories, narratives, and travelogues. At

the very least, texts tend to serve as the vehicles for the transmission of magical knowledge. Pope John the XV, according to William of Malmesbury, steals a book of magic from a Saracen in Spain.²² Similarly, the clerks in *The Franklin's Tale* search through books for hidden knowledge. Then, too, the practice of text-based magic used as amulets appears, as Corinne Saunders points out, in *Beves of Hampton*. Saunders notes that, in this tale, a clerk creates a “writ that seems to function as a talisman when fastened around the neck: as in numerous charms, power is inherent in the words themselves” (137). While that moment is one of the clearest analogues in the narratives to explicitly magical practices such as the *Ars Notoria* or the ritual inscription of the seal in the *LII*, the texts of the narratives, travelogues and histories function in quasi-magical ways in and of themselves, making the fantastic immediate through the recounting of a story, taking distant lands and the past, both of which are surely evanescent, and make them knowable, almost tangible, to their readers. In many ways, it would be surprising if writing were *not* viewed as a quasi-spiritual, almost mystical process.

Words are not the only means by which the creation of the Seal embodies the connection between the mage and God. The directions for the creation of the sigil repeatedly stress the relationship of the physical object and God's nature. The text directs the ritual worker to “*Primo fac unum circulum, cuius diameter sit trium digitorum propter tres clavos Domini vel 5 propter quinque plagas vel 7 propter 7 sacramenta vel 9 propter 9 ordines angelorum; set communiter 5 digitorum fieri solet*” (IV.i.1), that is to “First make a circle, whose diameter will be three fingers because of the three nails of God or five because of the five wounds or seven because of the seven sacraments or

nine because of the nine orders of angels, but generally it is the custom to use five digits”. These directions are founded upon the relationship between God and Man and use the cosmological order represented by the wounds of Christ that redeemed man, the sacraments that reinscribe and re-enact that relationship, and the orders of angels through which, in the medieval view of the motion of the planetary spheres, the universe is run, to construct a symbol that can be used to change the human-Divine relationship in a fashion, namely to remove the distance between God and man, to give the operator a vision of God.

The text continues at length, providing quite specific measurements and requirements. The degree of accuracy required in the production of the seal could increase the perception of its value and potency because the exacting measurements could be difficult to achieve, and would thus be rare. That value could also be increased through its association with scriptural or apocryphal figures. In creating the shape of the seal, the *LIH* directs the ritual worker to create a series of geometric shapes, the size and placement of which are related to the divinity or to God’s relationship with man. It states, “Then below that circle make another circle the distance of two barley grains away from the first because of the two tablets of Moses or the distance of three grains because of the three persons of the Trinity. Then, within those two circles in the upper part, which is called the angle of noon, make one cross, which to a small extent enters the inner circle”. The references to Moses and to the crucifixion suggest that even the size and shape of the seal and the figures within it is a recreation of the redemption of man, either under Mosaic law or through the sacrifice of Christ. The text then gives directions

for writing seventy two letters in an equal distance around the circle “*and sic magnum nomen Domini ‘Semenphoras’ 72 litterarum erit completum*” and thus the great name of God, Semenphoras” of seventy two letters will be completed (5), reproducing, at least in the divine name, the presence of God.²³

That, though, is apparently not sufficient to produce a tool by which the angels and spirits can be commanded or by which man can gain direct, visual contact with God. The text does not rely upon simple signification for its effect. It employs a kind of superabundance of signs, as if the greater number would be somehow more convincing to the creator or efficacious in changing the material world. After the careful measurement of the body of the seal, of the circles within the seal, and the spacing of letters around the circle, the text requires the ritual worker to inscribe a pentagon with a “tau” in the middle and to write two names of God, El and Ely. It goes on to give instructions for writing the names of angels, “Casziel”, “Anael”, “Michael, and Gabriel”, to draw a heptagon around those figures, and to write a series of other angelic and divine names (6-10). It gives directions for the color of each of the figures (e.g. “pentagonus fit de rubeo [red] cum croceo [yellow or scarlet] in spaciis tincto, et primus eptagonus de azurio”, etc.) (49), claiming, several pages later, “*Et per hoc sanctum et sacrum sigillum, quando erit sacratum, poteris facere operationes, que postea dicentur in hoc libro sacro*” (52), “And through this sacred and holy sign, which will be consecrated, you will be able to produce the operations, which are spoken of in this sacred book”.

The final assertion of spiritual potency would seem to be a mark of confidence. It appears to remark in a matter of fact fashion that anyone who follows a straightforward

set of rules and practices could gain control over the material world through mediated contact with the immaterial. However, it is preceded by pages of quite particular instructions for prayers, abstentions, and the creation of physical objects with exacting shapes and particular hues, piling layer upon layer of difficulty between the practitioner and the goal. While the process does illuminate the variety of materials that the text professes to believe can influence the immaterial powers, it also appears to reveal a kind of anxiety over the ability of any given person or thing to do so. One unadorned object is insufficient. One person acting in one moment cannot achieve the powers outlined by the text. The text simultaneously asserts the possibility of crossing the divide between the material and the immaterial and renders it almost impossible to achieve. When it does arrive, the appearance of immaterial influence in the material world apparently must be preceded by a plethora of actions and objects that are associated with the immaterial, as if these signifying objects were presenting an argument that the immaterial power really does exist. It is as if the text needs to build belief in its audience through repeated assertions that its goal is possible, that there really is something fantastic awaiting its audience. Elaborate repetition and habituation form the bridge spanning the divide between the material and the immaterial, to move beyond the limits of material, human existence.

This hyperabundance of signs is not limited to texts of ritual magic. Where the *LIIH* differs somewhat from the narratives is in the lengths at which it describes the physical objects through which it attempts to control the immaterial (though the lengthy discourse regarding Sir Gawain's arms and armor and the manner in which his character

reflects the “five wounds” of Christ is an exception to that distinction). Many of the narratives do employ repetition of elements or a superfluity of signifying objects in the discussion of all forms of identity, but these qualities are particularly present in the discussion of the supernatural. The appearance of Sir Launfal’s lover is preceded by the arrival of her handmaids, each of whom is lovelier than mortal women and each of whom is lovelier than the last, as if the audience would not be able to believe or to understand the superlative and supernal quality of her beauty without the repeated assertions of her superiority to those who precede her.²⁴ Gawain does not encounter Sir Bertilak in his guise as the Green Knight in the middle of a pleasant field on the side of a trade route; he journeys through wilderness and winds up in an eerie hollow before reencountering his horrific figure. Even the magician in *The Franklin’s Tale* is preceded by a lengthy discussion of the way that clerks lust after knowledge, and his demonstration of illusions to Aurelius and his brother might well be read as a preparatory prelude to his actions, proof that the material world can be changed by immaterial power.

Despite that seeming anxiety, though, the *LIH* is not backward about promising control over materiality to its practitioners. Although it begins with the ritual to see God, it ends with instructions for influencing planetary spirits and controlling the “airy” spirits, which are spirits associated with the winds from the various directions of the compass. The text states the airy spirits of the east are able to provide gold and carbuncles, to give grace and benevolence to families, to dissolve enmities between mortal men and others, to lift up men in highest honor, and to divide up and carry away infirmities (III.cxix.3). The airy spirits of the west, the zephyrs, on the other hand, are supposed to be able to

give silver, to move things from place to place, to give speed to horses, to speak about the past and present of groups and individuals (III.cxx.3). The airy spirits of the south have natures involving “war and death, to produce dominions and conflagrations” (III.cxxi.3),²⁵ while the spirits of the north “start discord, generate hatred, evil thoughts, theft and avarice” (III.cxxii.3).²⁶ The *LIH* provides further distinctions among the spirits from the directions between the cardinal points of the compass, which often blend the qualities of the cardinal spirits, so that the spirits from between the north and the east “generate . . . joy, peacefully conclude lawsuits, soothe enemies, heal the sick”,²⁷ an apparent diminution of the easterly spirits’ ability to end hostilities completely and a softening of the northerly spirits’ ability to produce discord (which would, presumably include starting lawsuits as well as thefts and conflicts that are *not* sanctioned by legal processes). The text specifically states that the spirits of the cardinal points are the height of good and evil and that the spirits belonging to the air between those points are neither perfectly good nor perfectly evil (III.cxxiii.1-2).²⁸ In providing these spirits with intermediate qualities, with, one might say, a varied moral compass, the *LIH* covers nearly all of the range of interventions that a mage might wish to make in the world, particularly in regard to wealth and to the direct control over people.

The logic behind the focus upon the spirits of the air is driven by the text’s understanding of the relationship between that element and the material world. Air, it claims, “is a corruptible element, liquid and fine, capable of receiving qualities from the rest and is simply spiritual (or invisible) but it is seen considered to be composed solely of itself (or unadulterated)” (III.cxvii.4).²⁹ That complex statement of magic theory

suggests that air partakes of the qualities of both the material world and the immaterial. It appears to touching upon the other material elements to the extent that it can receive qualities from them (presumably that it can be heated, made damp, or that it can carry dust) and that, given the claims made by the text that airy spirits can produce gold and silver, air can influence other elements. At the same time, it is invisible and, to that extent, touches upon the immaterial world. Air serves as a kind of bridge between the two states while being an “*elementum corruptibile*” an element that can be changed and, by following the instructions of the *LIH*, influenced.

With a similar kind of logic, the text goes on to distinguish among different types of spirits that can be controlled and, in doing so, reveals a still further nuanced understanding of materiality. The spirits of the air, for example, can be controlled because “those spirits that are ruled by air take after the qualities of air itself, and therefore we are able to understand their qualities” (III.cxvii.5).³⁰ Thus, because air can be touched and understood, the spirits governed by it can be controlled. Planetary spirits can only be invoked through God’s beneficence,³¹ though their names can be known by man, presumably without such assistance. In this case, too, the text calls attention to their liminal status, for they have physical forms, though those forms are of fire (“*Corpus igneum*”) (CIV.2). They influence the world, though they serve God first and nature second,³² and they can be influenced by man, though only at a greater remove than the spirits of the air. Finally, the text briefly mentions those spirits that serve God in his court and who cannot be conjured.³³ There is, in the description of the spirits and the means by which they are controlled, a kind of logical progression from those that are

closest to the material world and that are, in consequence, most easily influenced, toward the celestial and immaterial.

In the end, though, like the abstruse notions of honor and glory in the narratives, these celestial and immaterial beings are described only so that they can be put to use in the material world. For all of the concern in the *LIH* over the need to achieve physical and spiritual purity in order to petition God for the privilege of binding spirits and receive visions, the real concern in the text is the degree to which man can achieve control over the world and the forces around him.

While the *LIH* offers many abstruse, almost academic possible goals, such as the acquisition of the knowledge of all liberal arts and the understanding of the orders of angels and spirits and their roles in the world, it also has the pragmatic end of using that knowledge to produce wealth and other forms of control over friends and enemies. The text is, in short, about challenging the limits of the material world and the restrictions imposed upon human life. Such a desire for control underlies both the *LIH* and the *Lacnunga*.

The *Lacnunga* and the Healing Power of Sacrifice

Compared with the *LIH*, the *Lacnunga*, a late tenth to early eleventh century herbal,³⁴ is more overtly interested in changing the physical world; its focus is entirely almost entirely upon the prevention and treatment of disease. However, since the ills that it attempts to address were conceived of as rooted in the actions of supernatural forces,

the *Lacnunga* has as much material devoted to the ritual control of the immaterial through material actions and objects as the *LIH*. Indeed, the *Lacnunga* is invested in a particular understanding of the relationship between the material and the immaterial world, one in which mankind is often the victim of powers beyond its immediate perception.

In the world depicted by the *Lacnunga*, though, man is far from helpless. In addition to the saving power of God's grace and the intercession of saints and angels offered by orthodox Christianity, the *Lacnunga* offers its reader the opportunity to challenge the causes of misfortune and illness through rituals and techniques that are only at best tangentially associated with Church doctrine.

That is not to say that the *Lacnunga* does not draw upon scripture, prayers, or consecrated items; like the *LIH*, the *Lacnunga* calls for the use of actions and objects that possess a certain socially accepted spiritual power, some of which are almost part of conventional religious life. To wit, a substantial number of the curative recipes and protective rituals use Christian prayer or blessed objects. Holy water is frequently the basis for restorative draughts, and the sign of the cross and references to angels or evangelists are used as part and parcel of incantations.

This is not a book of prayers, though, and a number of those incantations are addressed directly to the herbs being used or to the imagined causes of the disease.³⁵ The determining factor in the use of all of the elements employed to influence the supernatural appears to be wholly pragmatic, not an expression of religious doctrine. If a particular set of materials is called for, or if a particular set of incantations are supposed to be used, it is because the text claims they will have a specific effect upon the illness

being treated. Unlike the *LIH*, the *Lacnunga* does not present a complex cosmology, nor does it offer a theoretical basis for the function of the elements of the rituals. That does not mean that there is not a set of principles or theories guiding the *Lacnunga*; they are simply not overt or explicated.

In fact, despite the seemingly haphazard presentation in the *Lacnunga*, a consonance exists between the two texts in understanding of materiality; most of the factors governing the use of particular elements in the rituals are the same in both texts. Like the *LIH*, the *Lacnunga* places a great deal of emphasis upon the use of names and sacralized phrases, of physical objects that have prior associations with the supernatural, and, particularly, on the use of scripture as the basis for incantations and rituals that cause the supernatural to intervene in and change the material world. Like the *LIH*, too, the *Lacnunga* employs a number of other components in its rituals that are less overtly associated with the immaterial: markers of social status, repetition of elements within rituals, and song.

The marked level of insistence upon influencing the immaterial through material objects makes the *Lacnunga* ripe for an analysis of the medieval material culture and the limitations of the material world itself. Yet, the history of scholarship on this issue for the text is vexed. A number of scholars, such as C.H. Talbot in *Medicine in Medieval England* and M. L. Cameron in *Anglo-Saxon Medicine*, have dismissed the supernatural elements or attempted to subordinate them to theories about the development of science. The issues of material culture in the *Lacnunga* have been most frequently been approached through attempts to understand the state of medical knowledge of the period,

to frame the text as a vehicle for proto-scientific understandings of the world and to characterize the text in terms of its failure to reproduce modern scientific methods and effects. As Pettit points out, Talbot “was . . . evidently prejudiced against magical and superstitious texts For him [*Lacnunga*] contains ‘nonsense’ . . . and a ‘farrago of superstitions’”.³⁶ Cameron, treating the elements of the text more seriously, discusses a number of recipes for healing salves that could have effects that are recognized by modern medicine as having a chemical basis for efficacy. He explains use of some prayers in some formulae, such as one that requires herbs to be boiled for the length of three recitations of the *pater noster*, may have been substitutes for accurate time-keeping devices.³⁷

These approaches do interrogate the issues of materiality and material culture that serve as the basis for the understanding of the nature of the world in later periods, but they do so only by ignoring significant elements within medieval culture and the medieval conception of the world. To the extent that the author (or authors) and audience of the text in the period were trying to prevent and cure illness, to produce a clear and repeatable result of particular actions, then the comparison between the medieval period and modern scientific attitudes toward materiality are apt. However, it is a mistake to condemn the text, as some modern scholars have, simply because the clarity of its descriptions, the categorization of its contents, and the techniques used to create those effects do not stand in parallel with the modern educational and scientific methods.

Cameron’s investment in the attempt to distinguish between the “real” medical effects and the employment of magical practices tells us a great deal more about the 20th

century beliefs in the preeminence of the material world and the dismissive attitude toward immateriality. Admittedly, he makes an important point about the desirability of not over-reading phenomena as magical when they could be the result of other issues. There are certainly moments when the texts could be interpreted in a number of different ways, and it is important to acknowledge the limits imposed by the texts upon our ability to understand the past.

Nonetheless, such a discussion of the intelligibility or scientific accuracy of the formulae obscures the potential value for understanding the medieval mind. In particular, Cameron's defense of the "pragmatic" uses of prayers as substitutes for clocks ignores the possibility that rituals can serve multiple purposes and that those prayers can tell us something about the medieval conception of the material world.³⁸ In discussing *Bald's Leechbook* and the *Lacnunga* in the context of Ælfric's sermons in "Anglo-Saxon Charms in the Context of a Christian World View", Karen Louise Jolly points out that the medical practices and the workings of divine favor cannot be so easily disentangled in the medieval world view. Jolly goes on to note that the idea that the material and immaterial are two categories cannot be denied, for Ælfric discusses that difference in his sermons; yet, they are not wholly separate in the medieval mind.

Any number of elements of the culture that participate in both the material and immaterial would support Jolly's interpretation. The coronation of a king is simultaneously a secular acknowledgement of the transfer of authority and power and a religious investment of divine sanction for his authority. The sumptuary laws of the fourteenth century combine the wholly material issue of the physical elements of clothing

with the immaterial, though not supernatural, distinctions of class boundaries and identity. In many ways, choosing and wearing a particular fabric, metal or fur becomes a ritual designed to create and reinforce identity, especially when it occurs in a culture in which that performance is entangled with the force of law, itself a materially based and enforced set of immaterial social expectations.

In fact, every culture negotiates the intersection of the immaterial and the material through the issues of class, law, and identity, whether those are overtly understood as having some supernatural basis or not. For the medieval period, in a time when the immaterial is conceived as having an active role in people's lives, whether that is figured as fortune's wheel, divine favor, or demonic temptation, that intersection becomes still more fraught because of the active discussion through narratives and daily discourse about the power of the immaterial.

In texts that deal with the attempts to influence the supernatural, that fraught discussion naturally raises the question of what the material actually is, of the limits of materiality and the influence of the immaterial, to the degree that the definitions of each become subject to a certain amount of slippage.

In the *Lacnunga*, one of the places that such slippage occurs is in the way that wealth is used throughout the text. Expense is perhaps one of the most consistent markers of supernatural potency in physical goods. Even more than in the *LIH*, though, the *Lacnunga* often requires the destruction of the expensive materials in order to create the supernatural effect. To a certain degree, that destruction is pragmatic; these goods are used in medicines that must be ingested or otherwise introduced into the patient for its

healing power to be transferred. However, that is not always the case; there are elements of sacrifice involved in the use of these expensive goods that suggest the kind of shamanic placation of spirits described by Mauss. In the recipes of the *Lacnunga*, there appears to be the attempt to trade expensive ingredients for the immaterial power to produce good health.

Even in those recipes that do not immediately appear to have any association with the supernatural reveal something interesting about the period's conception of the material world. While there could be a number of reasons for requiring expensive ingredients (e.g. to limit the number of times the cure could be tested and, thus, to limit the challenges to the author's authority; to suggest that health is the province of the wealthy; etc.), any such list must depend upon the perception that expensive goods are somehow different from quotidian ingredients, that they are invested with mystery because they are foreign or social power because they are scarce, desirable, or associated with the members of the upper class who can afford them. Whatever the particular circumstances, the presence of costly goods in the attempt to treat illness at least suggests something about the belief in the power of rare and expensive material goods to effect change.

Two such cures occurring early in the text both use pepper as a medicine for the eyes. The first states bluntly, "An eye-salve: wine and pepper; put it in a horn, and in the eyes when you want to rest" (5). The second is quite similar and directs the reader to "take the lower part of strawberry and pepper; put it in a cloth; wrap it up; put into sweetened wine; drip one drop from the cloth into either eye" (5). The direction for the

first would appear to be a bit perverse; it would be rather difficult to rest with pepper in one's eye. The resulting tearing might actually help the patients' eyes to cleanse themselves, but there are cheaper alternatives that would have the same effect. Simply eating fresh horseradish or slicing onions would produce the same quantity of tears, without the possibility of getting a coarse bit of peppercorn in the eye.

The only quality that pepper does not share with those two common foods is that it is expensive. Christopher Dyer places the cost of pepper in the late fourteenth century in a class of spices that would have cost between one to six shillings per pound, rather expensive, given that he estimates the daily wage of a building worker in the same period to be around four pence per day.³⁹ These two recipes taken alone could seem simply to be an odd use of a spice, but these are far from the only recipes that call for extraordinary amounts of wealth to effect a remedy.

A more definitively supernatural remedy demonstrates a similar understanding and use of expensive ingredients. In a ritual for curing lung diseases in cattle, the directions in the *Lacnunga* require the reader to “place upon glowing coals [a plant (which Pettit suggests may be hound's tongue), fennel and *cassuc* [rushes⁴⁰] and shot-silk taffeta and frankincense; burn it all together on the windward side; let it smoke onto the cattle” (97). In effect, the *Lacnunga* is directing the reader to suffumigate cattle with the smoke created by the destruction of wealth.

However, it is not the destruction or the expense of the ingredients alone that suggests that there is more at play than the physical properties of the incense or cloth. The directions for the ritual also require the participant to “Make five crosses from

cassuc’ place them on four sides of the cattle and one in the middle. Sing around the cattle: ‘I will bless the Lord at all times’ until the end, and the *Benedicite* and litanies and the Our Father; sprinkle holy water on them; burn frankincense and shot-silk taffeta around them, and let the cattle be valued; give the tenth penny to God . . . then leave them to get better; do thus thrice” (97). Finally, the text requires the healer to offer of a tenth of the value of the cattle to God, an action which must be repeated three times. That final requirement appears to attempt to create a kind of reciprocal relationship with God, using a formula (namely, traditional tithing) approved by the Church. Where tithing is an issue of general duty to the Church (and, presumably, a more general attempt to curry favor from God and to establish an expectation of reciprocity against future need) on the part of the giver, this sacrifice of thirty percent of the value of the cattle is a more direct exchange for a specific desired result.

The requirement that the goods be burned while the cattle are surrounded by crosses, touched by holy water, during prayer, and followed by a sacrifice of a considerable amount of wealth turns this from a simple mechanical process into an attempt to use supernatural forces to influence the material world. The process suggests that a bit of wealth, in the form of the cattle themselves as well as the taffeta and frankincense, can be destroyed in order to insure against the loss of still more wealth, as if the social power represented by expensive goods could be used to protect the sources of material wealth.

That exchange (or destruction) of material goods for immaterial power or influence is not limited to tithing; it runs throughout the religious and secular culture of

the medieval period. The basis of Christianity, Jesus's birth and sacrifice in order to redeem man's fallen nature and allow mankind to have the chance for immortality and the promise of heaven follows the same pattern. A feudal lord's gift of land and social status in exchange for his vassal's loyalty and military support is a similar kind of transaction, an exchange of immediate tangible goods for the hope and promise of both immaterial (in this case social) power and substantive benefits. Those two types of exchange are prominently and continually reenacted in the culture through the weekly celebration of the Mass and through periodic enfeoffment.

The narratives of the period, too, naturally reflect that process of exchange of material goods for immaterial power, whether social or supernatural. In *Sir Launfal* love and silence are exchanged for material wealth and status. The sacrifice is not wholly one sided, after all. The Tryamour does not give Launfal his invisible squire and his ever full purse simply because she admires him. Launfal sacrifices his ability to speak freely through his pledge to keep silent about Tryamour's identity. In a way, this is a kind of taboo or geas, and Launfal experiences the consequences attendant to breaking that kind of magical bond. He faces the potential loss of his wealth and, in some senses, he actually loses his life as he knows it, even if there are notable compensations for that further sacrifice.⁴¹

In the *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, the behavior of a king, for good or ill, is a kind of sacrifice on behalf of the future of his kingdom. Examples of this kind of exchange abound in the text. Cynegils, we are told, "bend[s] his kingly pride [and] gladly humbled himself before the priest in baptism" after which he and his kingdom enjoy "a long period

of peace” (I.18.3). His son Cenwealh “abandoned without remorse both Christianity and lawful wedlock; but being attacked and defeated by Penda king of the Mercians . . . he took refuge with the king of the East Angles . . . was converted, and three years later repaired his forces and recovered his kingdom” (I.19.1). In both of these cases, the willingness of the kings to submit themselves to Christianity, to maintain the covenant with God, is the factor that allows peace and safety for their subjects. In effect, it is an exchange of faith (and the material support for the clergy) for the strength to protect the kingdom.

As Mauss demonstrates, this process of the exchange of goods or actions for supernatural support is not solely a characteristic of medieval England; in fact, it probably occurs in one form or another in all cultures. However, the particular manner in which medieval English culture understood that process is interesting, especially since the same kinds of patterns appear to occur in both religiously and socially sanctioned contexts and in those that might have been condemned as magic.

A similar form of exchange occurs in the employment of objects, times, places, and even spoken phrases that have a history of use or a tradition association with the immaterial. These things, such as churchyards, altars, times and days the year, sacred gestures such as the sign of the cross, or words such as formulaic prayers or the names of the evangelists, have already been sacralized. They have been set apart from everyday use and have been marked as belonging at least in part to the immaterial. In this way, these physical things, which range from written or spoken formulae to land that might otherwise be made to serve a more pragmatic purpose, have a kind of pre-defined,

socially imposed liminality. In the *Lacnunga*, these elements are combined with other methods of accessing the supernatural, so that orthodox prayers are combined with unusual incantations, crosses are employed during suffumigations as in the charm to cure cattle, and holy water is used as the basis for potions to relieve a variety of ailments.

The sacred or magical quality attributed to objects and figures removed from quotidian or conventional use runs throughout the narratives as much as it does the texts specifically about the immaterial. For example, Sir Orfeo's music already occupies a kind of liminal position, for music is a decidedly non-physical thing that influences people, yet the narrative acts to remove it further from the ordinary. It possesses the power to influence animals and stones. Eventually, the music allows Orfeo to retrieve his queen from the fairies, albeit for a brief period. Orfeo's royal status, too, sets his music apart from that which would be played by any other outcast living in the wilderness; as a king, Orfeo is marked as a quasi-sacred figure; his kingdom suffers from his absence.

Charms and cures employing elements with a prior association with the sacred, the magical, or the mysterious can be found throughout the *Lacnunga*. In fact, often they are blended together. One example of this combination can be found in charm XXV, a prescription for curing a form of swelling. The charm instructs the practitioner to, "Sing this prayer nine times on the black blains; first of all the Our father: *Tigað tigað tigað calicet. aclu chuel sedes adclocles. acre earcre arnem*". The incantation runs for three lines before concluding, "seek and you shall find; I adjure you by Father and Son and Holy Spirit, may you grow no further but dry up. Upon the asp and the basilisk you will walk and you will trample the lion and the dragon; cross Matthew, cross Mark, cross

Luke, cross John” (15). In short, there is a wealth of orthodox Christian material being used outside of the confines of the Mass and, presumably though not necessarily, without ecclesiastic supervision. These are elements that would have been familiar to the Christian audience, that would have been already accepted as having power within religious practice, being used to an end other than religious worship.

In fact, the charm “Tigað” apparently has its own history of imposed liminality. Pettit notes that “there is “[a]nother version of the incantation (also to be sung nine times) . . . found in [Bald’s *Leechbook*] (112/28-33), where it is put to similar use against, in addition to flying poison, ‘every poisonous swelling’” (2.22). He goes on to point out, “There are at least seven variant forms of this charm, making it – perhaps surprisingly given that it is at least partly in Irish – the most frequently attested charm in surviving Anglo-Saxon records” (2.22).

Far from being surprising, though, the fact that it is in Irish and that it apparently has a wide spread history of use are exactly the kinds of forces that make it, nominally, a potent force for curing illness. The fact that it has a history of use invests it with a kind of inherited authority, for a reader who has encountered it in *Bald’s Leechbook* would quite reasonably assume that it would not have been used if it were not effective. That the charm is apparently composed of recognizably Irish and quasi-Latin elements⁴² might only have increased its value to the reader.⁴³

The most interesting element of the charm is not the incantation alone, though, nor is it the praying of the Our Father or the ritual use of the sign of the cross at the end. Rather, it is the variety of sources of authority (and presumed spiritual power) being used

to banish the illness that make the cure fascinating. While the blains are commanded to go away by power of the Trinity, by the names of the Evangelists, and through reference to Psalm 91, a psalm that promises God's protection to the faithful, those invocations alone are apparently not deemed to be sufficient. The charm, "Tigað", is also required for the efficacy of the ritual, as if the materially based actions needed to be reinforced through the invocation of a multiplicity of sources of immaterial power in order to have the ability to over-come the illness, itself imagined in some ways to be an immaterial force. As in the rituals of the *Liber Iuratus Honorii*, an excessive presence of material signifiers marks the attempt to manipulate the immaterial, which is a seemingly contradictory concept, though it occurs as much in the creation of reliquaries or the decoration and implements of Church ceremonies as it does in the curative practices of the *Lacnunga*.

Time and again, though, material signifiers are used for just such purposes. In fact, one of the cures in the *Lacnunga* for "elfish magic and for all the temptations of the Devil" (17) requires the prayers to be rendered materially, that is to be written, and on a paten, too, increasing the implied connection between the immaterial power of God and the manipulation of the physical elements that represent it. The paten is, after all, the plate upon which the Eucharist is consecrated, where God's flesh is made manifest during the Mass through transubstantiation.

This cure for the works of elves and the Devil is another ritual that borders upon orthodox religious practice, for most of the charm involves writing scripture. It instructs the practitioner to write, "In the beginning was the word' as far as 'comprehended it not',

and further more “and Jesus went about all Galilee teaching’ as far as ‘and great crowds followed” (17) and some additional passages that would presumably have been familiar to an educated audience, since they are not otherwise identified. The end of the charm requires the practitioner to have three Masses sung over it and to sing a number of Psalms and prayers, too.

However, the middle passage between them departs significantly from orthodoxy (if, indeed, the charm had not already entered the realm of the blasphemous or heretical by requiring the practitioner to *write* on a paten). That passage instructs the ritual worker to:

“Take ‘crystallium’ and *disme* and zedoary and *cassuc* and fennel, and take a full sextarius of consecrated wine; and have a virgin fetch in silence against the current half a sextarius of running water; then take and place all the plants in the water and wash the writing off the inside of the paten very cleanly; then pour the consecrated wine from above onto the other [liquid]” (17).

The instructions to wash the writing off combine two sets of assumptions about the way that supernatural power can be made concrete and transferred. The act of re-inscribing the text of the Old Testament and new Testament re-creates, in one sense, the events of the scripture, just as the performance of the Mass, also used at the end of the charm, and the use of consecrated wine recreates and makes manifest the Last Supper and Jesus’s sacrifice through both species of the Eucharist. The idea that writing can be used to translate the supernatural power to a physical representation of the thing is not a new concept, given the reverence with which Bibles are held as well as the use of writing in

the rituals of the *Liber Iuratus Honorii* and amulets. However, in this case, that writing is also used to transfer the supernatural power for a second time to another physical object when it is washed off by running water. The power itself is being treated as a commodity of a sort, one which can be put into circulation, almost as though it were currency. The fact that the transfer is surrounded by elements suggesting purity (that the water must be must be gathered by a virgin, that is must be drawn in a way that would seem to limit contamination) only deepens the issues surrounding the question of materiality and its limits. That power is being set apart from common transactions through that insistence upon purity, yet the forms and mechanisms of that transfer treat God's power as though it were another medicinal compound that can be steeped like an herb.

Then, too, since the fennel and zedoary are being treated with similarly pure water, that begs the question of where the line is drawn between the obviously sacred objects that have an orthodox and socially defined metaphysical potency and the seemingly more quotidian plants and jars of stream water that, presumably, do not. One reasonable answer is that there is no line, in a strict sense. That common objects used for uncommon purposes inhabit a kind of median state, one in which they begin to possess immaterial potency through the act of treating them as though they are sacred.

Of course, that answer raises a still more important question: what does it mean for anything to be a material object in the medieval mind? Where does the material world end and the supernatural begin? If the answer were simply an animist one, that all things have a spiritual nature that can be accessed by shamans and that everything has a latent supernatural power in them, then why should there be such insistence upon objects

associated with class distinctions (as in expensive and rare ingredients), and why should there be a superabundance of goods associated with all of these rituals and recipes?

It is as if these texts were attempting to reconcile two disparate issues. One could well be the belief that everything is potentially sacred, potentially a source of supernatural power that could be used to control the physical world. The other could be that the results promised by the rituals seemed to happen infrequently or not at all, whether that expression of control was the ability to conjure gold and silver, as in the *Liber Iuratus Honorii*, or to cure illness, as in the *Lacnunga*. That scarcity of actual changes to the world would explain the way that the *Lacnunga* circumscribes its formulas, limiting their practical use to people who could afford to sacrifice thirty percent of the value of cattle, who could secure a paten without repercussions and have Masses sung over a concoction, and who, like the ritual workers of the *Liber Iuratus Honorii*, would have the time to gain access to particular locations at particular times without drawing unwanted attention to themselves. The anxiety over the ability of any given person to use supernatural power to affect material reality seems to cause the author to limit the possibility of making the attempt.

In a way, the use of materials that are widely accepted in the culture as having supernatural potency, such as the Eucharist or the paten, is an attempt to address that anxiety, as are the elaborate rituals surrounding even common materials. The former articles serve as a kind of reassurance to the reader and ritual worker that supernatural manifestations of power are possible, for those objects have been involved in nominally successful rituals in the past. The complexity of the rituals could serve as a kind of

excuse, an explanation for the potential failure of the magic. In the above ritual, perhaps either the water or the person drawing it was simply not pure enough.

The recipes in the *Lacnunga* do seem to employ layers of bulwarks for belief, loading element upon element onto a simple set of actions. Music, chanting, and repeated incantations are also often used in addition to the purely material elements to produce magical effects and to provide the audience with reassurance about the potential manifestation of the supernatural. Music and repetition create ambivalent spaces by making the ordinary unusual, changing simple speech into something exotic by, in essence, adding decorative elements to it. Like a reliquary chased with gold and studded with gems, the incantations' value and putative effect is increased by its elaborate presentation. Then, too, the repetition serves as another form of the hyperabundance, the superfluity, of elements present in all of the rituals. That superfluity combined with an element of exoticism also runs throughout the chants, the sources of which range from corruptions of Irish, Old English, and other, less identifiable sources,⁴⁴ combined with passages from Scripture.

Various charms employ a combination of these elements. Entry XXVI provides a song to be used, "In the event that man or beast drinks an insect", a song which appears to be derived from Old Irish (15),⁴⁵ and directs the reader to "[s]ing this incantation nine times into the ear and the Our Father once" (92- 96). The "Tigað" charm discussed above, connects the corrupted Irish text with directions to sing the incantation nine times before issuing commands to the disease based upon references to the Psalms; Charm XVIII calls for singing a mass in order to create a "salve for flying venom and sudden

eruptions”. Although it differs from the “Tigað” charm in that the Mass is more familiar and potentially more intelligible, the use of the ritualized recitation of the Mass serves the same function as the incantation. Pettit suggests that the practice of using passages of scripture and the Mass itself “may, in some cases, have superseded the recitation of pagan incantations – such as, perhaps, Entry LXXVI [the Mugwort charm discussed below] – over plants” (2.16).

The sheer volume of liminal elements marks a final point of consonance among the narratives and the texts about the supernatural. The tale of *Sir Orfeo* as much as in *Sir Launfal*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, or *The Franklin’s Tale* is marked by an excessive signification of supernatural potency. It is not enough that Orfeo is a king, that he plays music, that he wanders in the wilderness, that his wife is taken away from him in an area that is almost a borderland between the man-made and the natural. All of these elements are piled onto the story. This type of redundancy, of a superfluity of magical elements, marks the *Lacnunga* as much as it does the *LIH*, Gerald of Wales’s *Topographia Hiberniae*, or *The Golden Legend*. In the *Lacnunga*, that repetition takes the form of repeated chants or reduplicative sacrifices. Again, this emphasis upon the amount of time, energy, and expense involved in repeating a given set of actions multiple times appears to mark a perceived level of difficulty in influencing the immaterial forces at work in the world. It suggests a perceived barrier between the material world of goods and physical actions and the immaterial world that can influence both, as if it were only the repeated assertion that allows for belief in the potency of immaterial forces.

Alongside excess, other forms of tangible, material authority are used to reinforce the belief in immaterial power. In charm CLXX royal authority is invoked to explain and lend credence to the healing power of a particular recipe, though it, too, displays some of the other issues associated with the concept of materiality, particularly the hyperabundance of material elements. This particular entry in the text states, “There was a king called Arestolobius. He was wise and skilled in the art of healing. Wherefore he composed a good morning drink for all infirmities that agitate a person’s body from within or from without” (119). The list of infirmities is quite extensive; the drink is conceived of as a sovereign remedy for a series of illnesses ranging straight down the body from inflammation of the brain, lung diseases, jaundice, inability to urinate, to knee pain and swollen feet. It also claims to ward off skin diseases, poisons, and “each temptation of the devil”. The potion that produces such miracles is compounded of the seeds of thirty three different plants along with cinnamon, costmary, pepper, and ginger and gum mastic, and, as usual, there is no discussion of the reason that it should be efficacious. The potency of the drink appears to rest solely upon the weight of royal authority and on the number of herbs; yet, there is no suggestion that it could be any less effective than the charms involving prayers or scriptural passages. Apparently, some combination of translated authority derived from nominal king along with a plethora of seeds from herbs is sufficient to overcome a wide range of threats material and immaterial threats, including those posed by Satan.

The issue of translated authority is not limited to kings. Just as the story of Brutus is used to justify the inherited authority of English kings, the history of the source of a

charm or the history of its use serves to prove the efficacy of its workings. One charm provides the explanatory back story of an “angel [who] brought this letter to Rome when they were greatly afflicted with diarrhoea” (111). The power for this incantation is based upon a two-fold story. One of those, of course is the arrival of the angel, an obvious source of supernatural authority. The other, though, is the story of the charms’ efficacy during a time of disease in Rome. In a way, the charm’s authority is derived from the power of storytelling, upon the accreted social power invested in a narrative that has supposedly both occurred and survived through being re-told and accepted by other audiences.

The narratives upon which the incantations are based are not always even close parallels for the problems that they are supposed to solve, though. Charm CLVIII involves a reference to Jesus’s birth that is then “repurposed” to solve the problem of “lost” or, more probably, given the text of the incantation or prayer, stolen. In this case, the text directs the reader,

“As soon as some one tells you that your cattle are lost, then before you say anything else say: ‘ The city is called Bethlehem in which Christ was born. / It is glorified throughout the whole world; / So may this deed become notorious in the sight of men, / through the holy Cross of Christ. Amen” (103).

The text suggests that it is possible to use the city’s fame as a sympathetic analogue for the theft. There would seem to be few other reasons for referring to Jesus’s birth in the context of the charm. However, the instructions following the verse direct the reader to pray three times in each of the cardinal directions, saying “May the Cross of Christ bring

(them) back from” each of the directions, ending with the statement “the Cross of Christ was lost and is found; the Jews hung Christ, did the worst of deeds, hid that which they could not conceal; so may this deed not be concealed by any means, through the holy Cross of Christ” (103), which provides at least some narrative justification for the analogy (though it still seems loose). In making those statements, the instructions effectively draw an analogy between the physical area over which the reputation of Bethlehem has spread (i.e. that it is “) and the limits of the power of the charm (i.e. that Bethlehem is “glorified throughout the whole world” and that the charm shall make the deed known just as far). It makes a second parallel between the crime of the Jewish people and the recovery of the Cross to suggest that the theft of the cattle shall be treated in the same way.

The statement is certainly an interesting assertion, as much for what it does not say as the claims that it makes. For instance, it does not draw upon Jesus’s representation in Scripture as the protector of the weak, nor does it use the weight of divine authority as the basis for royal authority or as the judge of all men after death. That seems particularly surprising given the number of times that narratives about kings insist upon the role of good kings to maintain the peace of the kingdom.⁴⁶

Instead, this incantation focuses upon physical objects that are associated with the supernatural power of the divine. The fragments of the cross have a longstanding association with the manifestation of God’s power through miracles. Indeed, in William of Malmesbury’s history, Aethelstan is depicted as being surrounded with relics, including various pieces of the cross (II.135.3-5). That the city is used seems more

unusual, although it is not uncommon at all for the charms of the *Lacnunga* to draw upon a variety of sources for authority.

One of those sources involves the retelling of apparently older, non-Christian stories. In general, these follow a “sympathetic” pattern, in which the object of the charm (the source of disease or the patient) is enjoined to follow the narrative script of the story being related by the incantation. A charm for a “sudden stabbing pain” (CXXVIII) instructs the reader to create a paste from three herbs and butter; it includes a script, though it does not say whether it is to be used while making the paste or while applying it to the patient. The text of the spoken portion of the charm is:

Loud were they, lo, loud, when they rode over land. / Shield yourself now, you can survive this attack! / Out, little spear, if you are herein! / I stood under a limewood shield [*or* linden tree], under a light shield, / Where [*or* when] the mighty women deliberated upon their power, / And they sent yelling spears. / I will send them back to them, / A flying dart from the front in return. / Out little spear, if it is herein! / A smith sat, forged knives, / Little iron weapons, powerful in wounding. / Out, little spear, if you are herein! / Six smiths [(?)*or* Knife-smiths] sat, made deadly spears. / Out spear! Not in spear! / If there should be herein a sliver of iron, / The work of a witch [*or* witches], it shall melt [(?)*or* heat shall melt (it)]. / If you were shot in the skin, or were shot in the flesh, / Or were shot in the blood, [*or* were shot in the bone], / Or were shot in the joint [*or* limb], never may your life be harmed” (91-3).

This is a rather complex and involved, if vague and undeveloped, narrative, with a full cast of characters and possibly as many as four separate incidents, if the incident with the witches in line six is distinct from the “they” who were “loud” when they “rode over the land” at the beginning of the charm and from the smiths who made deadly spears (though they may be the same actors described in different ways). Its exhortations are directed at almost as many objects. It calls upon the afflicted patient to resist the current disease as the speaker did when he “stood under a limewood shield” (5). It repeatedly addresses the disease itself, ordering it to be gone as if it were a physical spear that could be withdrawn or melted away. It even obliquely threatens the source of the illness when the speaker states that he “will send another back to them, / A flying dart from the front in return” (8-9). Like the use of the Scriptures in prayer or the passages that were to be written on the paten in the charm to cure swelling, this retelling seems to be an attempt to draw upon the power of the previous events, to remind the subjects and objects of the charm of their roles in the world (according to the mythical events). If this were part of a longer narrative, one which might have been well known in the period,⁴⁷ it would have an almost precise parallel with the use of the scriptures; they would both be stories about the supernatural world that would already be familiar to the audience and already accepted as a pattern for action.

While the mythic pattern would seem to indicate a level of certainty about the cause of the illness and its role in the cosmology of the speaker (i.e. that at least some disease is caused by “shot” from malefic beings), there is actually a level of doubt introduced in the charm. The incantation repeatedly calls for variations on the

command, "Out, little spear, *if you are herein!*" (3), and enjoins the spear to come out *if* it is present. It might also be that the use of the charm is precautionary, and that there is some doubt regarding the specific cause of a given illness. However, the uncertainty might arise because the *location* of the shot that is in doubt. In that case, one must imagine the incantation as a performed operation and not simply as a static text; it could be that the practitioner would be directing the charm at different locations of the body and ordering the shot out if it is in each particular place. In either case, the mere possibility of a physical agent as the cause of illness raises some questions about the limits of the material world, of the point where material agents lose efficacy and also of the point at which the immaterial depends upon the material. After all, while the shot is physical, the *source* of the shot is a mythical being, presumably never seen by the afflicted patient, even if those beings were supposed to be physically present. In this case, those beings do not rely upon a vague ill-wishing or even a largely immaterial spoken malediction. Their power is conveyed by a physical object, begging the question of whether it would have been possible, in the conception of the world in the period, for such beings to act without material agents.

A similar kind of material agency and of the use of narrative is appears in entry LXXVI, the "Nine Herbs Charm". In this case, the charm addresses the herbs being used, mugwort and (likely) chamomile, with the phrase "Remember, Mugwort, what you declared" (1); the text speaks to two of the herbs Mugwort and *Mægðe* as though reminding them of mythic events would invoke their power.⁴⁸ Here, too, the pattern

suggested by the story is not sufficient; it must have a material representative, the plants, in order for the healing power to have potency.

Just as objects, names, and stories are made sacred and supernaturally powerful, so too certain times are associated with magical potency. While orthodox religious practice suggests similar kinds of reservations of hours and days for ecclesiastic ceremonies though the canonical hours and the feast days, the authority for other reservations of days and hours is sometimes less clear. Charm CLXXXII involves a taboo against blood-letting on particular dates, specifically “the last Monday at the end of the month that we call April . . . the first Monday at the beginning of the month that we call August . . . the first Monday after the end of the month of December” (123), without reference to any cause for the prescription or agency for the threats of death that would follow. In fact, although some of the charms seem to use feast days, others employ references that may hearken back to pre-Christian celebrations of the turning seasons. Entry XIV, a charm to treat one who has “erysipelas [literally “red skin” in the Greek] of the neck” calls for the patient to gather a certain set of plants “together three nights before summer comes, an equal amount of each, and let him make them into a drink in Welsh ale, and then on the night when summer comes, in the morning the person who wants to drink the drink must stay awake all night”, drinking the draft at specified times during the night.

In *The Golden Bough* James Frazer notes a similar conflation of orthodox religious and pre-Christian practices and suggests that while the ancient rites surrounding Midsummer have been celebrated as the eves of St. John Baptist and St. Peter, yet those

celebrations took the form of fire-festivals that were supposed to have the power that ranged in various places from controlling the growth of flax plants to warding off “demons and witches that molest the cattle” across Europe (258-264). The variety of rituals and anticipated effects that Frazer describes suggests that Midsummer’s night, perhaps like other sacred times and dates, is not reserved for particular effects; it has certain associations with a type of celebration and with the supernatural in general but is flexible in its application. It is as though the beliefs about times and dates in general, and the recipes of the *Lacnunga* in particular, treat certain times and dates as points at which the material world is more subject to being altered or influenced by the supernatural, as if physicality and human life were more open to being reshaped and interrogated.

Such flexibility may explain the appearance of the dates in the narrative texts. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is replete with references to time, such as Midsummer, when Gawain leaves Arthur’s court, and Christmas Eve, when Gawain arrives at Bertilak’s castle. The particular reasons that those specific dates are used is open to interpretation, but the fact that dates with a conventional association with the supernatural are used at least suggests that the audience might expect unusual events to occur on unusual days, those that are already rife with significance. That association would also explain the date of Sir Launfal’s return to Arthur’s court, namely the feast day of St. John the Baptist. As Stephen Shepherd wryly suggests in his footnote to the text, that day is “very close to the summer solstice, a time by tradition associated – ironically, given what is about to happen to Launfal . . . with fairy visitations” (207 n.1).

At the very least, these dates are somehow seen as different from others, somehow set apart from the ordinary. That difference sits at the heart of all of the treatments of material objects that are associated with magic and the supernatural. They are not ordinary objects, times or locations; they have some additional quality imposed upon them. That very imposition of sacredness or mysteriousness is a matter of social convention, but it carries with it a peculiar understanding of material objects. Whether that process would have been recognized in the period or not, it amounts, in both the *LIH* and the *Lacnunga* to the belief that material objects, when they are set apart from ordinary life, can gain the power to influence the immaterial forces of the world and, in turn, to affect the material world.

The Golden Legend: Saints, and Materiality

While it might seem reasonable that a text about the works of saints would be the most concerned with the purely spiritual and least associated with objects, in fact, *The Golden Legend* is steeped in depictions of materiality. *The Golden Legend* differs somewhat from the *Liber Iuratus Honorii* and the *Lacnunga* in that it has a somewhat more suspicious attitude toward material wealth and in that it emphasizes the importance of faith over philosophy. The latter is particularly significant, given that the two preceding texts either implicitly or explicitly require the reader to embrace the knowledge of the world and the way that it works. Despite those differences, though, the depiction of the power of saints and of God's grace in *The Golden Legend* is rife with material objects

that are used both as evidence of God's presence and, to a certain degree, as tools for producing supernatural effects.

The amount of time and energy that *The Golden Legend* spends upon denigrating the love of wealth and worldly knowledge would, in and of itself, cause the text to play a significant role in the understanding of medieval materiality, the text's involvement goes further than that. While there is a recurrent attitude of the deprecation of the material world, the disdain and distrust are not consistently maintained. In particular, material objects are depicted as having a role to play in the manifestation of supernatural power. Expensive goods are not always a source of corruption, particularly not when they are involved in material manifestations of God's grace, through the saints or their relics. The commonalities among *The Golden Legend*, the *Liber Iuratus Honorii*, and the *Lacnunga*, as well as the nominal and poorly maintained differences among the texts about the status of wealth, suggests that the view of the material and the immaterial offered by the *Lacnunga* and the *Liber Iuratus Honorii* is not limited to audiences of such potentially obscure texts. In fact, since the *Legenda Aurea* is among the most widely distributed medieval texts and may have been second in readership only to the Bible,⁴⁹ the congruities and the points of contestation among the texts point to issues of significance in the medieval understanding of the world.⁵⁰

That understanding is, again, echoed in texts about very different subjects. The depiction of kingship in William of Malmesbury's *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, as well as in some of the romances, shares some traits in common with the story of Saint John in *The Golden Legend*, particularly in its treatment of gold and proper attitude toward material

goods in general. In fact, the depictions of most of the kings and their management of kingdoms in the histories are quite similar to the understanding of holiness in the lives of saints, and the physical effects of material objects associated with kings and saints are depicted as having a kind of equivalency, of having the same kind of supernatural power.

The proper use of immaterial power forms another connection between the histories, romances, and the *Golden Legend*, though the possibility of its misuse. While there are some parallels with the issues surrounding the concept of proper kingship, the depiction of the misuse of supernatural power more closely resembles the actions of Aurelius in *The Franklin's Tale*, and the threats such misuse pose are echoed by the monstrous figures in the travelogues or the villains of the histories. The notion that mortal, material men can gain access to immaterial power is, naturally threatening to the established social power and, particularly, to the Church. Thus, the pagan magicians in *The Golden Legend* are depicted as being less powerful than saints. Pagan priests are converted and brought into the orthodox fold. Even demons summoned by sorcerers are dismissed through the power of God's grace. Those instances are unsurprising, almost *de rigueur*, for a text so firmly entrenched in Church doctrine. Every threatening and potentially disruptive moment caused by the presence of demonic powers are brought into harmony with the world view of the Church and established social order⁵¹. The more telling issue is that saints undergo a similar set of controlling actions by the Church hierarchy.

In some ways, that uneasiness is understandable. The Church spends a great deal of energy upon creating and maintaining the reputation of saints, a gesture that

simultaneously allows the Church to demonstrate that God's grace is manifest in the world and to gain a great deal of money from pilgrims and the presence of and transaction in relics. However, those saints also could pose something of a threat to the Church hierarchy and its established traditions, or, rather, they would, if they were not, generally, safely dead or rigorously circumscribed in various ways. One would not want a declared, living, saint challenging papal authority, after all. A similar kind of distrust of those who have unmediated access to God appears in the discussion of the dangers of mysticism in *The Cloud of Unknowing*. That text describes the perils that can befall those who seek contact with God outside of the cloister; it suggests that the structure of the Church can prevent the mystic from being misled by demonic forces.

Saints, of course, are only occasionally cloistered figures; generally, they are depicted in the stories in *The Golden Legend* as being participants in society. However, the potential disruption to the Church posed by the contact the saints have with God is just as circumscribed as would be if the saints were anchorites. In addition to the Church's control over the recognition of saints and the Church's physical control over their remains in the form of relics, there are sets of attributes that separate saints from ordinary people and, thus, place the immaterial power that they possess and represent out of the reach of common men. The very holiness attributed to the saints acts to separate them from the quotidian, as does the saint's relationship with material objects. At one and the same time, the saints frequently repudiate the desire for material wealth and yet their presence and their holiness are sometimes signified by rare perfumes and other expensive goods. The gesture of abjuring a thing while being represented by it would be

a father difficult needle to thread. It is certainly a gesture that is beyond most mortals (though one might cynically note that the princes and prelates of the Church manage to condemn the desire for wealth while wearing quite elaborate vestments). Such separations from the ordinary has the effect of limiting the potential danger to Church power that stems from unregulated supernatural power, keeping the possible threat contained to those who have Church sanction.

The separation also has the effect of bringing saints into the discussion of the limits of materiality and mortality. Perhaps it is not so surprising after all that saints could be signified by exotic and expensive materials while rejecting the “corrupting” effects of the physical world. The saints themselves are liminal figures, standing between the supernatural power of God and the material existence of men. They are separated through their sanctity, yet they appear to people of all classes and many races, making the power of God available (at least in stories and in the beliefs of pilgrims) to everyone. In effect, saints trace the limits of materiality and of man’s capacities by standing just beyond them, still mortal, until their deaths, yet capable of directing supernatural power.

It is worth noting that the same process of rendering the saints into figures who stand as both part of humanity and yet outside of its normal boundaries are at play in the *LIH* and in the narratives. The magician in the *LIH* must undergo his days of fasting, prayer, and social separation in order to simply begin the process of preparing his talismans. The heroes of the narratives tend to set themselves apart from their peers through their nature or actions, whether that is Gawain’s decision to face the green knight when all the other knights in Arthur’s court stand aghast or Horn’s innate worth, which is

so great that it literally shines forth from him. Yet, each of these figures are also bound into participation within society, too. Even the magician of the *LIH* seeks to participate in the processes of social exchange, either through direct communion with God or by gaining wealth, power, and the ability to influence men. The process of the quest for supernatural power or heroic action is ultimately reflexive; the figures separate themselves from society or the boundaries of the material world but ultimately end up using that status in order to participate in material action.

In *The Golden Legend*, the saints' status as figures with the potential for channeling the divine while still being bound by the limits of human capacity appears most clearly in the stories about Saint Andrew the Apostle. One of the stories also reveals the potential threat posed by the accidental misuse of divine power, for the saint appears to make a mistake in his application of that authority.

In this particular episode, Andrew arrives at the gates of Nicaea only to be told that seven devils were killing anyone who passed. At his command, the devils appear before him in the shape of seven dogs. Andrew orders them "to be off to some place where they could not harm anyone" (15). However, when Andrew arrives at the gates of the next town, he finds that a funeral is taking place for a young man who has just been killed by seven dogs, and Andrew "in tears, cried out: 'I know, Lord, that these were the seven demons I chased out of Nicaea!'" (15). Andrew restores the young man to life, and the young man promptly converts and begins to follow Andrew.

In many ways, this is a story of unintended consequences, and it demonstrates the limits of human knowledge and ability. In this application (or misapplication), Andrew

seems to be closer to ordinary magicians than to a divine representative. He is, perhaps, not unlike Merlin, who attempts to create a grand kingdom only to be undermined by human frailty; Andrew's failure to understand the consequences of casting the demons out of Nicaea is likewise a condition created by his lack of divine foreknowledge and understanding.

The story ends happily enough; the young man is brought back to life through Andrew's prayer. *The Golden Legend* is a very doctrinaire text, so it is hardly likely to suggest that events do not ultimately follow God's plan for the world. In fact, viewed objectively, the outcome is almost wholly salutary, for while the young man dies, it is not permanent, and he is converted, presumably gaining eternal life.

Andrew's failure is not rooted in the young man's death; rather, the troublesome aspect of the episode lies in the fact that Andrew himself is convinced that he has made an error. It is difficult to see what that error might have been, since Andrew specifically ordered the demons to go to a place "where they could not harm anyone" (15). However, he is apparently deeply upset by a result that he perceives as a mistake and that would seem to be an unintended consequence of his use of divine authority. Andrew's grief marks the limits of his faith in his ability to use immaterial power properly, just as his apparent inability to understand exactly how he made an error marks the limits of human understanding. It is this apparent mistake in Andrew's original request that makes Andrew a liminal figure, possessed of the ability to influence the course of events through the power of his prayer, yet still human in his lack of complete control over the ends of that power and still, as saints are, participants in the exchange of material actions and effects

for immaterial social benefits, whether that is expressed as the immediate gratitude of a follower during the saint's life or the increased faith of a supplicant after his or her death.⁵² The issue of the limitations of mortality and materiality is brought to the foreground during his martyrdom. He is put to death for converting the Achaians, for refusing to worship idols, and for (in essence) asserting the superiority of the immaterial over the material in his discussion of the necessity of Jesus's passion. The last point is implied though a series of comments that he makes to the proconsul Aegeus, first remarking that Aegeus who "has earned the right to judge men on earth. . . . ought to . . . recognize your judge who is in heaven" and that those who worship idols, which are demons, will die and "leave their bodies, carrying with them but their sins" (16). In essence, he is arguing that the material world passes away and that the immaterial and eternal is more significant, a familiar Christian trope.

Yet, Andrew does not wholly dismiss the material, though the text's inconsistent attitude toward the physical world is prominent throughout the presentation of Andrew's final act of preaching and his death. Using five arguments, Andrew demonstrates that the physical world and material objects are necessary parts of man's salvation, since they were the source of his fall. He argues that "[s]ince the first man had brought death into the world by means of wood, it was fitting that the Son of man should banish death by dying on a cross of wood" and draws similar parallels between Adam's creation from earth and the necessity of a virgin birth, the use of the hand to eat the forbidden fruit and Jesus's transfixion on the cross, the sweetness of the apple and the gall that Jesus was forced to drink, and the way that Jesus took on mortal life to restore immortality to man

(17). In each case, there is an explicit exchange being made, each physical object redeeming the supernatural loss incurred through the use of another object, not unlike the shamanic exchanges in the recipes and rituals of the *Lacnunga*. In Andrew's recitation, though, physical objects play a dual role, as both the source of damnation and part of the process of salvation. In either mode, though, physical objects are understood to have a kind of power, an ability to influence the immaterial. Far from being irrelevant to the nominally superior and more significant eternal life after death, the material is an indissoluble element of man's eternal life.

If they are necessary, material objects are still viewed with suspicion, even open hostility. While he is being crucified, Andrew begs God, "do not let me come down alive! It is time for you to entrust my body to the earth. You entrusted it to me, and I have borne it so long and watched over it and worked so hard, and now I wish to be discharged of this obedience and relieved of this most burdensome garment" (18). For Andrew, the earth is a source and repository for corruption. His physical nature is a burden that he has borne, but that he is entirely happy to release. He speaks of resisting "the assaults of this body for so long, and with your help I have mastered it . . . it will not curb and hamper me, thirsting as I am to come freely to you" (18). For a saint whose failure of understanding and failure of faith in God's divine justice has created at least one moment of difficulty in the past, the implication that his body and his mortality are the potential sources of his problems is significant, especially given the signs that follow his death.

Andrew's death and subsequent manifestations mark the vacillation with which the text approaches materiality. On the one hand, the Andrew's prayers and the spiritual signs surrounding his death would seem to suggest the apparent triumph of the immaterial over the material, just as Jesus's death marks the triumph of God's grace and the redemption of humanity over sin and death. Echoing Jesus's crucifixion and death, as the tale does throughout, Andrew hangs on the cross for three days and refuses to descend from it until he is dead. The physical capacity of men to change Andrew's fate is thwarted by supernatural power, for the soldiers who attempt to free him find that their arms hang helplessly at their sides and mortal sight is rendered ineffective when a light shines down from heaven for the final half hour of Andrew's life, hiding him from view (18).

Yet, once Andrew is dead, material objects express the power Andrew possesses as a representative of God's grace. Manna and oil issue from his tomb, the volume of which foretells the harvest in the region. A bishop who is tempted by a demon in the guise of a beautiful young woman is saved by Andrew when the saint appears disguised as a pilgrim. It is not a spiritual vision or dream sent to warn the Bishop, for other people can see Andrew. Finally, in a separate incident, another bishop curses a prefect who takes possession "of a field that belong to a church dedicated to Saint Andrew" (20). In all of these cases, the immaterial power evinced by Andrew is greater than the purely physical, yet that power depends upon the physical world for its manifestation and all of the effects are tied to the social changes that they produce in the audience of the miracles and of the text of *The Golden Legend*.

Although the use of material objects as vehicles for God's grace echoes the central Christian miracle of transubstantiation, the presence of physical things as vehicles, apparently necessary vehicles, is still surprising. That almost ubiquitous presence of objects in the stories about miracles suggests that the seeming ambivalence in the understanding of the relationship between the material and the immaterial is not limited to Andrew's story, and it raises questions about the concept of God's grace and power and how that power is made manifest in the world.

Two particular episodes point to an understanding of the relationship between objects and God's power that suggest a kind of dependence upon physicality. In the story of St. John the apostle, St. John overcomes disbelief by giving a cloak to a pagan high priest, Aristodemus, so that *Aristodemus* could raise two dead men back to life. That gesture is effectively a material transfer of immaterial power, not unlike the washing of the paten in the recipe in the *Lacnunga* that produces the potion for curing "elfish magic". In the story of Saint Nicholas, there occurs an incident in which a Jew who has ordered a statue of Saint Nicholas as a watchman for his house beats the statue of the saint for failing to prevent a theft. The saint then appears to the thieves covered in bruises and threatens them with the wrath of God and with public exposure and hanging. This incident seems to indicate a belief that it is possible to exert control and power over the immaterial through material goods and actions. After all, the saint is not simply notified of the theft, as he might be through prayer; he appears to be injured by the beating, to have been affected, if only to the extent of *appearing* to be bruised, by physical action. To add to the complexity of the understanding of materiality, in this case, the person

exerting such control is not a practitioner of magic, nor is he particularly faithful. Although he buys a statue of the saint, apparently convinced of the saint's power to enforce the law, he is Jewish and does not have any particular reverence for the statue. The manifestation of supernatural power seems to be determined by the presence of the beaten statue, the physical representation of the saint, not the faith of the participants.

Orthodox Christian theology would answer that God is omnipresent and simply makes his will known according to his divine plan. In the medieval conception of the relationship between the immaterial Creator and his material creation, though, the presence of particular material objects appears to be at least helpful, and it may be understood to be necessary in some fashion. Given the significant presence of relics, reliquaries, and depictions of saints in *The Golden Legend* or as in the depiction of Mary on Sir Gawain's shield in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, material objects appear conceived of in the texts as at least obligatory, if not necessary, for the manifestation of God's power or for the revelation of God's favor. Yet, *The Golden Legend* asserts that the power of God's grace repeatedly triumphs over the physical.

The discussion of the birth of Christ in the text specifically addresses the superiority of God's grace over the material world, as does the discussion of man's redemption and the conquest over death discussed in Andrew's story. Regarding Jesus's birth, *The Golden Legend* states that "[i]t was above nature, by the fact that a virgin conceived; above reason in that God was begotten; above the human condition, in that the birth was painless; and above what is customary since the conception was by the Holy Spirit" (39). The wording of the statement is particularly important in this case; God's

power is “above” nature, reason, and the human condition. At the same time, its expression is physical in Jesus’s birth, his resurrection, and the physical resurrection promised to the faithful. The presentation of Christian belief in this text appears to suggest that the material and the immaterial are intertwined, even if the immaterial is in some senses superior.

Caroline Walker Bynum addresses the seeming ambiguity in *Christian Materiality* while discussing the medieval understanding of relics and their relationship to the immaterial. She states, “According to . . . theorists, sacramentals were only signs of God’s grace or expressions of pious hopes for blessing; relics were mementos of the saints Yet there was a contradiction. Formulae for blessing objects such as water and bread suggest that power lies *in* them. People behaved as if relics were the saints” (34). Bynum’s analysis of the incongruity of the attitude and understanding of Christian doctrine and practice toward materiality is particularly useful at this point in the argument, for she argues that the attitude toward matter ought to be understood as a paradox, as a “simultaneous assertion (not the reconciliation) of opposites Miraculous matter was simultaneously – hence paradoxically – the changeable stuff of not-God and the locus of God revealed” (34-35).

That interpretation of the medieval understanding of the material neatly explains some elements of the contested interaction of the spiritual and the physical in *The Golden Legend*. Yet the concept of paradox, in this case of a set of incongruities that do not *need* to be resolved in order to be an accurate representation of medieval theology, also poses some additional problems. On the one hand, Bynum’s discussion of the treatment of

Dauerwunder as “the body and blood of Christ in a more immediate sense even than the Eucharist” and her remark regarding the popular treatment of relics helps to explain the legend of Nicholas’s statue. Certain portions of the Christian audience may have understood the significance of the statue differently than others.⁵³

On the other hand, Bynum does not simply let the idea of a paradox paper over some of very real differences in the understanding of materiality in the medieval mind. Her remark that “theorists [understood that] sacramentals were only signs of God’s grace” implies a division, though not necessarily a simple one, between the educated and the uneducated or between elements of the educated clergy and their less theologically adept brethren and their flocks,⁵⁴ but her other remarks about the genuine contradictions of the attitude toward the material in Christian theology (e.g. the reference to “the formulae for blessing objects” and the understanding that the “Eucharist *was* Christ”) undercuts that suggestion (34). The differences in the treatment of materiality may be partly based upon a variety of differences in class or education, but the contradictions in the understanding of materiality are also largely a central issue in Christianity, and that is a set of contradictions that Bynum explores throughout her book as she describes the various practices surrounding material objects and the theories with which they conflict and coincide.

Bynum uses those points of paradox in order to reveal the moments of contested understanding of materiality. In some cases, those are issues involving practice, about whether particular relics were miraculous or the manner in which they ought to be venerated,⁵⁵ at other times that contestation involves the contradictions within the

theories of the material, as it is in her analysis of Peter the Venerable's treatment of the ambivalent state of relics, caught as they are between the present lifelessness of "dry bones" and "their future incorruption . . . Fresh flowers from dryness".⁵⁶

For *The Golden Legend* and this discussion of the contested treatment of materiality, the solution to the question of the relative importance of the material versus the immaterial may be less significant than the time that the text spends upon the debate. It is as if the problem of understanding the relationship between the material and the immaterial is so vexing that the text must repeatedly return to it, just as the *Liber Iuratus Honorii* implicitly does when it presents a ritual for seeing God that can also be used to bring wealth and worldly knowledge or as the *Gesta Regum Anglorum* does as it attributes the success of kings and the stability of kingdoms to the monarch's devotion to God. *The Golden Legend*, a text about the lives of saints and power of God's grace, is enmeshed in the question of what the material world is and how it ought to be used, both explicitly through its condemnations and implicitly through its continuous use of material signs, every bit as much as those other texts or as the debate about the nature and role of relics throughout the middle ages that Bynum describes.

In *The Golden Legend*, the issue of material goods becomes particularly fraught when money, rather than simply the signs of material wealth and power, becomes involved. While gold and rich goods such as incense can hold a dual role as both the source of corruption and the sign of the presence of one of the saints, coins and other forms of money are generally depicted as more intrinsically problematic.

The story of St. John the Apostle specifically addresses the proper attitude toward wealth. The saint encounters a philosopher, Crato, in Ephesus who is having two of his followers destroy their inherited wealth in order to demonstrate their contempt for the material world (51). The young men do so by grinding gems, into which they had converted their inheritance, into dust. John chastises Crato for that disdain, claiming that the philosopher's actions "wins the praise of men but is condemned by divine judgment" (51). John restores the gems when he is challenged to do so and scolds the philosopher as he does so for simply destroying the gems instead of using them to feed the poor. The two young men are converted through John's demonstration and begin to follow him, yet when they see their former servants dressed well, they begin to regret giving away all of their money. John transforms sticks and pebbles into gold and gems, offering the young men the opportunity to replace the inheritance that they gave away and ranting against the desire for wealth as he does so. While John holds forth on the evils that come with the desire for riches, pointing out particularly that "it leads to swollen pride in the present life and to eternal damnation in the next", a funeral procession passes by (52). John brings the dead man back to life and urges him to tell John's two errant disciples about the glories of heaven that they had lost by accepting the gold and gems. After hearing about heaven and hell, the young men repent and relinquish their wealth again.

The curious element of this tale is that it uses promises of future wealth in order to condemn a present desire for wealth. In some ways, the saints are demonstrating the "proper" attitude of rejection of the material world. Yet, the text itself revels in the repeated references to wealth and expensive goods as a sign of supernatural power.

Despite the fact that John says that a “rich man is the slave of his money; he does not possess it, it possesses him” (52), the glories of heaven are described in materialistic terms. The tale attempts to suggest that there is a difference between material goods that can be lost and the promise of “eternal glory” in heaven, but those “glories of paradise” are rendered as “eternal palaces built of shining gems, filled with banquets, abounding in delights and lasting joys” (52). The augured heavenly goods are essentially still worldly things; they are simply exaggerated and made eternal. There is not a discussion of the eternal wonder of God’s presence, of complete understanding of the reasons for existence, or other immaterial things. The closest the description comes to such immaterial benefits is the promise of “delights and lasting joys”, but those feelings are tied to the experience of the banquets and the gemstone palace, to things.

While some depictions of heaven might focus upon immaterial qualities that do not have an earthly counter-part, the understanding of heaven presented by this text does not. Instead, it offers an exchange that is quite similar to the formulas of shamanic exchange presented in the *Lacnunga*. In that text the reader is instructed to destroy costly goods in order to influence immaterial forces that will, in turn, provide a material benefit, such as curing illness in cattle. In *The Golden Legend*, the audience is asked to forsake material wealth, to give it to others rather than destroying it entirely, in order to win God’s favor and gain more and superior physical goods.

The use of physical objects as metaphors continues in other stories in the text, as does the imagery of the transaction of goods in exchange for divine favor and of signs of God’s grace. In rejecting the advances of a suitor, St. Agnes describes the glory of God

in remarkably physical terms: “his wealth never lacks or lessens; his perfume brings the dead to life” (102). While much of this statement might be read metaphorically, there is also an overwhelming physicality to the list; although she states that God clothes his followers “and adorns them with a multitude of virtues”, she also states that “He has placed a wedding ring on my right hand . . . and a necklace of precious stones around my neck, gowned me with a robe woven with gold and jewels, placed a mark on my forehead to keep me from taking any lover but himself, and his blood had tinted my cheeks” (102). Essentially, the text imagines supernatural “gifts” as physical adornments and even cosmetics, and the reliance upon wealth to convey the concept of supernatural potency should not be ignored.

The Golden Legend is not alone in making such promises. As Julia M. H. Smith points out in “Rulers and Relics c. 750 –c.950: Treasure on Earth, Treasure in Heaven”, the opening of the Exeter relic list begins with a description of just such an exchange. She notes that Æthelstan is supposed to have thought “about how it might be best for him to use his royal treasures for the glory for God, and for himself, and for the eternal benefit of his people” and receives a “divine command . . . that he should use his ‘transitory treasures’ to obtain ‘everlasting ones’” (73). Significantly, the king exchanges his riches for “the most precious treasures which could ever be purchased on this earth, which was the greatest of relic collections” (73), an exchange of material wealth for the material signifiers of God’s grace that Æthelstan sought for himself and his people.

Then, too, the description of the day of judgment in the first sermon of John Mirk’s *Festial* echoes the concept of the renunciation of earthly riches for the rewards of

heaven, stating first that “þer schall no pleder helpe, ne gold, ne syluyr, ne othyr yftes” if a man has failed to be generous, to give away wealth on earth in exchange for heavenly favor, but rather “as a man don, he schall haue” (4, l. 21-23). The concept of receiving heavenly reward in exchange for actions is a rather straightforward presentation of scripture, and Mirk references a familiar passage from the Gospel of Matthew when he writes “when I was hungry, 3e fedden me” (4, l.4). Yet, Mirk draws issues of materiality and the transaction in material objects into the images of judgment day, both with the statement that worldly goods cannot help (“ne gold, ne syluyr”) and with issues of class resentment, for he states:

Thys, good men, 3e schull know well þat yn þe day of dome pore men schull be domes-men wyth Cryst, and dome þe ryche. For all þe woo þat pore men hauen, hit ys by þe ryche men ; and þogh þay haue moche wrong, þay may not gete amendes, tyll þay come to þat dome”; and þer þay schall haue all hor one lust of hom. . . . For þus he sayth by his profit: ‘Kepytt your veniauns to me, and I wyll qwyt you (4, l.33 – 5, l.7).

Quite aside from the promise of future comfort in exchange for the immediate pains of the poor on earth, the sermon is also promising that the lack of earthly commodities shall be translated into the spiritual power to be part of the process of judgment of others, that the poor shall be “domes-men wyth Cryst” and shall receive the immaterial power to condemn in exchange for present poverty.

The consonance between the two texts is not surprising; Judy Ann Ford identifies *The Golden Legend* as the source text for the sermon. Yet, Ford notes that unlike Mirk,

Jacobus de Voragine “does not specify that the wicked will be rich men”, and while Voraigne provides God with assistants, “they are the saints, not the poor” (78). It would appear that Mirk’s *Festial* extends the imagery of material exchange to promise more than the deferred and eternal material rewards promised by *The Golden Legend*; it offers the addition of a shamanic exchange of immediate vengeance and justice for a later, and eternal, physical punishment of the rich (and other evil souls) who will be “bulmyng vp and don, crying horrybuly . . . yn pyche, and cood, and bryston, and hot leed” (5, 1.29-33).

The supernatural efficacy of the destruction or renunciation of material goods is another expression of the fungible nature of wealth; the social power represented by expensive objects can be exchanged for other forms of non-material power. Wealth seems to hold magical efficacy in the cures presented by the *Lacnunga*. It has the power to reshape a pattern of social rejection and acceptance for Sir Launfal when he moves from impoverishment to magically endowed wealth in the romance *Sir Launfal*.⁵⁷ It is even a necessary part of the creation of magical talismans in the *LIH*.

One final parallel understanding of the workings of the supernatural world appears in the texts. The spoken word and writing are employed to convey God’s power and to demonstrate its effect in ways that are similar to the techniques used in the *LIH* and the *Lacnunga*. That similarity may have a great deal to do with the general medieval conception of writing and oral story telling as a means of making the immaterial present for the audience, whether that immaterial thing is an author’s experiences of foreign lands in travelogues, the fictional exploits of a knight in romances, or the deeds of kings of the

past in the histories. It could also be that scripture and hagiographies are the source of the beliefs about the importance of writing in influencing the supernatural, since the Mass involves an oral recitation of scripture as part of the ritual of making God manifest in the world through the Eucharist. It might be that both causes are at play in the conception of writing and speaking as a tool for reaching past the boundaries of the material world. In any of those cases, the fact remains that the parallels among the texts exist.

The use of the names of immaterial beings as a written or spoken tool for changing the material world appears in both *The Golden Legend* and in the *LIH*. As discussed earlier in the chapter, the creation of the Seal of Solomon in the *LIH* requires the inscription of God's name; the creation of that seal is the first action described by the text and is, apparently, a necessary step in the magician's attempt to control the material world. In *The Golden Legend*, there is a debate between Saint Silvester and twelve Jewish masters, the last of whom uses "the name of the almighty God, a name the power of which the rocks cannot withstand and which no creature can bear to hear" (70) to prove that Silvester's teachings are without merit. That Silvester claims that the name that the Jewish master uses is that of a demon is almost beside the point. In both cases, the supernatural being is made manifest through the deployment of its name and could, to some degree, be said to have been given a physical representation through either the inscription or through the sound of its name.

Writing is also used to demonstrate the effects of God's grace in two incidents in the text in which the sacrament of reconciliation is conveyed through writing. Both of these incidents suggest something about the transfer of potency from the material world

to the immaterial and back. In one story a woman writes a list of sins that she has committed and asks Saint Basil to pray for her. At the end of the woman's list is "one sin more serious than the others" (112). When the saint prays, the sins are wiped off of the paper, except for the final sin that is not expunged until after Basil is dead and the woman places the confession upon his bier. In a second deployment of this trope, *The Golden Legend* describes a woman who is too embarrassed to make a verbal confession of her sins and who writes them down in a confession to Saint John. The written confession is placed in Saint John's tomb (which he shares with two other bishops, apparently because he did not want money spent on his tomb). When the woman becomes concerned that someone will find the confession, she goes to the tomb to ask Saint John to show her where the paper is. The saint appears "in full pontifical regalia" supported by the two dead bishops, scolds her, and shows her the still sealed paper. When she opens it, she that there is a message to her stating that the sin "had been completely erased and that in its place was written, 'Because of John, my servant, your sin is wiped out'" (118). In both of these cases, the act of writing becomes the means of reifying spiritual corruption, and the disappearance of the writing at least a representation of the cleansing of the confessant of the sin.

While the portions of the story involved in forgiveness could suggest that the writing is simply a representative act, a physical sign of the intent to beg for forgiveness and of God's grant of pardon, the intrusion of death into both stories suggests that there is something more at work than simple signification. Basil's prayers are, after all, apparently insufficient to gain clemency for the woman until after his death. While John

is already dead, the proof of the remission of the sins awaits John's physical return to the world and the delivery of the still sealed note. In both cases, the transaction in sorrow and remorse in exchange for eternal life depends upon a messenger who moves between the immaterial and material worlds. The presence of the saints echoes both the role of writing in the way in which the material and immaterial mingle and also the role of the confessor priest in the normal act of contrition. The fact that the saints are men who can act from beyond the grave and who return to "prove", each in different ways, that God has accepted the exchange acts as a kind of confirmation of the efficacy of the status of confessors as go-betweens for man and God, of the ability of writing to convey ideas in the material and immaterial world, and for the ability of man to enter into contracts and covenants with God.

That final point may be obvious, but it lies at the heart of the importance of saints in the medieval understanding of materiality. They are liminal figures, standing on the threshold of mortality and immortality, able to move back and forth in their status as men and women (sometimes fallible or subject to injury) while serving as channels for God's grace and power. They replicate, to a greater or lesser extent, the central miracle of Jesus's incarnation and death, and in doing so, they make the participation in scriptural events available to every believer, for the saints, too, are mortal men. At the same time, that liminal status serves the same ends as the proscriptions and lengthy rituals of the *Liber Iuratus Honorii* or the expensive and complicated formulae of the *Lacnunga*. It is difficult to complete those rituals and those formulae or to have the purity of devotion and willingness to suffer of the saints; each makes it possible for the members of the

medieval audience to believe that he or she could transcend the material world while making it difficult to believe that any given individual could do it. The ambivalence that accompanies the attitude toward material objects, and toward wealth in particular, as necessary components of the expression of immaterial power is echoed in the attitude toward mankind's own ability to truly grapple with the supernatural.

Physiologus and Human Nature

The *Physiologus* and the travelogues also deal with the question of man's participation in the supernatural world, though the ambivalence present in the other texts is generally dealt with as a matter of creating distance between the reader and the wonders of the immaterial world. In the case of the bestiaries, the animals are used as surrogates for man, as points for comparison and elucidation of man's nature. For the most part, the animals serve as mirrors for humanity, the exotic against which the audience might compare itself. The lion and eagle represent the extremities of man's nature, divine in regality yet corrupt, bestial, and tainted by the mortal world. To the degree that they replicate man's nature, the animals are accessible, if extreme and inflated, visions of humanity. However, some of the animals are depicted as being able to transcend the limitations of the material world. To the degree that they are models for man, the abilities of the animals implicitly question the degree to which man, too, can transcend materiality. However, the access that those animals have is often dependent upon their non-human qualities. Like the saints or magicians, the animals are figures that capture

the ambivalent attitude toward the supernatural, both the hope for contact with something greater than human and in the fears that it may never be reached.

This twinned set of feelings is at work in the travelogues, too, though there the distance between the subjects of the texts and the audiences is physical. It is also complicated at times by the subalternity of the subjects; they are part of foreign lands and different peoples, often suspect and the focus of the forces of exoticism and otherness. Whether people, animals, or locations, though, that distance allows the subjects to serve as distorting mirrors for the audience, magnifying elements of the audience's own nature for examination; that process is never quite so extreme or obvious as when supernatural qualities are imputed to the objects of study. Chapter Three will take up the issues of the specific travelogues in greater detail, but it is worth bearing in mind the parallels between the treatment of exotic animals and exotic lands and peoples.

As for the descriptions of those animals, the *Physiologus* is one of the most influential sources of depictions of beasts in the medieval period. As Hanneke Wirtjes puts it in his introduction to his edition of the Middle English version of the *Physiologus*, the depictions of and conceptions of the various animals described by the text, "occupied a place of special importance in the symbolism of the Christian world. Both directly and through numerous intermediaries, *Physiologus* became an established source of Medieval sacred iconography and didactic poetry and was used in the preaching manuals and religious textbooks of the later Middle Ages" (i). In *The Boundaries of the Human in Medieval English Literature*, Dorothy Yamamoto traces the various ways in which the influence of the *Physiologus* appears in Chaucer's description of Chauntecleer in *The*

Nun's Priest's Tale, part of Richard Rolle's writings, and even, citing Morson and Owst, sermon writers and the Cistercian order. The latter use is quite reasonable, given that the text is designed, not as a tool for observing and understanding nature for its own sake but "for what it can tell us about God's purpose and about how we should conduct our lives" (Wirtjes, lxix).

While every set of observations would tell us a great deal about the observer and his or her conception of the world, the *Physiologus* is a particularly useful tool for probing that relationship because of its didactic nature. In instructing its audience toward a particular, authorized understanding of man's nature and his relationship to animals and the natural world, the *Physiologus* offers a starting point for examining the depictions of that relationship in other texts. While there might be questions about differences from or resistance to the concepts of the *Physiologus*, there can be little doubt about the text's influence, given its wide distribution and deployment.

The depiction of the relationship between man and animals in the *Physiologus* ranges from fairly straight-forward parables about the way one ought to approach relatively mundane issues in life to more complex ones involving questions of man's essential nature. The story of the ant and the serpent, for example, depict relatively simple concepts. In the Middle English *Physiologus*, the ant's toil during the summer "muneð us mete to tilen . . . for ðanne we of wenden, ðanne is ure winter", reminds us it is proper to work in the summer, for as we do then, so shall be our winter be (172-174).⁵⁸ The Latin *Physiologus* claims that the serpent leaves his poison in a pit when he does to drink and assures the reader that "when we gather together we, too, ought to draw the

living and everlasting water. And when we hear the divine and heavenly word in church, we ought not to bear poison along with us" (19).⁵⁹ These are fairly direct directives regarding fairly simple conduct.

On the other hand, some of the other beasts explore more convoluted aspects of man's nature. The Latin *Physiologus* suggests that the lion and the eagle encapsulate a greater range of nature, that they are "unclean even though the one is the king of the beasts and the other of the birds. Because of their kingdoms they are likened to Christ, yet because of their greediness they are likened to the devil" (9). These two beasts encapsulate the potentiality of man, though the Latin *Physiologus* assures the reader that they are not the only two examples of such complexity, for "there are many others among the creatures who have double significances; certain are praiseworthy, while other are blameworthy, according to their different habits and natures" (9).

At the same time, the eagle, in particular, challenges the limitations of the material realm. Both the Latin *Physiologus* and the Middle English text carry the analogy of man's habits and natures further in the discussion of the eagle as an animal that can physically ascend to heaven to be rejuvenated. The Middle English text specifically mentions that it passes *through* the "skies sex & seuene, / Til he cumð to heuene" (40-41). This passage, like the others, is glossed with a *significatio* that states that a man can be "Old in hise sinnes dern / Or he bicumeð Cristen" (64-65). In that line, the metaphor of the eagle's physical ability to fly to heaven is explicitly related to man's spiritual ascent and rebirth. In that (relatively) easy flight, the eagle captures the anxiety over man's limitations.

In many ways, that belief, even though it may have been received as a metaphor or resisted as an accurate description of an eagle's behavior in the period, expresses the same conception of man's relationship with God and man's ability to reach beyond the material world as the central ritual of the *LIH*. In both cases, the texts implicitly express the belief, or the hope, that man may reach beyond the physical and transitory to see or to reach the eternal and immaterial. Yet, both impose significant barriers, possibly born of the anxiety that the goal may be out of reach. The *LIH* presents lengthy rituals that could easily go awry if not conducted perfectly. The *Physiologus* imagines that heaven is present and tantalizingly close. If only man had physical wings like the eagle, he might take flight and be reborn. Man's lot, instead, is to go through life and hope for God's grace after death.

That same impulse to examine the nature of man's life and ultimate fate is at play in the depiction of the phoenix, possibly the most obvious animal that can cross back and forth over the limits of the material world through its well-known cycle of death and resurrection. However, its relationship with the material and the immaterial goes beyond that aspect of its nature. Not only does it arise from its own ashes, but it also holds an ambivalent relationship with other earthly concerns, particularly with food. Guy Mermier traces the various depictions of the phoenix across a range of textual variations in "The Phoenix: Its Nature and Its Place in the Tradition of the *Physiologus*," and he suggests that in the non-Latin versions of the *Physiologus* that Mermier discusses, the subject of its diet "is rarely addressed". Two versions that do treat its diet range from the obscure notion that the bird lives near the sea and feeds upon "water and dry matter", as

in the Vienna *Physiologus*, to the insubstantial idea that the bird feeds upon the Holy Spirit”, in the Greek *Physiologus* (73). Much can be made of that last point; this is nominally a physical animal that derives physical sustenance from the immaterial, the breath of God upon the water, a possible analogy for the manner in which man’s soul depends upon God’s grace and sacrifice for its redemption.

As with the depictions of the attempts to influence the immaterial world in the *LIH* and the *Lacnunga* or the descriptions of the intersection of the immaterial with the material in the manifestations of saints or the description of the physical afterlife, the process of resurrection for the phoenix also involves expensive material objects, often aromatics and spices. According to Mermier, these can either be gathered by the priest of Heliopolis (in the Latin *Physiologus*, B version) or gathered by the bird itself (in the *Etymologiae* of Isidore of Seville). The pyre itself, if it is not lit by fluids from the bird or the beating of the phoenix’s wings in some versions, is lit by the rays of the sun (again, from Isidore) (75). In all of these cases, the causes and components of the physical fire that leads to its rebirth are outside of the mundane. They must be gathered by the bird or by a liminal figure who stands outside of quotidian work, a priest. They are lit not by a flint and tinder but by some essential nature of the bird or by the sun itself. In this extraordinary set of materials and conditions, the text shares with the other texts in this chapter a conception of the difficulty of moving between the material and immaterial, and it again echoes the anxieties of the audience about the possibility of ordinary people making the same kind of transition at the ends of their lives.

Although the phoenix is in many variations described as a solitary bird, the experience of its death and rebirth, with the concomitant implications for mankind's own experiences of death and the transition from mortality and immortality, is made quite present for the audience of the text. The difficulties of that passage, represented by the struggles of the bird to gather the materials and then mysteriously be made anew, echo the audience's struggle through life and hope that their own passage may be made as easily. So, too, do the simple parables of the serpent and the ant. Mermier makes the point, perhaps an obvious one but worth noting, that "if man is often complex and obscure, the animal offers constant and unequivocal qualities which serve as a mirror for man" (69). This idea helps to explain the prominence of odd animals and locales in travelogues. They serve as a tool that allows the audience to understand themselves, to understand their own nature through a comparison of differences.

The measurements of that tool become more complex when the object of its study involves other humans. When humans living in far places are difficult to understand, one method for beginning to understand them is to project the strange qualities projected upon animals and fantastic locations around those people, upon stable objects that can be examined in their "constant and unequivocal" state. The sense of difference is projected upon the animals and places as though upon a screen; the difference between the animals of strange lands and the animals known by the reader of the travelogues becomes the measure of the difference between foreign lands and the reader's home, between the familiar behaviors of the audience's culture and the customs of foreign lands. The

travelogues are essentially should probing at the definition of humanity, and thus at the limits of materiality, by using strange beasts and fantastic events.

However, the texts do not stop simply at projecting the idea of difference or strangeness upon animals. Not uncommonly, the travelogues describe creatures that blend the human and the animal, such as the werewolves who seek redemption in Gerald of Wales' *The History and Topography of Ireland* or the half-goat, half-man figure who discusses theology in John Mandeville's *Travels*.⁶⁰ The texts are, in this case, using the human body as the locus for difference. In her discussion of the use of bestiaries to understand the nature of humanity, Yamamoto refers to the point made by Stallybrass and White that, "in the fairs of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the 'pigmeys' which 'walks upright and drinks wine' and 'the creature looking like a wild man' who 'politely removes his hat to the crowd' display manners which 'amusingly transgress, as well as reaffirm, the boundaries between high and low, human and animal'" (2). The figures in the medieval travelogues and bestiaries do, in one sense, transgress and reaffirm those boundaries, tracing the limits of humanity and the material world as well as the familiar and the distant. However, they are not always wholly negative depictions. The werewolves are seeking forgiveness. The goat-man inquires about the nature of God. In some ways, the texts are asking whether those distant, different figures might not share the same hopes and fears as the audience. In some cases, the texts may be suggesting that the other is different, yet it may be human.

In the end, that confrontation with the human is the central focus of all four of these texts. The issues of the boundaries of materiality and immateriality are really a product of the attempt to interrogate what the relationship between humans and the material world is and ought to be. The *Lacnunga* and the *Liber Iuratus Honorii* seek to challenge those limits directly, reaching past the restrictions of the physical to control disease and fortune or to make contact with the divine. *The Golden Legend* offers its audience images of humans moving past the boundaries of the material world, bringing men back from the dead and offering hope of eternal life through God's grace. The *Physiologus* turns the audience's gaze reflexively back upon itself through its descriptions of fantastic beasts that encapsulate the extremes of mankind's hopes and fears about itself.

In finding those points about humanity, the texts also reveal the attitudes of medieval English culture toward material things. The stresses provoked by the confrontation with the limits of the material world call attention to the culture's conceptions of the kinds of power that can be exerted by social class, physical wealth, knowledge, strange times, and distant places. Expensive goods are used and destroyed in rituals because they can influence the material world and, thus, must be able to sway the supernatural. Areas marked off as outside of normal life in the medieval English mind, whether graveyards, churches, the wilderness and Ireland, must have some power over the immaterial *because* they are exempted from the limits of daily life. So, too, must people who stand on the margins, whether they are foreign, priests, or saints. Yet, in all of those cases, the confrontation with the limits imposed by the material world seems to

beg the question of whether humans can move beyond those limits. That which begins with a question about the nature of the material world ends with a question about what it means to be human.

End Notes

¹ In *Christian Materiality* (Zone Books, 2011), Carolyn Walker Bynum describes an instance of that kind of resistance to belief in her discussion of the manner in which the supposed transformation of pilgrims' staves into swords, which were later hung in the church at Wilsnack, was derided by some of the faithful, even though other such miracles formed the basis of pilgrimages (224).

Bynum uses that moment as part of a broader discussion of the lack of uniformity of attitudes toward relics, even within categories of medieval audiences. In particular, she rejects the groupings of "elite," "learned," "intellectuals," "layfolk," and so forth imposed by "French scholars and others influenced by them" in the 1970s and 80s and cautions against assuming unanimity of belief within those audience (129).

² This story is from the legend of Saint Andrew (and is discussed in greater length below).

³ Christopher Dyer presents a compelling argument about the nature of economic and social change in *An Age of Transition? Economy and Society in England in the Later Middle Ages* (Clarendon Press, 2005). While he does not address the marvelous and miraculous, Dyer does refute the notion of a static medieval period preceding the modern period, and he demonstrates a series of changes in attitudes toward land, housing, and work that would have shaped the culture's understanding of material goods. While this is far from a definitive indication of attitudinal changes toward relics, graveyards, churches, or the expensive material goods described in the texts below, Dyer's argument serves as a cautionary note against the assumption that such attitudes are fixed over the course of the roughly two hundred and fifty years between the texts.

⁴ The *Liber Iuratus Honorii* speaks of using amber, musk, aloe, and other expensive ingredients, specifically stating "*Deinde suffumigetur hoc sigilium ambra, musco, aloe, lapdano albo et rubeo, mastice, olibano*" (IV.57). In an article on a related text, Mauro Zonta suggests that "olibano" is likely derived from the Italian or Catalan word for incense ("A Hebrew Translation of Hippocrates' *De superfoetatione*: Historical Introduction and Critical Edition." *Aleph* 3 2003 (97-143).)

⁵ In particular, see the discussion of charm CXXXIII in the *Lacnunga* below. This particular charm involves sacrificing a tenth of the value of the cattle to be cured by the ritual.

⁶ See the Introduction, page ten.

⁷ See LII.5 of the *LIH* and Hedegård's discussion of these passages in his introduction to the text (33).

⁸ See below and also Mermier, Guy R. "The Phoenix: Its Nature and Its Place in the Tradition of the Physiologus." *Beasts and Birds of the Middle Ages*. Ed. Willene B. Clark and Meradith T. McMunn. Philadelphia, University of Philadelphia Press: 1989. (73-76).

⁹ Valerie Flint describes the resiliency of the desire for magic, really the desire for human control over the supernatural, though she does not necessarily put it that way, in *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe*. Her discussion of the way that even some early Church fathers attempt to redeem certain types of magical practice is particularly trenchant (see particularly chapters 5-7).

¹⁰ Kieckhefer suggests that the prologue of the text, which attributes the production of the *Liber Iuratus Honorii* to an attempt to preserve ritual magic from papal persecution, may place the composition of at least that part of the text to around 1317 (253-4), although that connection seems tenuous. Hedegård is similarly skeptical of that analysis. Similarly, Kieckhefer presents some reasons for thinking that the *Liber Iuratus* is more influenced by Jewish, rather than Christian, mystical traditions. The presence of the "seal

of God” does “seem to imply Jewish influence”, as might the attempt to see a vision of God, rather than Jesus, who is usually the “sole icon of divinity” for Christianity (255-6). However, neither of those elements definitively marks the text as necessarily Jewish in origin.

¹¹ According to Hedegard, there are three complete Latin manuscripts in the Sloane collection (14-15), which date to the fourteenth through the sixteenth centuries, though it is important to note that Hedegard corrects some of Thorndike’s references to other Sloane manuscripts (3883 and 3885, which do not contain versions of the LIH). From his description, it appears that Sloane 3854 (version A in Hedegard’s work), a collection of manuscripts of which the LIH is a part, is the most complete and faithful to some precursor text. Sloane 313 (B for Hedegard), a vellum manuscript written by a single scribe and containing only the LIH, seems to be a more heavily emended version with some variants upon the rituals and some attempt at a critical apparatus. Hedegard refers to it as “the work of an eager practitioner rather than a conscientious copyist”, with numerous marginalia, most of which seem designed to make the work more accessible, elaborating upon some portions and calling attention to others (15). Sloane 3885 (C in Hedegard’s work) is incomplete and glossed with few marginalia, though Hedegard notes that it corrects some of the “more or less obvious errors” of the text (16).

Hedegard also notes that there is a partial English translation (MS Royal 17-A-XLII), from which the English title “Sworn Booke of Honorius” seems to be drawn, and which Hedegard, following Robert Mathiesen’s arguments, states “must be earlier than 1533” (16). Mathiesen’s advances those ideas in “A 13th-Century Ritual to Attain the Beatific Vision from the Sworn Book of Honorius of Thebes,” in *Conjuring Spirits: Texts and Traditions of Medieval Ritual Magic*, Ed. Claire Fanger. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998. 143-162.

¹² See Chapter Four for further discussion of this aspect of the text.

¹³ “*Tucius est cum ursa et leone in cavernis morari quam cum muliere nequam*”

¹⁴ “*Semper et continue roget Deum per has sanctissimas oraciones, que secuntur, quia dicitur: ‘Beatus servus, quem, cum venerit Dominus, invenerit vigilantem.’*”

¹⁵ “*Pagani sacrificant spiritibus aereis et terreis et eos non constringunt . . . “Et quia fidem malam habent, opera eorum nulla.”*”

¹⁶ “*Nec per invocaciones suas veniunt ad effectum, nisi Christo fidem adhibeant.*”

¹⁷ Rita Copeland and Ineke Sluiter trace the etymology of “ycos” in *Medieval Grammar and Rhetoric: Language Arts and Literary Theory, AD 300 -1475*. In their discussion of Thomas of Chobham’s *Summa*, the authors respond to Chobham’s statement that “*Ycos* is the likeness of an inanimate thing to an inanimate thing” in a footnote where they suggest that “The term *ycos* (which appears in both extant copies of Thomas’ [i.e. Thomas of Chobham] *Summa*) is most likely a confusion of Donatus’ trope *icon* . . . with the Aristotelian term *eikos* (622 and 622n.)”

¹⁸ See Chapter Four for a full discussion of *Sir Launfal* and the significance of Launfal’s transformation.

¹⁹ Thorndike connects the *Liber Iuratus* with the *Ars Notoria* (Hedegård 10), and Hedegård believes that the “*Ars notoria Salomonis, Machinei et Euclidis*” (British Library, Sloane 1712, *folia* 1-22) and the *Flores Aurei Apollonii* (Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, CLM 276, *folia* 1-26) are one and the same text (10). Hedegård draws a number of parallels between the two texts in one of his appendixes (298-336).

²⁰ "*Cum igitur ignoratis superioribus angelorum illos consringere sit impossibile, nomina spirituum aeris et ventorum in precedenti posuimus capitulo, ut sui superiores clarius viderentur, et a quibus poterat quilibet subiugari*".

²¹ See the discussion of entry XXIX in the *Lacnunga* below.

²² Malmesbury, William. *Gesta Regum Anglorum*. Ed. and Trans. R.A.B. Mynors, R. M. Thomson, and M. Winterbottom. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006. (II.168.i.6).

²³ Veronése discusses the use of the names of God and angels in text of ritual magic at some length. Among her comments, she states:

"The use of names invested with virtue exceeding their simple meaning is one of the invariants of magical practice; on it rests much of magic's perceived efficacy. Anthropologists as well as historians have proven the importance of this phenomenon, which the early church father Origen analyzed in his often quoted *Contra Celsum* . . . They give to those who possess knowledge of them a power that has no limit other than God's will, which readily explains historical attempts to control their use" (30) and "If astral magic resorts to God's names, then ritual magic, based on the invocation of angels or demons, is the privileged ground for their use. Many texts, such as the *Liber septem nominum* preserved in a manuscript Florence, are entirely dedicated to such magic" (31).

²⁴ See Chapter Four for a complete discussion of the arrival of the women and the similarity it bears to ritual processes.

²⁵ "*Sua natura est guerras et mortalitates, occisiones, prodiciones et combustiones facere.*"

²⁶ "*Sua natura est seminare discordias, odia generare, malas cogitaciones, furta et avaricias*"

²⁷ "Generant . . . gaudia, lites pacificant, mitigant inimicos, sanant infirmos"

²⁸ "Cum igitur de perfecte bonis et malis diximus, de mediocribus hinc dicamus. / Set est advertendum, quod operans non debet operari in istis nec pro perfecte bono nec pro perfecte malo."

²⁹ "*Aer est elementum corruptibile, liquidum et subtile inter cetera nobilius passibiles recipiens qualitates et est simpliciter invisibilis set ipso composito videtur*"

³⁰ "*Et illi spiritus in aere reguntur secundum ipsius aeris qualitates, et ideo eius qualitates videamus*"

³¹ The text only addresses this point obliquely when it states in a prayer, "ut ex dono ac permissione gracie tue omnes illos angelos, quos invocaverit, ut per eso benigniter consulatur, sibi mittere ac constringere digneris, ut te mediante possit cum ipsis misericorditer consociari" (CXII.9-10).

³² "quod serviunt Deo per prius et naturatis per posterius" (CIV.1).

³³ The text states, "There are two types of Celestials, those who serve God only and the others who are of the nine orders of angels" (III.5).

³⁴ For a more detailed analysis of the dating and the arguments surrounding it see Edward Pettit's introduction to *The Lacnunga*.

³⁵ Two particularly interesting charms that employ such direct addresses to the physical elements that either cure or cause illness are charms LXXVI (the "Nine Herbs Charm") and CXXVIII, which contain appeals to

the herb mugwort and commands addressed to the “little spears” that cause the disease respectively. These charms are discussed at greater length below.

³⁶ Pettit, xli.

³⁷ Cameron, M.L. *Anglo-Saxon Medicine*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 38-9.

³⁸ In all fairness, it should be noted that Cameron does not denigrate the magical elements of the text in the same way that some of the earlier scholars do. While not he is much more interested in recovering the elements of the herbals that indicate a “rational” approach to the world, Cameron also admits in “Anglo-Saxon Medicine and Magic” that “[i]t is noteworthy that magical remedies are most common for diseases which were intractable to rational treatments, as many of the same diseases are today” (194). Thus, for Cameron, magic appears to be a course of last resort, a kind of retreat when other methods have failed, but it is not one of which modern audiences ought to be contemptuous, for we make the same gesture when confronted with similar conditions.

³⁹ Dyer presents his analysis of the costs of goods in *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages: Social Change in England c.1200 – 1520*, pages 62 & 215.

⁴⁰ This translation of “rushes” for “*cassuc*” was suggested by Joseph Bosworth in “An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online.” *Cassuc*. Ed. Thomas Northcote Toller and Others. Comp. Sean Christ and Ondřej Tichý. Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague, 21 Mar. 2010. Web. 11 Mar. 2013. <<http://bosworth.ff.cuni.cz/005879>>.

⁴¹ See the discussion of *Sir Launfal* in Chapter Four for a further discussion of Launfal’s exchange and transformation.

⁴² The possibility of influence of Latin in the charm is suggested by elements such as the prefixes and suffixes of the words *adclocles* and *arnem* and the apparently nonsensical use of *sedes*.

⁴³ See the discussion of travelogues below and in Chapter Three, particularly Gerald of Wales’ *History and Topology of Ireland*. See also Pettit’s discussion of the presumed authority of the Irish in healing (xxix).

⁴⁴ See Pettit xxix – xxxii for a discussion of the linguistic sources of the charms, particularly for his explanation of the presence of Irish prayers and chants in an Anglo-Saxon text. As he points out, that while “a number of scholars have studied [these passages], none has addressed the reason for their presence” (xxx).

⁴⁵ Pettit traces the history of the scholarship concerning the origin of the words of the charm in his appendix (vol.2 29-33).

⁴⁶ See Chapter Two for a complete discussion of the depiction of good kings. The story of King Horn, though a romance, is particularly apposite to this point because of the story of another, apparently historical, king who is mentioned in the prologue to the narrative.

⁴⁷ Unfortunately, it may be impossible to trace the charm back to an original source. Pettit suggests that it may be drawn from oral narratives, although he does discuss a number of possible analogues, including the *Second Merseberg Charm* and notes that Glosecki compares the action of the narrator in the charm with “Wulmæ’s action in the *Battle of Maldon*” in *Shamanism and Old English Poetry* (Pettit, vol. 2, 220).

⁴⁸ Pettit suggests that this herb is chamomile.

⁴⁹ William Granger Ryan briefly discusses the editions and distributions of the *Legenda Aurea* in his introduction to his translation of the text (*The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*. Trans. William Granger Ryan. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993. xiii – xiv.)

⁵⁰ These texts are far from the only ones to engage in the discussion of materiality in the Christian worldview. Augustine engages with a similar kind of discussion of the relationship between saints and material goods in *The City of God*. In many ways, the question of the relative importance of the material and immaterial is the foundation of the whole text, but the issue of saints and material wealth is treated specifically in book one, chapter ten, where Augustine insists that saints and good men lose nothing of significance when they are stripped of material goods. He cites passages from scripture, specifically the books of Timothy and Matthew, to demonstrate that real wealth is found in immaterial qualities.

Yet, in order to demonstrate this relative worth, Augustine himself is still forced to rely upon the analogy of the material in order to describe the immaterial and to express spiritual value in terms of expensive goods, and he discusses a kind of transaction in immaterial goods. He draws upon the stories of men being tortured during the sacking of Rome and Nola to demonstrate that those who placed their trust in immaterial treasures are better off, saying that “[t]hey could indeed neither deliver nor lose that good which made themselves good” (I.10). He excoriates those who desire material wealth; he states that even those who do not have wealth and who are only tortured for the possibility that they might have money hidden can benefit from being tortured, if they “had perhaps some craving for wealth, and were not willingly poor with a holy resignation; and to such it had to be made plain, that not the actual possession alone, but also the desire of wealth, deserved such excruciating pains” (I.10). Yet, Augustine does not suggest that materiality is wholly irrelevant to man’s salvation. In that same passage, Augustine suggests that there is a kind of exchange possible, for “no confessor of a holy poverty could be tortured without receiving a heavenly reward” (I.10). The possibility of using material goods, even if only to reject them, in order to gain spiritual benefit smacks of the same kind of shamanic exchange that occurs in the *Lacnunga* or that is described by Mauss in the potlatch ceremony.

⁵¹ Similar rhetorical gestures occur throughout the texts many of the texts about magic. The *Liber Iuratus Honorii* contains the passage that attempts to justify the practice of magic in the face of papal disapproval. Valerie Flint discusses the ways in which various Church fathers present arguments to redeem types of magical practice in *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe*. Then, too, see my comments on the *Franklin’s Tale* in Chapter Four, particularly the socially redemptive ending that reestablishes the social structures that are threatened by magic.

⁵² That position on the border between the material and the immaterial allows the story to interrogate what it means to be human, even if the passage itself is rather brief. However, Andrew’s story echoes much lengthier scriptural treatments of Jesus’s passion and death in some recognizable ways. Andrew’s doubts are not unlike those Jesus has in the garden of Gethsemane. Andrew’s story moves from his moment with the demons to an explanation of Jesus’s passion, and Andrew’s story ends with Andrew’s crucifixion. Ultimately, both stories interrogate the relationship between the human and the divine, probing the point at which one begins and the other ends.

⁵³ Those differences in understanding may not fall into neatly divided categories. Bynum takes up the issue of social identities and the dangers of presenting an understanding of social divisions as binaries in a cautionary note regarding the way that she employs “terms such as ‘elite,’ ‘learned,’ ‘intellectuals,’ ‘layfolk,’ and so forth” (129).

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⁵⁵ That is not to say that discussions of praxis are necessarily removed from theory. Bynum points out that “Steven Justice as perceptively argued . . . the medieval belief that miracles are manifestations of both the extraordinary and the unseen led to repeated interrogations – and sometimes rejection – of the supposedly miraculous” (224).

⁵⁶ Bynum is particularly struck by the difficulty Peter has with the reconciliation of those simultaneous states and points repeatedly to his ambivalent terms “uelut” and “quasi” (220).

⁵⁷ See Chapter Four for a further discussion of Launfal’s narrative.

⁵⁸ All references to the Middle English *Physiologus* are to *The Middle English Physiologus*. Ed. Hanneke Wirtjes. New York: EETS, Oxford University Press, 1991.

⁵⁹ All references to the Latin *Physiologus* are to *Physiologus: A medieval Book of Nature Lore*. Trans. Michael J. Curley. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979.

⁶⁰ See Chapter Three for a further discussion.

Chapter Two:

Kingship, Relics, and the Implications of Supernatural Power

Kingship and the processes of governance draw the relationship between humans and the material world into stark relief. Any set of laws and customs surrounding possessions and the actions of men toward other men naturally reveals a great deal about any culture's conception of material goods and the relative value of people and things. Monarchy goes further, though, by making one person responsible for the welfare of a group. The pressures of expectations placed upon kings for social stability and physical safety create a division between monarch and subject. The customs surrounding the physical treatment of kings (the reservation to the monarch of colors and fabrics, the requirement of physical and social deference paid by bowing, et cetera) are an acknowledgment of that difference. By themselves, though, simple physical markers appear not to be enough to express the distance of that divide between subject and monarch in the depictions of kings and the histories of kingdoms in the medieval period. The concept of monarchy appears to demand immaterial markers of distinction, some proof that a king, at least an effective king, has powers and influence beyond the material world. Yet, at the same time, those expressions of divine favor are as thoroughly entangled with the material as are the miracles of saints in *The Golden Legend* or even the rituals in the *Lacnunga* and *Liber Iuratus Honorii*.

In the histories in this chapter, William of Malmesbury's *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*, and William of

Newburgh's *History of English Affairs*, as well as the more deliberately fictional representations of kings, such as *Havelok the Dane* and *King Horn*, the texts use the supernatural in order to explain and make concrete some of the less tangible aspects of kingship and cultural identity.¹ The presence of divine favor, often expressed through relics or miracles, is both the sign of a good king and an explanation for his abilities. It is not the only sign; the texts refer to military success, effective political maneuvering, and the even handed distribution justice as tangible expressions of good governance. Ultimately, though, those qualities are, almost without exception, rooted in the moral qualities of the king, particularly in some justification for his separation from ordinary men, a difference that also elevates his moral character. Even in the pre-Christian period in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*, a period when direct expression of God's favor would present logical problems, the monarchs prove themselves to be honorable men according to the standards of their day and to be superior to unnatural foes. Brutus, in particular, with his authority inherited from his Trojan ancestors is, in some ways, equivalent to Dante's virtuous pagans, sufficient in capacity and nobility, lacking only in the experience of revelation. In the period when Christianity arrives in Britain, the belief in God and respect for his clergy becomes entangled with the personal worth of the monarch and with his quality as a leader. In the most successful kings, the relationship with the supernatural forces of fortune and divine favor are the ordering theory behind the principal of good government.

The insistence by the histories upon the presence of divine favor in efficacious reigns reveals as much about the understanding of the limits of human capacity and of the

material world as do the narratives about heroes in the romances, the stories about odd people and quasi-human creatures in the travelogues, the complex and fragile rituals of the texts of ritual sorcery, or the stories of the saints. As with the successes of the heroes of the romances, the execution of the responsibilities of monarchy are, according to the texts, apparently just out of reach of humans who are not supported by some force outside of themselves. Both kings and heroes are authoritative and authorizing figures, symbols for what one ought or ought not to be, inscribing the limits of human capacity by standing just outside of it through the addition of divine favor.

The fraught positions of kings leave them vulnerable to failure on grand scales, too, and the supernatural forces of the world provide a ready explanation for the outcomes of those unfavorable events; as with the rituals in the *Liber Iuratus Honorii*, the causes of that failure can be blamed upon a lapse or error that draws the wrath of God. The same attribution of fortune to divine wisdom and judgment can also handily explain those times when the immoral political figures in the histories, who are not always kings, succeed; when it happens, there is often some mention of a late repentance or some possibility of redemption of the wayward aristocrat or cleric, an excuse for the withholding of divine retribution. The conditions for the success of rituals and for dubious political success echo each other; sometimes the magic ritual seems to work, and sometimes sinners repent.

Saints, though, not sinners, are most often the most apposite parallels for kings. Like saints, kings are part of the mortal world, yet they are touched by divine favor. They occupy an ambiguous ground, legally and spiritually. Like the saints of *The Golden*

Legend, the monarchs in the histories receive divine attention; they are often surrounded by manifestations of the supernatural in the form of relics and marvels, and sometimes, like the saints, their remains are capable of serving as conduits for divine power. Like the magician, like the saint, the monarch has power because he is set outside of the quotidian, because he is a liminal figure standing on the threshold between the material and the immaterial world.

In order to explore these issues, the chapter is divided into five sections, one on the theories of kingship (with an emphasis upon those of the medieval period), a section devoted to each of the three major texts of the chapter, and a final section on the purely romantic expressions of the same concepts of kingship that appear in the histories. The chapter could be organized differently; one could easily treat the depictions of good kings, those of bad kings, and those of the redeemed kings whose personal changes redeem their kingdoms. In fact, each of the sections on the major texts contains such depictions. However, I have chosen to treat each text separately in order to emphasize the patterns of the appearance of each type of king.

While the presence of a corrupt king tends to mark periods of historical disorder in the kingdom, there is a broader underlying pattern of disorder created by bad kings followed by the restoration of the kingdom through the return of a good king or the return of a bad king to a state of grace. The histories do not simply present the individual stories of effective or ineffective kings; they create a narrative thread that runs through those reigns in order to explain the eventual triumph of the kingdom. The romances at

the end of the chapter take up that thread and demonstrate the way that it is interwoven into the patterns of the concept of kingship in fictional narratives, as well.

These narratives, whether putatively historical or overtly fiction, involving the salvation of kingdoms from vice and immorality can be thought of as echoes of the broader Christian concept of the redemption of the world, with the king standing in as a Christ-like figure with the additional caveat that the redeemer of the kingdom, unlike Christ, can sin and fail.

Kings as Mediators and Redeemers

Such a conception of the king as the mediator between mankind and the divine has been noted in the ancient and medieval world, and, indeed in cultures across the world, by a number of scholars. Mauss describes a similar set of issues surrounding the position of chiefs in the American Pacific Northwest in *The Gift*. He notes that a chief “can only maintain his rank among the chiefs . . . if he can prove he is haunted and favoured both by the spirits and by good fortune . . . he can only prove this good fortune by spending it and sharing it out, humiliating others by placing them ‘in the shadow of his name’” (39). Mauss makes these comments as part of his argument about the effects of reciprocity; in order to bind the loyalty of other warriors, the chief must give physical goods and do so to a degree that proves that he is superior to other men, much like the feudal lords in England or the “ring givers” among the Norse. In describing the formula of giving and reciprocity among Native Americans that Mauss presents that superiority,

in part, as dependent upon good fortune and the support of the spirit world through the destruction of goods in the potlatch ceremony.

That quality of superiority through supernatural support is codified in the legal and social structures in medieval Europe and is reinforced by the beliefs about the monarch's relationship with the divine. In the political arena, the king is both outside of the law and the source of the law, a tension that explains, in part, the concept of the monarch's sacred nature.² Just as God stands outside of the world while creating it, so does the monarch stand outside of society while governing it and participating in its exchanges. Kantorowicz explores that ambivalence in the legal conception of kingship in *The King's Two Bodies*, where he interrogates the concept of a monarch's two separate legal identities, one mortal, capable of dying and of holding personal property as any other man might, and one representing the state itself, immortal and distinct from his subjects.

The legal identity of the monarch is not distinct from the issues of supernatural superiority, though. Kantorowicz demonstrates that the legal reasoning that creates those two identities for the king as a religious basis in the concept of the monarch's "*character angelicus*" (8) and traces the concept at least as early as an anonymous Norman author of a theological and political work from around 1100 (42). The "Norman Anonymous" makes quite clear that both bishops and kings "are consecrated and sanctified for the purpose that . . . they be saints; that is, outside the earth and outside the world be they set apart as mediators between God and the people, having communion in heaven and moderating their subjects on earth" (qtd. in Kantorowicz 88). In this conception of the

political structure of society, bishops and kings would both stand as intermediaries between the people in their charge and both the immaterial forces of the supernatural and the social pressures of the law. Although one might suspect that the bishops would gain more practical value from such an equivalency, the fact that the anonymous author can advance the idea that bishops and kings have analogous roles in society in a serious fashion suggests that there is a kind of recognition of the tension between the concept of physical, material force and immaterial power, whether social or supernatural, and that there is a need for figures to stand at the boundary between them.³

Similar language in the honorary titles given to kings, such as the “Vicar of Christ” or the “Image of Christ” (Kantorowicz 89), replicates that concept, suggesting that there is an on-going need to bridge the divide between God and man, between the material and the immaterial. While the incarnation of Christ would seem to address that issue for Christian philosophy, there is apparently an on-going demand in the culture to make that connection more immediate and present through the concept of the mediation offered by bishops and kings.

In *The King's Body* Sergio Bertelli notes a similar set of concepts as he traces the metaphors surrounding the concept of monarchy from the ancient Egyptian and Greek through the early modern period. Bertelli focuses particularly upon the descriptions of the kings and the religious rituals of coronations. As he does so he notes the twinned concepts of the king as the head of the body of the state and as the representative of the divine on earth (10). For the former, he traces the descriptions of kings and the physicality of the metaphors of monarchy, citing sources such as the *laudes regiae* for the

Eastern Roman Emperor and its references to subjection of the world to the hands of the monarch (35-36) and King Alfonso the Wise's *Siete Partidas* that describes the king as "the birth and brain of humankind, soul and brain, and the others are the limbs" (10). For the latter, Bertelli notes that throughout classical and medieval times, "[l]ike a priest, the king was both the advocate of his people before heaven and the sacrificial hostage of heaven among his people" (22) and later noting the similarities between religious sacrificial rituals and the coronations (114-138). Those descriptions of kings as "the head and soul" as a "sacrificial hostages" echo the treatment of the kings in the histories in this chapter. The kings are made responsible for the moral and physical shortcomings of the nation

Daisy Delogu offers an explanation for prominence of those theories in the early medieval period. She notes that prior to the the reintroduction of Aristotelian theories of the monarch following "William of Moerkbeke's mid-thirteenth-century translations of Aristotle's *Politics* and *Nicomachean Ethics* into Latin" (8), Augustinian theories predominated. The Aristotelian models are more familiar to modern audiences and suggest that the need for a sovereign stems from man's social nature, that "social institutions [are] the natural, indeed irresistible consequences of his gregariousness, not . . . repressive or punitive" (8). The Augustinian theory of kingship, though, requires a ruler imposed from without because of man's fallen nature. In that sense, kings are necessary in order to restrain the baser impulses of the people. Therefore, when a king goes astray, the nation loses its conscience and its ability to govern its will. Perhaps even God becomes wroth because the nation as a whole drifts toward sin.

That is not to say that this impulse to understand the world and mankind's place within the framework of natural and, apparently, supernatural forces arrayed against him (e.g. death, disease, ill fortune) is the only issue driving the concept of the leaders of the society having authority in both physical and spiritual realms. There may be more pragmatic social reasons, too. Kantorowicz suggests that it is part of a broader pattern in society that creates similar fusions of identity, such as the "'mixture' of monk and knight postulated in the orders of spiritual chivalry" or the dual identities of bishops who also held titles as secular lords, such as "Odo of Bayeux who, at Lanfranc's suggestion, was tried by the Conqueror as an earl, and not as a bishop" (43). He points out that "this transference of definitions from one sphere to another, from theology to law, is anything but surprising or even remarkable. The *quid pro quo* method – the taking over of theological notions for defining the state – had been going on for many centuries, just as . . . imperial political terminology . . . had been adapted to the needs of the Church" (Kantorowicz 19). The transference of terms may be involved an attempt to understand and codify power by using analogous terms from different venues where power is exercised, from the role of priests and bishops in daily and legal life to the status of monarchs and the limits of their authority. At the same time, those pragmatic issues cannot be wholly divorced from the concept of the limits of the material world and the apparent influences of forces outside of the material. The depiction of kings and bishops as liminal figures may be an expression of hope that someone somehow might be able to assert authority over otherwise uncontrollable forces.

While the need for some intermediary between the material and immaterial helps to explain the depiction of kings, this understanding of the qualities of the monarch leads to some nebulous representations of kings in the histories, too. Even though the specific moments of inheritance of the throne, the particular invasions, or the details of political engagements vary among the kings, the underlying qualities that make kings good or bad are not necessarily distinct. That is not to say that all of the kings are not recognizable figures; clearly, many of them are, in one way or another.⁴ That occasional distinctiveness is only appropriate for works that are dedicated to, supported by, and read by members of the nobility, whether secular or clerical, and that are often about events and figures in which their ancestors (or in recent historical events, they themselves) would have played a role. Yet, the causes of success or failure tend toward the stereotypic.

A similar quality appears in hagiographies, which share an ambivalent attitude toward the material world with the histories on some levels. Like the intertwined division between bishops and kings in the tract by the Norman Anonymous, a division that suggests that the bishop and king are similar in status and authority and merely have a different area of immediate responsibility, the saint and the king are focused upon similar relationships between the material and the immaterial, though the saint and king approach each with slightly different emphases. In discussing the formulaic nature of hagiographies, Patrick Geary in *Furta Sacra* states:

A medieval hagiographer wrote the life of a saint, not to tell his readers anything about the subject's personality or individuality, but rather to demonstrate how the

saint exhibited those universal characteristics of sanctity common to all saints of all times the *vita* provides a vision of the stereotypic world in which truth takes precedence over fact, a world which is composed to the *topoi* gleaned from other *vitae*. Hence, to the extent that the hagiographer was successful in his purpose, the historian is thwarted” (9-10).

To the degree that histories share this quality of universality and of the depiction of a morality play at work in each reign, they, too, engage the subject of events as *topoi* rather than particular products of historic moments and social conditions. That tendency toward generalization in the histories, as well as in the language that describes the way power is used, elides the difference between kings and saints; in some ways, the king and the saint have the same function. They are both serving as examples for others to follow as well as providing some hope of control over the vagaries of fortune.

Although this framework explains some of the tendencies in the histories to use events as exempla, there is considerable variation among the authors and texts. The histories do not share an absolute set of standards in their interpretation of past events. They do not even necessarily fall neatly into the category of histories. Carl S. Watkins discusses the range of approaches taken by the authors of histories in the twelfth century and points out that Gerald of Wales is in some sense a historian, but one who “produced writings which spanned history, hagiography, topography polemic, exegesis and *exempla* and in doing so frequently traversed traditional boundaries of genre” (27). Watkins goes on to note the various ways that other authors, including Gervase of Tilbury, Walter Map,

and John of Salisbury, include elements of narratives, scripture, and discussions of marvels and wonders in texts that are nominally about historical events.

Why, then, ought one to consider such varied texts and varied approaches to “history”, in whatever sense we might define it? However factual these text might or might not be, they are popular, and they capture an understanding of kingship, of a particular and extreme manner of being human. Those parts of the text that may seem to be a less accurate account of the actual events may be some of the most essential to an understanding of the attitudes of the authors and audiences of the text. Geraldine Heng suggests that the elements of the fantastic that appear in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Gesta Regum Britanniae* is at least partly a reaction to contemporaneous events, including the atrocities of the crusades, and that those marvelous and supernatural events are an attempt to redeem history and national identity from the turmoil and strife of invasion, conquest, and the horrors of warfare.⁵ Even though Geoffrey’s contemporaries may, in some cases, been taken aback by his inclusion of elements of the fantastic in a history,⁶ the elements of that history, and of all history, that appear to stray into the hagiographic or the romantic are part of an attempt to understand the events of history and the people involved in them.

Despite the range of approaches taken by the histories in this chapter toward history, all of the texts share the tendencies to describe kings as figures whose decisions affect, for good or ill, the fortune of the kingdom. Their misdeeds translate into misfortune in the form of divine wrath. Their morality blesses the kingdom with prosperity. Some of the kings even leave relics behind that are capable of healing the

sick, further blurring the distinction among the kinds of figures who serves as mediators between God and man. In many ways, the stories of the kings, of their heroic deeds, and the wonders worked by the remains of the exceptionally good monarchs serve the same role as the reading of scripture or of the physical relics themselves. They reassure the audience that the immaterial realm is reachable, that it is beyond and in control of the daily troubles they face, that disease, death, warfare, are under the control of some force or action. The tales themselves become a kind of enclosure, a monstrance or reliquary, for the actions of the kings as representatives of both the human and the divine.⁷

In the end, these kings, figured as legends that are greater than human, encapsulate medieval England's response to the problems of external warfare, internal strife, the regulation of law, and the ever-present threat of disease and death that beset it. The problem of the limits of human control over immaterial forces is expressed in the depictions of the actions and misdeeds of its kings. In regarding kings as figures who can influence divine favor through their actions on behalf of the nation, the histories probe at the understanding of the framework of the material and immaterial and attempt to find a space for humanity within it.

The *Gesta Regum Anglorum* and the Divine Support of Kings

The first two books of William of Malmesbury's *Gesta Regum Anglorum* employ the supernatural in the construction of English kingship and English identity ways that illuminate the relationship among material objects, social identity the concept of

governance, and the perceived power of faith and magic. From the opening passages of the text, William conflates the behavior of the king with the success of the kingdom. The text makes clear that the health and well-being of the country is directly dependent upon the king's ability to follow certain models of behavior, first Roman and then Christian, connecting the proper models for secular rule with the proper model for the spiritual life.

While the text uses the connection with the Roman world largely to justify the inheritance of secular power and governance from the established authority of the Roman state to the English kings of the text, there are elements of a broader pattern of patrimony of thoughts and ideas, too. The *Gesta Regum Anglorum* uses the successes of the kings who take up Roman ways to set the stage for the later kings who accept Christianity as Rome itself did.

That argument of the text progresses from the early accounts of the British resistance to the Angles and Saxons, in which the British are considered proper to the degree that they are Roman, to the establishment of the Angles and Saxons as part of the English peoples, a transformation that only occurs when their king is converted to Christianity. The presence of the supernatural increases as the English kingdoms become more fully established and more fully effective as monarchies; as they approach the historical moment in which William is writing, the presence of God's grace in the support of the English kingship becomes more manifest. Kings move from destroying idols and removing the stain of paganism from the island to possessing relics and even becoming relics in their own right. The text also presents objects whose spiritual provenance is less explicitly divine as the history progresses, suggesting a growing breadth of spiritual

potency on the part of the English kings, inscribing and emphasizing a pattern of growth and power in the English identity that is expressed through its relationship with the divine and magical.

By the closing of book two, William's history reaches the Norman invasion, and it is at that point that the argument of the text becomes most clear. Attaching the success of the kingdom to the moral and spiritual qualities of its king allows for the creation of an honorable history for all of the English peoples. In displacing the success or failure of the various groups onto their leaders, the *Gesta* is able to suggest that there is not a deficiency in any of the peoples as a whole, that the problems arise only in particular leaders. By making the failures dependent upon the relationship with the supernatural and divine, the text obviates any lasting deprecation of the peoples who are conquered, for it also offers models for redemption and reconciliation. Kings repent and are forgiven, wresting their kingdoms from ruin in the process. Corrupt kings, whose immorality offers explanations for the difficult periods in the history of the countries, are followed by moral rulers whose sanctity restores the strength of the kingdom. Likewise, the merging of the various English peoples is explained and subsumed within the framework of moral turpitude and redemption. Just as the Britons are able to resist the dominance of the Angles and Saxons until the leaders of the Germanic tribes become Christian, until, that is, their kings begin to participate in the common spiritual identity of the land, so, too, are the English maintain an identity separate from the Normans until the country is weakened by the corruption and incapacity of their kings, particularly Aethelred and Harold. In the end, William of Malmesbury works to excuse both the

English and the Norman peoples as a whole; the various conflicting strains of English identity are reconciled, blended into a harmonious narrative through the auspices of supernal influences and divine purposes.

The creation of English identity on a purely social level is worthy of a study in and of itself,⁸ yet, something more is happening in the *Gesta*. William's depiction of the king's identity is not simply a matter of couching the unfamiliar in familiar terms; there is a translation of authority invested in that association. Just as the Church developed imperial power and reach, Malmesbury, in presenting the king as a sacred figure, argues both for an extension of the king's authority beyond that of a secular ruler. William is presenting an implicit argument in favor of a different kind of kingship in his depiction of the history of the English kings, one that presupposes that there is a single English identity that can be woven out of the disparate strands of the peoples that are eventually subsumed into Norman England, that unity promotes the strength of the kingdom (an idea to which he returns constantly in his discussions of the actions of good kings), and that the king as a mediator between God and man is instrumental and essential in directing the welfare of the kingdom.

While William situates his explicit argument about the growth of English power from the beginning of his text, the presence of relics as material proof of divine support for a king's power is reserved for those later figures who begin to unite the island and who, in doing so, prove their greater worth. However, even before reaching that crescendo, the *Gesta* suggests a gradually increasing authority and power on the part of kings through their participation in certain qualities, first secular and then religious. In

his prologue, he explicitly connects proper history and identity with the successful and authoritative examples of the Roman Empire, following the pattern of *translatio studii et imperii*. He promises “a concise first book on the history of the English from their conquest of Britain to the reign of Ecgberht, who, after various strokes of fortune had dismissed the lesser kings, made himself sole ruler of almost the whole island” (i.pr.5). Implicit in his argument about the importance of English unity is the idea that it is only the Latin, Roman model that can promote success. Discounting any knowledge that can be gained in the vernacular, he claims that “After Bede you will not easily, think, find anyone who has devoted himself to writing English history in Latin” (i.pr.1.) and that “It was therefore my design, in part moved by love of my country and in part encouraged by influential friends . . . to mend the broken chain of our history, and give a Roman polish to the rough annals of our native speech” (i.pr.4). William is creating a history of the English peoples, but it is a history that is crafted to emphasize certain qualities. The presence of the Germanic invaders is largely dismissed until they accept the outward forms of the Christian imperial structure, for he states that his work “will be easier if I leave to the end the kingdoms of the East Angles and East Saxons, which I consider unworthy of my on labours, and of the attention of posterity” (i.pr.5), until, that is, those peoples reach the point in history at which they accept conversion and the rules of proper society.

Those rules are set forth in a rather didactic way in the description of the early kings of Kent, Wessex, Northumbria, and Mercia, who, in general, are more or less successful and praiseworthy to the degree that they are proper Christians. Discussions of

good kings often precede or follow those of bad, and the traits that make the kings successful involve, as is not surprising in a history written by a monk, faith and a respect for learning. William begins with the Romans, firmly rooting the history of the kingdoms in proper soil, for Romans “held [Britain] in high regard . . . “Serverus and Constantius . . . princes of great distinction, both died in the island and were solemnly buried here” (I.i.1). As in Monmouth, the claim is made that the Britons conquered Gaul, in this case under Constantine, “where to this day their descendants still live and have grown into a great people, though in manners and language they have sunk somewhat below the Britons of our own island” (i.1.1). This action, though, leads to the rapid decline of the British, for it drains away the strength of the nation and expends the force of the kingdom in distant lands. In this case, it is hubris which causes the British people to fall from their state of grace. The Romans, nonetheless, are the model for proper behavior in the face of the pillaging Scots and Picts, it is the Romans who “gave effectual help by throwing back the enemy time and again” (i.3.2)

This is set against the depiction of “the king of Britain at the time [who] was Vortigern, unready and unwise, devoted to carnal pleasures and servant of almost every vice” “Amid all these disasters he paid no attention to business, and wasted the substance of his realm on riotous living” (i.4.1). It is in the midst of these disasters that the Angles and Saxons are summoned, a race of vigorous people who, William admits, have conquered much of Europe and part of Africa over the course of time. However, he attributes their success to the numbers of people produced by the region, employing an

interesting etymological argument when he claims that their birthplace is “known as Germany because it is the germinating place of such a horde” (i.5.1).

He dismisses a claim to supernatural greatness by citing their descent from “Woden . . . whom the English peoples vainly suppose to be a god” but who is, according to William, just a chieftain “from whom the royal family in almost all barbarian nations traces its descent” (i.5.3). These are not yet figures who belong to the English people; their right to rule is not yet established through their participation in the common Christian identity. Thus, their claims to supernatural power are rejected.

In contrast, the Britons are supported by figures such as “Vortigern’s successor Ambrosius, the sole surviving Roman, [who] kept down the barbarian menace with the outstanding aid of warlike Arthur” (i.8.2). While William dismisses many of the “false and dreaming fable[s]” about Arthur, he asserts that Arthur’s historical efficacy depends upon his reliance “on the image of our Lord’s Mother which he had fastened upon his arms” and which allowed him to defeat “nine hundred of the enemy single-handed” and (i.8.2). The Britons are favored by the “favouring providence of God, in whose hand is every change of lordship”; the success of the Angles and Saxons is attributed to “the sport of Fortune’s wheel” and to treacherous conduct that is prompted by greed (i.8.3).

In the middle of these conflicts, William depicts the secular salvation of the English people as dependent upon their spiritual rectitude. He claims that the English are only redeemed by “intercourse with the Franks” and the conversion of Aethelberht by Bishop Liudhard (i.9.2) so that he became “the first of all his dynasty to renounce the cult of idols” (i.9.2). Signally, “those who bowed beneath his power as a king were

overshadowed equally by his renown as a believer” (i.9.2), an attribution that furthers William’s depiction of the role of king. To William, “this is true aristocracy . . . to excel in goodness those whom you excel in rank” (i.9.2); spiritual capacity is linked in Aethelberht with the ability to govern, for “he passed laws in the mother tongue designed to reward the good and keep the wicked in check . . . leaving nothing in any transaction doubtful for the future” (i.9.2).

This example of proper kingship is immediately followed by the negative example of Eadbald, who “[n]o sooner cast off the restraints of filial respect than he threw Christianity to the winds and even violated the honour of his stepmother”, an example of poor kingship linked with a loss of faith and the violation of the tenets of Christian life. Because of this failure on his part, he loses part of his kingdom and is plagued by “the hourly visitation of an evil spirit” (i.10.1). This concomitant failure as king and as spiritual being further strengthens William’s depiction of the two states as inseparable. It is only when the king returns to his faith under the auspices of bishop Laurence that he is redeemed as a king and succeeds “in retaining his ancestral territory, [though] he never could aspire to his father’s eminence” (i.10.2), presumably because his lapse of faith renders him unfit to be a truly worthy king.

As the history progresses and moves from a discussion of various and disparate kingdoms toward a portrayal of a unified Britain, the involvement of the divine and supernatural becomes more explicit. That shift begins with the reign of Edwin, whom even the “stubborn Northumbrians soon welcomed” (i.48.2) as overlord. Immediately after him, Oswald casts down paganism, in a familiar trope, and causes “the worship of

idols” to sink into ashes (i.49.4). It is at this point that the union of the divine and the regal becomes most explicit, for the relics of Oswald’s body work a variety of miracles involving healing, connecting proper kingship with the manifestation of God’s grace in the world. The *Gesta* claims that “[f]rom his blood, where he fell, the turf grew green again and fuller than its wont of flowers; a horse was cured by it”, that “[a] little dust steeped in water used to wash the relics made a precious lotion, with which a lunatic was restored to his sound senses” (i.49.9), and other, similarly material signs of divine favor convinced monks to care for the king’s remains, despite their animosity toward him while he was alive. It is not insignificant that those miracles occur through the auspices of a king who unites a significant portion of the island, whom is even accepted in the northern kingdoms. William fashions an argument for the twinned growth of faith and fidelity to a common identity through the depiction of regal success and supernal puissance.

That implied connection continues through the reigns of Oswiu and Egferth, kings who are powerful only to the extent that they are pious, to the intrusion of the discussion of Charlemagne’s empire into this history of England, an intrusion that allows William to present another, stronger model of unified governance that is also deeply connected with the divine, in various ways including the emergence of relics.

Aethelstan, in particular, is favored by the presence of supernal objects. He is, by the standards of the *Gesta* a great king. He unites the island; William claims that he “brought the whole of England entirely under his rule by the mere terror of his name, with the sole exception of the Northumbrians”, whom he later subsumes into his lands through marriage (ii.134.1). He is, according to the *Gesta*, “well disposed and gracious”

to the clergy, “to laymen cheerful and courteous; to magnates he was serious in consideration of his own position”, and effectively suppresses the rebellions of the Northwalians (ii.134.5-6). Aethelstan is even revered by the kings of other nations, who “thought themselves fortunate if they could buy his friendship either by family alliances or by gifts” and who “sang his praises and extolled his merits to the sky” (ii.135.1).

The *Gesta* does not rest content to praise his qualities abstractly. In exchange for his sister’s hand in marriage, Hugh, king of the Franks, sends Aethelstan a series of gifts, including spices, “noble jewels (emeralds especially, from whose green depths reflected sunlight lit up the eyes of the bystanders with their enchanting radiance”, horses, an onyx vessel so modeled by the engraver with his subtle art that one seemed to see real ripples in the standing grain . . . men’s figures really moving”, Charlemagne’s sword and lance, the banner of the martyr and general Maurice, and a “small piece of the holy and wonderful Cross enclosed in crystal” (ii.135.3-5). The location of these gifts in the text, their connection with an English king supposedly renowned for his military strength, piety, and courtly ways a mere twenty four pages after the discussion of Charlemagne’s own kingdom is surely not accidental. All of the gifts emphasize particular aspects of a king’s power. The wealth implied by the spices, jewels, and onyx is suggestive of a superabundance of material goods; the horses, sword, and lance imply military might, underscoring the physical power of Aethelstan and reminding the reader of the accomplishments that the king has achieved without the support of those relics. Moreover, many of these gifts possess spiritual qualities. Quite aside from the remnant of the true cross, which can be seen inside the crystal, “solid rock though it is”, the

scabbard of Constantine's sword has "an iron nail, on of four which the Jewish rabble had got ready for the tormenting of or Lord's body" (ii.135.4). The lance not only brings victory, it is also "said to be that same lance which . . . opened Paradise to hapless mortals by the precious wound it made" (ii.135.4).

There is a superabundance of goods, an excess of signs, connecting Aethelstan's reign with Charlemagne's empire and with perfection in kingship, signs which conflate the military prowess of a king with spiritual power. As Laura Hibbard Loomis notes, William is drawing upon an established tradition associating Aethelstan with these gifts (437), yet William uses them to particular effect. The gifts are not merely military or divine in nature; Constantine's sword and the lance combine the two qualities in a way that is emblematic of the position of the king as Christ's vicar on earth.

By itself, the list of gifts might not be fully convincing, but they appear shortly before other, similarly supernatural events that are not explicitly linked with God and that support Aethelstan's claim to royal authority. For example, a shepherd's daughter receives an omen in which "her belly shown with the brightness of the moon, and all England was illuminated by its brilliance"; shortly thereafter, King Aelfred's son Edward happens to meet her and "left her with child . . . who was Aethelstan" (ii.139.1). While William distances himself from this description by claiming that he "learnt [of these things] more from popular songs which have suffered in transmission than from scholarly books" (i.138.1), the introduction of all of the potential varieties of supernal and physical richness serves to underscore the extent of the king's power.

Similar, though often less flamboyant, signs mark the later kings as the history approaches the moment of the Norman Conquest and the eventual reconciliation of the strains of English identity. Edgar, ironically known as “the peaceable”, receives a great deal of praise as a king who binds England together, forcing the kings of the Scots, the Cumbrians, all the Welsh kings, and “Mascusius the pirate king” to submit to his authority (a rather odd and comprehensive list of all of the powers of the island). William recounts the by now famous legend of “triumphal procession on the river Dee” where Edgar forced the other kings to “row while he sat at the prow, as a way of displaying the majesty of a king who held the power of so many kings in subjection” (ii.148.2).

In order to bolster the king’s claim to spiritual authority, William attributes monastic reform to Edgar, particularly the restoration of land to the monastery of Malmesbury. In response to a letter from Pope John, King Edgar indicates that the disturbances which troubled the Pope were caused by just and proper reforms that the king was undertaking. William makes clear that the king is simply restoring various monasteries to the charge of monks under religious rule. After recounting the letter, William thinks it not “inappropriate [to] commit to writing a vision which was shown [the king] by some heavenly agency” (ii.153.2). This dream, when interpreted by Edgar’s mother, indicates that Edgar shall have two sons and that there shall be contention between them. William’s account of the interpretation redeems this seeming break with a well governed England by claiming that all is well because “the dead son will reign in Heaven and the living son in this world” (ii.154.5). The dream also predicts

that “rascals” will persecute the Church and that the “northern peoples” will attack the English, but it offers solace, saying that the northerners “will never succeed in filling this corner of the world . . . [that] our English people . . . will drive them out, and England will be under its own government, and God’s, until the time already laid down by Christ” (ii.154.5), a clear attempt to redeem the narrative of English history from the imputation of injustice or random events.

Such is William’s desire to maintain that account that he emphasizes Edgar’s devotion to justice and law (ii.156.2), despite having to defend him against charges of cruelty and lechery. William explains away the rather unjust execution of Ordgar, ealdorman of Devon, “by his kingly care” for Ordgar’s son and the building of a monastery (ii.157.2). William forgives the kidnapping and rape of a nun by the king’s seven year penance (ii.158.1) and Edgar’s taking of a mistress by his faithfulness to her (ii.160.2).

Despite these flaws, William claims that King Edgar deserves praise and honor. Significantly, he states that “neither in his own nor in any earlier age has there been a king in England who could be properly and justly compared with Edgar: nothing was more saintly than his life or more admirable than his justice, except for faults which were extinguished by his ample virtues” (ii.160.3). Some of the versions of the text make even further assertions, for while the T and A versions of the text simply state that he is buried with the honors that he deserves, in the C and B recensions, the king’s body takes on the qualities of a relic after his death, healing a lunatic and a blind man and causing an abbot who attempts to defile the body to go insane and die. As with the statue of Saint

Nicholas or the body of Saint Andrew in *The Golden Legend*, King Edgar's remains have apparently crossed some boundary in the distinction between the material and the immaterial. Like the saints, Edgar achieves the capacity to serve as a conduit for God's power after he is, in one sense, no longer present. His physical remains are so potent that they are somehow more than material.

Similarly, Edward the martyr, despite his apparent lack of qualifications for the throne, is excused from blame for the mishaps during his reign. Instead, it is the contention over the kingship that creates chaos in the kingdom, according to William. The king's step-mother, Ælfthryth, "tried to promote her son Aethelred, a child barely seven years old, in order that she might reign herself in his name" (ii.161.1). With this division in the kingdom, a comet appears, harvests fail, and nobles and clerks attack the privileges of the monasteries. The arguments of those clerks are rebutted by an image of Christ that rebukes the clerks and by a building that collapses and either kills or maims all of those who are attempting to undermine the Church's power, leaving only Saint Dunstan "the Church's strongest bulwark" standing (ii.161.2-3). In citing these disasters, the text explicitly shifts the fault from the king to the division created by Ælfthryth and her supporters, for Edward "treated his brother . . . and his stepmother with proper warmth of feeling", was properly religious, and listened to good advice, all laudable qualities in a king. Like King Edgar, his essential goodness is confirmed by miracles after his death. At his burial site, lights shine in the sky, the sick, lame, and dumb are healed (ii.163.3). Also as with Edgar, the villainous are punished; Ælfthryth's horses refuse to carry her, and one of her supporters, Aelfhere, is "consumed by the worms which we call lice"

(ii.163.4), a fitting punishment for the sin of avarice which caused him to destroy monasteries and mistreat the body of king Edgar.

The punishments for greed and corruption also find their echo in *The Golden Legend*. Saint John points out the eternal loss which will fall upon two of his erstwhile disciples after they leave him in pursuit of the wealth they have lost by following him. Far greater punishment befalls two parents who accuse Saint Andrew of turning their son into a sorcerer; they are struck blind and then die. In both cases, immorality and impiety are translated into physical punishments for individuals in ways that are quite similar to the broader punishments of warfare and famine for kings who fail to maintain a proper relationship with God.

The tragic reign of Aethelred demonstrates just that kind of failure on the part of the king and the way that his personal, individual failure affects the kingdom as a whole. His reign is marked by portents of doom, and it is also linked with stories of avarice and necromancy in William's narrative. Aethelred's ascension to the throne is marred by Dunstan's prophecy that the reign will go poorly because of Aethelred's culpability in the death of his brother, a prophecy which is supported by a series of invasions and other misfortunes. Aethelred's character is repeatedly called into question; he is described as "active and well-built for slumber" and as one who "put off . . . important business and lay yawning" (ii.165.7). It is not the king alone who suffers because of his failures, though. Dunstan's prophecy specifically links the suffering of the people to the redemption of the sins of their leaders, for he tells the king "the sin of your shameful mother and the sin of the men who shared in her wicked plot shall not be blotted out

except by the shedding of much blood of your miserable subjects, and there shall come upon the people of England such evils as they have not suffered . . . [since] they came to England” (ii.164.3).

After recounting the tribulations of England during the reign of Aethelred, William’s narrative make an unusual excursus, recounting the legends of Gerbert, later pope John XV, who learns “astrology of other such arts” (ii.167.1) in Spain, of a band of treasure seekers who attempt to capture the treasures of Octavian with the help of a Jewish necromancer (ii.170.1-6), of two “old crones, who . . . were filled with one spirit of witchcraft” and who turn travelers into animals and sell them (ii.171.1-3), and of a man whose “lack of shame was fired by plenty of money and by ancient lineage” leads him to take a woman raised in convent as a lover and who is eventually struck down by lightning for his lack of repentance (ii.175.3). It is as though the text, having run out of ways to excoriate Aethelred in his own person, continues the attack through proxies. While William specifically allows for the possibility that John XV’s powers might not be from “the black arts” (ii.169.5), he nonetheless depicts him as using buried treasure “to satisfy his greed” while Gerbert is archbishop of Ravenna. In the other cases, the connection between greed, lust, and destruction mirrors the events that William recounts in Aethelred’s reign in England.

It is as though the *Gesta* must find some way to explain the fact that the Normans invade England without condemning the later kings. Cnut is a monster, cutting off the ears and noses of hostages, “even castrat[ing] some of them” (ii.179.5), until he actually becomes king of part of England. Then he “arranged his life with great statesmanship

and courage” (ii.181.3). Haahr quite rightly points out that William claims that Edward the Confessor was ‘a man from the simplicity of his manners little calculated to govern’, and were it not for the benevolence of God and the vigorous support of the nobles he could not have held the country together” (358), yet Edward does hold the kingdom together, and it is significant that he does so with supernal support. The blame for the kingdom’s disarray appears to fall upon the weakness created by the moral turpitude of the slothful king Aethelred.

On the whole, the text supports a theory of kingship and of history that is heavily dependent upon the moral, the spiritual, qualities of the kings as representatives of the land. In doing so, the *Gesta Regum Anglorum* creates a coherent narrative that elides the differences between the peoples that make up the contemporaneous kingdom and supports an impression that a unified kingdom under the guidance of a king supported by divine favor and supernal gifts is the inevitable consequence of history.

Kings, the Monstrous, and the Marvelous in *The History of the Kings of Britain*

While William of Malmesbury seems to be intent upon proving that the rise of the English kings depends upon their association with classical Roman virtues and their fidelity to Christianity, Geoffrey of Monmouth’s depiction of the power of British and English sovereignty depends more upon the concept of British identity. Nonetheless, Geoffrey of Monmouth employs supernatural sanction in ways that are similar to those in William’s work. Not every reasonably effective monarch in *The History of the Kings of*

Britain necessarily has a reign marked by supernatural favor and events, but signs, marvels, and miracles attend the most remarkable kings, though in the case of those who are most noted for their failure or immorality, those signs are often take the form of divine displeasure or marvelous events that bring about the king's downfall. Both authors explain the effect of the monarch on the kingdom through supernatural forces rather than relying solely upon physical and material demonstrations of a king's value, even though both authors do discuss the material signs of good kingship. It is as if the purely physical is insufficient to convey the weight of the author's judgments.

Like William of Malmesbury's work, Geoffrey of Monmouth's text often reads like a morality tale, veering between tales of good and bad kings. While William of Malmesbury argues that English identity is define through its Roman inheritance and that Britain is rescued from barbarism through the civilizing and pacifying influence of the Romans, Geoffrey Of Monmouth's thesis appears toward the end of his work: the Britons are never defeated by anyone other than themselves. It is civil war and dissent that allows the Saxons and the Angles to overcome a people who are able to stand as equals against the power of Rome. The stories create a concept of the identity of the Britons that makes them superior to all of the people around them while still explaining their eventual inevitable defeat. It is not that everyone else is strong but rather that the British weaken themselves, either through over-extending themselves in conquest, fighting civil wars, or by a failure to be properly Christian. Michael Wenthe suggests, this depiction of internecine strife is likely a response to the conflict between Stephen of Blois and the Empress Matilda over the English throne. He states that Geoffrey's history

“demonstrated the longstanding difficulty of maintaining a widespread empire centered on a Britain with an ethnically diverse population, a difficulty no less pertinent to the cross-Channel kingdom of Geoffrey’s Anglo-Norman contemporaries than it was to the cross-Channel empire of Arthur” (95). The presence of supernatural forces and foes serves three purposes, then: to explain the successes of the great British kings, to provide a kind of authority for the British people through their conquest of super-human and supernatural foes, and to explain the failures and eventual conquest of the native Britons.

Geoffrey begins his foundational myth with the story of the Brutus, of his descent from Troy, the misfortune that causes him to leave his home in Italy, the liberation of the various descendants of the peoples of Troy, and the arrival of the early Britons in their new homeland. For the most part, this section of the story is devoid of supernatural elements, as is almost appropriate for a history that is attempting to bolster the claim of the British monarchs to claims of divine favor. However great Brutus is, however noble the qualities his descendants have inherited from Troy, true divine sanction is reserved for those who inhabit Britain and the Christian monarchs who rule them.

Nonetheless, there are certain indications that Brutus and his followers are marked by something extraordinary. Not only does Brutus impress the descendants of Troy who are living in Greece to the extent that they are willing to follow him, he also leads them successfully into battle to win their freedom, defeating Pandrasus and eventually winning Pandrasus’s daughter for his wife (63). Pandrasus’s concession is interesting, for he echoes the qualities upon which later kings of Britain will rely; he states that he has lost because “the gods are hostile to me”, and he takes comfort in the fact that Brutus has the

investments of inherited authority and the hallmarks of monarchy, for the “nobility which flourishes in him, and his fame . . . show him to be of the true race of Priam and Achises” (63). The narrator does not confirm that the gods favor one side or the other, this is a pre-Christian invocation, after all, but the sense that kings must be marked by supernatural favor and inner worth is present, nonetheless.

That worth and supernatural favor are confirmed in the long struggle that Brutus and Corineus face to lead their people to Britain, particularly the fights with the giants. While there is no explicit statement that the Christian God favors the pagan proto-Britons, Corineus’s defeat of the giant Gogmagog demonstrates his ability to overcome scriptural foes, which at least implies that the pagan Britons are aligned with the divine. Then, too, Geoffrey states that the later failures of the Britons are the result of the “vengeance of God [which] overtook them because of their arrogance” (34), which is, again, at least a tacit suggestion that the successes of the early Britons have some heavenly approbation, even if the people are pagans in that age.

Those successes stand in opposition to the kings who fail to behave properly and who face some sort of retribution because of their behavior. The early British king Mempricius acts treacherously, killing his brother and “exercising so great a tyranny over the people that he encompassed the death of almost all the more distinguished men” (78). After completing his corruption by “abandon[ing] himself to the vice of sodomy, preferring unnatural lust to normal passion” (78), Mempricius is torn apart by wolves, an act of barbarism that echoes his own actions.⁹ While there is not an explicit suggestion that supernatural forces are involved, nature itself, in the form of wolves, seems to have

acted in at least a marvelous fashion, requiting Mempricius's inappropriate actions and violations of natural laws with a just and poetic death.

Likewise, hubris claims King Bladud, who "encouraged necromancy" and who constructs a pair of wings and is smashed to fragments on top of the Temple of Apollo (81). Signally, Bladud is dashed upon the temple of Apollo, echoing the myth of Icarus and underscoring the presumption of his actions. Morvidus is claimed by his ruthlessness and, arguably, by over-weening pride, too. Morvidus has many of the qualities necessary to be a remarkable warrior, for "[i]n the whole land there was no one who was as brave as he, or who could resist him in a fight", and a generous leader who "distributed gifts most openhandedly" (102). He is undermined by his pride in his fighting abilities and by his treatment of his enemies, for he was also guilty of "the most outrageous cruelty", in one case killing unarmed prisoners one by one until he is exhausted and then ordering the remaining prisoners to be skinned and burned while they are still alive (102). Morvidus is killed when he attempts to fight a monster single handed and is devoured whole. Whatever worth that Morvidus has as a king is apparently undermined by his immoral treatment of his foes.

Generally speaking, though, the tales of immoral kings are surrounded by stories of kings who behave properly. Morvidus is preceded by Gurguit Barbtruc, who reigns respectably enough, and is followed by Gorbonianus, who honors the gods and restores the temples. These gestures of morality by Gorbonianus are paired with and precede Geoffrey's comments about the practical, material issues of his governance. The remark about Gorbonianus's treatment of the gods is followed by the statement that he "insist[ed]

upon common justice for his people” (102). The note about the rebuilding of the temples is followed by the description of the way that “a great abundance of wealth flooded into the island, such, indeed, as was enjoyed by none of the neighbouring countries” (102-3). It is not enough for Geoffrey to suggest that piety is rewarded through prosperity; he also has to assure his readers that Gorbonianus was not simply benefitting from favorable economic conditions in his day, and he has to demonstrate the effect of Gorbianus through material objects. Geoffrey captures and expresses the effects of divine favor in wealth.

Once Christianity is introduced, the connection between the morality (and Christianity) of the king and the welfare of his people becomes even more explicit. While the ill-fated expeditions to Gaul and Rome, which strips Britain of its young men and best warriors, begins after a long series of peaceful exchanges of leaders between Britain and Rome. The flow of men out of Britain becomes problematic when Maximianus, a British king, develops “an obsession with power, because of the enormous amount of gold and silver that flowed in to him daily” (139). That leads to the forced migration of some Britons to the newly conquered lands and to the forced marriage of some women “who preferred chastity to marriage and would rather have forfeited their lives among no matter what people than have become rich in this way” (142). Geoffrey couches his comment in a way that entangles the desire for worldly goods with an offense against the religious, or potentially religious, British women. It suggests a moral culpability to the decisions of the kings involved that sets the stage for the later failure of the British; their kings desired the inappropriate goods and power, offended God, and are

eventually called to task for their failure. Geoffrey later laments, “Oh, how God avenges himself for past sins! Alas for the absence of so many warlike soldiers through the madness of Maximianus” (147). Essentially, the fall of the Britons who have remained on the island is imputed to the failure of their kings to maintain their proper relationships with material things, namely the desire for inordinate wealth that undoes Maximianus and that leads to his decision to invade Gaul) and with the immaterial (through the kings’ decisions that offend God).

The period that follows contains many laments regarding the actions of pagans in Britain, including the night of the long knives orchestrated by Hengist, but the most significant issues do not recur until Vortigern’s reign and defeat. The prophecies that Merlin delivers to Vortigern and Ambrosius’s rallying speeches to his men both focus upon the way that the foreign pagans, the Saxons under Vortigern and Hengist, have threatened both the political life and the religious life of Britain. In addition to broader prophecies that Merlin makes about the fate of the kingdom, Merlin delivers a set of predictions that Vortigern will be killed when the sons of Constantine return to avenge their father’s death and to conquer the Saxons. Signally, Merlin predicts that Ambrosius will “restore peace to the people and build up the Church again” (186). Similarly, in urging the Britons to focus first on destroying Vortigern, Ambrosius Aurelius cites Vortigern’s betrayal of Constantine and Constans, the importation of pagans, that he has “exiled the nobility, laid waste a fertile country, destroyed holy churches and virtually obliterated Christianity from one sea to the other” and that it is “By God’s will” that Vortigern is about to be destroyed (188). In this, Geoffrey again pairs the concept of

good governance with the proper treatment of the Church. It is as though the formula, repeated by both figures, is that the treatment of the people (especially nobles), the land, and the Church are the same.

By contrast with Vortigern and Hengist, Aurelius and, later, Arthur, are kings who are properly aligned with both the social and the spiritual expectations of the culture, as presented by Geoffrey. Hengist and the Saxons fear Aurelius because he was “brave and hearty . . . liberal in his gifts, regular in his attendance at divine services, modest in all his behavior and unwilling ever to tell a lie” (188), suggesting that the with the supernatural is a concomitant with physical bravery and generosity to followers and that all three are part of the definition of proper kingship. Geoffrey continues that suggestion as he describes Aurelius’s response to the devastation of the kingdom, stating that as Aurelius marches toward the Saxons, “he passed through the different regions, he grieved so see how desolate they were, but most of all to find the churches razed to the ground. He swore that he would restore them, if only he were victorious” (189). Indeed he does so; Aurelius’ first action after defeating his enemies is to order the restoration of the destroyed churches and to undertake the rebuilding of the metropolitan cathedral of York. After describing his rebuilding projects in York and London, the text refers to his restoration of laws and his equitable division of vacant estates, again presenting the rebuilding of the church as concomitant with rebuilding the laws and social order of the kingdom (194).

Although the monarch, as a liminal figure between God and man, is the primary focus of the twinned concept of fidelity to God and to the social order, that construction

of bravery and fidelity to Church and land is not limited to the king. When the Britons come to meet with the Saxon army, Eldol, the Duke of Gloucester, states that he would be happy to die that day if only God would grant that he were able to fight with Hengist in order to avenge the treachery of the assassinations Hengist and his men undertook (190). Eldol attributes his survival to divine intervention, for “God placed a wooden pole in [Eldol’s] hand” so that he might defend himself and escape (190). Eldol is essentially committing his life to righting the treachery of Hengist, treachery which undermines the social order by challenging the bonds of honor and proper behavior, and trusting in providence to allow that sacrifice to be meaningful. In this sense, Eldol is serving as a model for men who are loyal followers of a king, and Geoffrey has Aurelius endorse this offer by echoing Eldol’s sentiment. Aurelius follows Eldol’s comment with a tripartite exhortation, that his men should “place all their hope in the Son of God, to attack their enemies boldly and to fight as one man for their homeland” (190). In that statement, Geoffrey of Monmouth interweaves three sources of identity, the personal sense of honor demonstrated through courage, the nascent sense of identity drawn from nationhood, and the communal identity of Christians dependent upon the supernatural support of the divine in their war against the pagans.

Aurelius’s actions after the war confirm these braided strands of British identity, particularly the supernatural sanction for the British kingdom, expanding the immaterial potency of the island beyond suggestions of divine favor through physical objects and signs. It is not enough that the foreigners have been driven out of the island and the Britons bound together by a sense of brotherhood. When Aurelius bursts into tears at the

site the slaughter of unarmed Britons during the night of long knives, he plans a monument in consultation with Merlin, who suggests getting the Giant's Ring from Mount Killaraus in Ireland because the stones have healing powers (196), literally adding to the well-being of the nation by taking a source of metaphysical power to his country. Uther, Aurelius's brother, takes fifteen thousand men, defeats the Irish handily, and attempts to take the stones. Merlin's knowledge and capacity for working in ways beyond simple physicality is demonstrated when fifteen thousand Britons are unable to move the stones. Merlin, on the other hand, is able to place his equipment and do so easily, "thus proving his artistry was worth more than any brute strength" (198), an act that helps to confirm his authority as a wise man, if the text has not done so already through his predictions.

Both Merlin's support of the kingdom and his claims regarding the future greatness of Briton's monarchs all suggest that the monarchs are blessed with potency beyond the merely material, particularly through his interpretations of the omens surrounding Aurelius's death. When Aurelius is killed, "a star of great magnitude and brilliance, with a single beam shining from it" appears, and the beam forms "the shape of a dragon. From the dragon's mouth stretched forth two rays of light, one of which seemed to extend its length beyond the latitude of Gaul, while the second turned towards the Irish Sea and split up into seven smaller shafts of light" (200-1). Merlin interprets this sign, indicating that the star signifies Aurelius "in person, and so does the fiery dragon beneath the star. The beam of light, which stretches towards the shore of Gaul, signifies [Arthur] will be a most powerful man. His dominion shall extend over all the

kingdoms which the beam covers”, a final point of confirmation that the king possesses more than human significance for his kingdom (201). Nature itself appears to take notice of his death in a way that links the king’s greatness and death with the future of the kingdom.

This relationship among the material sources of identity drawn from behavior on the battlefield and the immaterial sense of identity created through the social bonds of a shared homeland and religious identity appears throughout Arthur’s reign. When Arthur is about to fight the Saxons, who have treacherously pledged to leave Britain and then returned to pillage some more, forcing Arthur to execute the hostages they left behind, Dubricius, the Archbishop of the City of the Legions, urges the Britons to fight because the men are Christians, because of the loyalty they owe their homeland and their fellow-countrymen. He even draws the men into a kind of reenactment of Jesus’s life when he says, “Whoever suffers death for the sake of his brothers offers himself as a living sacrifice to God and follows with firm footsteps behind Christ Himself, who did not disdain to lay down His life for His brothers” (216). This speech does a number of interesting things. It combines the concept of personal honor and filial loyalty with the concept of fighting for a country by employing the language of family. At the same time, the use of the term “brother” has a scriptural echo, as in the phrase “whatsoever you do for the least of my brothers”, though Dubricius uses the language to urge men to kill. Finally, it conflates that concept of loyalty and service to the kingdom with Christian devotion. The self-sacrifice (very much in accord with the shamanic exchanges in the *Lacnunga*) of a soldier’s death for his fellow-countrymen (and through them, for the

kingdom) is the some kind of exchange made by Christ himself for the world. In all, the passage interrogates the interaction between the material and the immaterial, at once conflating the physical action of fighting with the immaterial force of loyalty and piety while at the same time prioritizing the immaterial through the relationship with God and fellow-countrymen.

After the speech, though, the text's attention shifts to Arthur and his actions and reactions. In this case, too, the king is the focus of the intersection between the material and the immaterial and the model for his people. While the text states that everyone girds themselves for war, it talks extensively about the way that Arthur puts on "across his shoulders a circular shield called Pridwen, on which there was painted a likeness of the Blessed Mary, Mother of God, which forced him to be thinking perpetually of her" (217), and, like the painting on Gawain's shield in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, it serves as a signifier of Arthur's relationship with the divine. Arthur is further aligned with supernatural forces through his "peerless sword, called Caliburn, which was forged in the Isle of Avalon" (217). When he attacks, Arthur "drew his sword Caliburn, called upon the name of the Blessed Virgin . . . Every man whom he struck, calling upon God as he did so, he killed at a single blow" (217), a somewhat disturbing image and use of Christian piety, but one that further establishes Arthur as God's representative on earth, dealing out justice and divine wrath to the treacherous pagans.

As with Ambrosius, the narrative provides Arthur with the opportunity to demonstrate the proper balance between the exercise of physical force and the obedience to divine will and social custom. Arthur spares the Irish after their bishops come before

him with bare feet and the relics of saints and the treasures of their churches in their hands, begging him to show pity and to relent in his attacks (this despite the fact that the Irish helped to resume the war). Then, too, while his fight with the giant on Mont- Saint- Michel is another example of his physical prowess, Arthur's decision to go into that fight is founded upon the loyalty that he owes to Hoel and his duty to rescue Hoel's niece, Helen; since Hoel is Arthur's cousin and loyal follower who aided Arthur during his war with the Saxons, Arthur is essentially acknowledging the same bonds of social and familial expectations that Dubricius urges all of the Britons to remember in their fight against the pagan Saxons. In facing the giant, Arthur proves that he is yet again an exemplar for his people both because he is willing to risk his life who threaten the fabric of society because he faces such an unnatural foe, making Arthur's triumph even greater than the men who follow him.

The incidents in the lives of both of these kings reveals the balance that the text presents between the demands of the material world and the need to follow the requirements of the divine and immaterial. Those who are drawn into too great a love of the material, as Maximianus is when he pursues conquests because of his love of money, or who ignore the "proper" relationship with the supernatural, as do the pagans, are excoriated by the text. Yet, *The History of the Kings of Britain* does not paint kings and nobles as ascetics. Instead, it shows the concerns for the material well-being of the kingdom working in tandem with the obedience to divine law. The king serves both as a mediating presence and as a kind of model for that proper relationship, altogether a

Christ-like presence, in the sense that the monarch's function, viewed in that light, is to save the kingdom and to teach it through laws and proper behavior.

Divine Sanction in the *History of English Affairs*

A similar sense of a morality play or a hagiographic set of exempla runs throughout William of Newburgh's *History of English Affairs*, even though William resists many of the easy intrusions of the supernatural, particularly the magical rather than the divine, that William of Malmesbury or, particularly, Geoffrey of Monmouth embrace.¹⁰ William of Newburgh's text suggest that he is skeptical of events that contradict other reputable authors or reliable witnesses, and he admits to his uncertainty in those cases when he believes that he does not have sufficient information to warrant a firm conclusion.¹¹ That does not mean that William of Newburgh does not present supernatural causes for the actions of kings or the events in the kingdom. His history presents an understanding of kings that is fully consonant with Kantorowicz's analysis of the dual-natured king as both monarch and representative of the divine, mortal man and immortal representative of the state. Yet, because William is skeptical of events and resistant to things that he regards as fanciful, his history is quite useful for the examination of the attitudes toward the immaterial in the period. The significant role that supernatural, particularly divine, forces play in even a careful, skeptical author's text suggests that the concept of kingship that places the monarch somewhat outside of the boundaries of the material, mortal realm is not a product of a desire to romanticize or entertain.

William of Newburgh is quite explicit about the seriousness of his intent in his task. In the prologue to his history, William takes Geoffrey of Monmouth's history to task for "the infantile stories of . . . prophecies" of Merlin and for the fact that he "gives space to fables without substance" (31) and attributes them to Geoffrey's desire to provide a better history and a more important identity for the Britons than they deserve. In contrasting himself with Geoffrey, William continuously makes reference to his sources, particularly to Bede and Gildas, and, in his presentation of the events of his own life time to witnesses he has interrogated.¹² If William is in error regarding events or their causes, it would appear not to be a deliberate fiction, for he wishes to enter the rolls of those who present the events of their day in a "scrupulous and faithful" manner (37).

William's careful depiction of history, along with the interwoven understanding of the supernatural forces at play in the world around him, appears in his discussion of William I. William of Newburgh does not present the king as an unblemished figure. He notes that the king is consecrated by Ealdred, archbishop of York, after Stigand, archbishop of Canterbury, refuses to perform the ritual because of William the Bastard's violation of another noble's lands, and suggests that Ealdred came to this decision out of a recognition of necessity and as a means of "soften[ing] this most aggressive man, who was still breathing threats and slaughter against the people" (39). While there is an obvious possible agenda in suggesting that a conqueror could be emolliated, so that he might at some point become worthy of being a king and that repentance and forgiveness is possible for both the conqueror and conquered, at the very least William of Newburgh is willing to present the image of king as a human figure, capable nuance. While

William I shows considerable submission to Ealdred and “allowed himself *without resentment* to be commanded by Ealdred” (39, my emphasis added), William of Norwich also recounts the way that William I pursued vengeance against Stigand through canonical censure. William of Norwich’s analysis thus includes the way that the king displays submission to the Church, while still maintaining some ambivalence toward him because of the “shedding so much Christian blood” and his political maneuverings (41).

Significantly, that painstaking presentation does not elide the supernatural elements of William’s reign, at least as represented by William’s funeral. There are two two minor oddities. In one event a man appears at William’s funeral demanding compensation for the land where William was to be buried, land that taken by the king in order to build a monastery. As William recounts this event, he remarks, “All present were astonished, thinking that this had occurred by God’s judgment to make manifest the emptiness of transient power” (41). The event is certainly not a miracle, but it is a definite commentary upon the perception of supernatural versus material power. William even turns it into a parable, noting that the nobles present “first met the wish of that living dog as though he were the better, and only then did they carry out the proper rites for the dead lion” (41).

In making the rhetorical gesture of extracting an exemplum from an event, William is engaging in the same kind of treatment of history that Geary attributes to hagiography, which is significant because both types of text serve the same function in that moment. They are probing at the specific events in human life in order to define the limits of human power and capacity. In the case of this moment in William of

Newburgh's history, those limits are defined by the parable that he draws; human life ends at some point and while the forces of the immaterial and divine continue.

In many ways, the significance of that rather mundane, if socially awkward, moment is reinforced by the paragraph following it, which recounts what appears to be an actual marvel. William of Newburgh comments upon William I's guilt in God's eyes for invading Britain through the appearance of the land where the Battle of Hastings occurred. He claims that it is to the way that the place "still sweats real and seemingly fresh blood whenever there is a slight shower of rain, as it were being openly proclaimed on the very evidence of this event that the voice of all that Christian blood is still crying out to God from the earth" (41).

In this, William is using the supernatural to provide a commentary upon historical actions in ways that are quite similar to those found in the histories of William of Malmesbury and Geoffrey of Monmouth even though William of Newburgh is careful to cite an eyewitness source to the miracle. William claims that he has "heard proof of [the bleeding land] from trustworthy witnesses" (41). William is not using the story to entertain, and, if he is to be believed, he is not creating a fanciful elaboration to underscore his point. His account may or may not be correct, but William of Newburgh appears, as a careful historian using reliable sources, that the supernatural intrudes and provides a kind of commentary upon the material world and history.

The lives of the two kings who follow William the first follow that pattern, too. In contrast with his father, William Rufus (William II) "was "without sense and stability in all his ways. He showed no piety to God, and he oppressed the Church" (43). He was

a bad king in consequence, for he “exhausted the resources of the kingdom with wholly pointless prodigality, and when these were exhausted he raked in the wealth of his subjects for the same purpose” (43). William’s death is attributed to “his own wicked deeds”, especially after he banishes Anselm, archbishop of Canterbury (45), divine retribution worked out in an historical moment.

William’s account of the third Norman king of England returns to a nuanced depiction of the acts and the human nature of the monarch. On the one hand, Henry showed “a praiseworthy character”, particularly when he “recalled the venerable Anselm from exile So far as an inexperienced king could, he strengthened the rights of peace and justice (47). On the other hand, he was entirely too devoted to materialistic pleasures, particularly in sexuality and hunting, and compares the king with “the wantonness of Solomon” and suggests that “in his public punishments distinguished insufficiently between killers of deer and killers of men” (51). When he dies, his brains and organs are removed and salted for transportation back to England; the man who removed the brain “is said to have been infected by the unbearable stench, and to have died; so just as the body of the dead Elisha gave life to a dead man, so the body of the dead king brought death to a living man” (51). William chooses to relate this anecdote that shows that the king’s physical body reflects his moral character, even though it is merely “said” that this has happened and is not ascribed to a reliable witness. His wiliness to suspend disbelief and, even more, to accept conjecture in some areas while rejecting it in others, reveals a great deal about the threshold of his acceptance of certain

ideas. William does not question the concept because it stands in accord with the culture's understanding of the interaction between the material and the immaterial.

Like the other histories in this chapter, that interaction is *The History of English Affairs* a central concept of the monarchy. Despite his skepticism regarding the “fables” written by Geoffrey of Monmouth, William's history embraces the idea that the king's moral character determines his fate and affects the kingdom. When Stephen, the count of Boulogne and nephew of King Henry, usurps the throne, William claims that he has sinned against the human and the divine by breaking the law and his oaths respectively, and he interprets the events that happen to Stephen and to the bishops involved in his coronation as a result of that offense. William the archbishop of Canterbury, and Roger, bishop of Salisbury, both die because of their actions. In the case of the archbishop, death comes swiftly, “within the very year of his transgression in what is believed to have been a deserved punishment for that perjury” (53). Roger, on the other hand, waits for some time before divine judgment falls upon him. He is depicted as a greedy and an under-educated opportunist who uses the offices he gains to build two castles and enrich himself. William ascribes his worthier actions, namely building monasteries, to a desire to cover up his misdeeds. In referring to Roger's eventual demise, William attributes Roger's insanity and death to both his greed and his participation in Stephen's broken oaths of fealty. As William describes the situation, it is Stephen who actually is the instrument of Roger's undoing, for Stephen turns against Roger, strips him of his castles, and puts him in prison. To William, though, Stephen is simply “the divinely-ordered agent of vengeance against the bishop” (59).

Even though Stephen is actually acting as a mediator between God and man to a certain degree, Stephen himself gains no credit for his actions in William's eyes because "he was motivated by either personal hatred for them or a desire for money" (61). Since Stephen "showed no respect at all for holy orders . . . he too failed to prosper (61). Like William Rufus, Stephen's flaws are an overweening desire for power and his greed. The text implies that the financial disarray inflicted upon the kingdom by William Rufus leaves Stephen vulnerable to his enemies, but he does not excuse Stephen for seizing the ill-gotten treasures hoarded by the corrupt Roger or Roger's nephew Alexander as an attempt to restore justice and order to his kingdom by weeding out corrupt officials. Because Stephen eventually loses the kingdom, his actions are characterized as a result of corruption and the conclusion of his reign a matter of divine justice.

In this set of circumstances, the supernatural is used to amplify the significance of the material issues of governance. Stephen does not fail because of poor fiscal management or as a result of his inability to maintain a balance between factions of nobles. Rather, his decisions to break the agreements (never specified in the text) that he made with his nobles at the beginning of his reign are paired with his offense against God in broken oath and the mistreatment of the clergy.

Stephen's failed reign could have been described as an issue of the physical control over the land, the management of finances, and people or as a prosaic social set of issues in the interactions of the nobility of the kingdom, but it is not. The physical control of land, the transfer and manipulation of wealth, and the social dominance of a monarch are based upon immaterial things. They depend upon bonds of loyalty and

fealty that allow authority to be concentrated in the hands of the king and that in turn, bolsters the authority of the knights and barons because they are participants in a system larger than any of the individual participants. In some ways, the text acknowledges that system in the references to the failed oaths and agreements. However, that broken set of social bonds does not seem to be enough to serve as the cause of the problems that Stephen experiences.

In Stephen's problems, as in the histories of the other kings in the texts of this chapter, the texts grapple with the problems of understanding the immaterial forces at play in his reign. The issues of social interactions, morality, and fortune are bundled together and are understood through the lens of divine approval or disapprobation. That is in no way to suggest that the historians of the period are unaware of the effect of clear laws, even-handed justice, and the reasonable distribution of goods. It is simply that the attempt to find causes for these issues inevitably reverts to immaterial issues as a *primum mobile*. That understanding of the immaterial world naturally raises the question of the limits of human capacity and suggests that, at least as far as kings are concerned, without divine favor, there may be no possibility of success.

Romantic Redemptions of Kings and Kingdoms

The same attempt to understand the trajectory of a kingdom through the actions of its king appears as much in the deliberately fictional romances of kingship as it does in the histories. Like the stories of the kings in the histories, the state of the kingdom depends

upon its representative and intercessor. Both *Havelok the Dane* and *King Horn* draw connections between the triumphant return of the hero and the restoration of the kingdom as a whole while implying that the absence of the proper monarch is an occasion for disorder. The two stories also provide moments of supernatural signification and divine approval that mark Horn and Havelok as superior to the men around them and as intermediaries between the human and divine. As in the other narratives and the histories, the moral worth of the king, expressed through the support of the supernatural, both reveals and determines the health of the kingdom.

Havelok the Dane is rich with comments about the quality of the kings of the narrative, Havelok's story begins with an account of good kingship through the story of Athelwold, who "lovede God with al his micht" (35), made traitors and robbers fall (39), and hanged outlaws and thieves (41-4). Athelwold demonstrates the twinned qualities of loyalty to God and the ability to maintain the physical defenses of the kingdom that are demanded by the tropes of the histories, and as a result "at hayse" (59). The narrative even figuratively connects Athelwold with Christ through the scourging on Athelwold's sickbed and through Athelwold's final quoted cry of "*In manus tuas*" (228).

The usurping regents, Godrich, who betrays Athelwold, and Godard, who betrays Havelok's father Birkabeyn, on the other hand, are depicted as villainous traitors. While their failures are largely discussed in personal terms, there is some evidence that Godard, at the very least, unlike Athelwold, cannot maintain order within the kingdom. Godrich's failure on a personal level is made clear through his villainous laments over treating Athelwold's daughter, Goldeboru well (302-7). His decision to forsake his oath is an

obvious act of treason, and the narrator names it as such (312). Godard, too, is an oath breaker, and it is that fact, along with the concomitant murders, that Ubbe uses to stir the kingdom against him. Perhaps the most significant charge against him stems from the fact that he, unlike Athelwold and Birkabeyn, cannot properly keep his subjects safe. The attack upon Havelok when he is Ubbe's protection is suggestive of a breakdown in law and order. Although Ubbe attributes the attack to the temptation of Goldeboru's beauty, the fact that sixty men can gather in order to try to break into the house and take Goldeboru away indicates that there is something quite awry in the kingdom. The usurpers essentially have the same effect upon their kingdoms as the morally corrupt kings have in the histories; they invite disasters, divine retribution, and civil disorder. By comparison, Ubbe's men declare that Birkabeyn, Havelok's father, "Wel to yeme and wel were / Ageynes uten-laddes here", that he was well able to protect and defend against foreign men here (2152-3), presumably invading armies, but probably with the sense that he defended the land against threatening strangers in general, too.

Havelok is, of course, marked in quite obvious ways as the proper heir. There are physical manifestations of divine favor; immaterial emotions are not sufficient to convey the weight of the king's worth. Ubbe remarks upon his physical appearance almost immediately after they meet, saying "Betere semede him to bere / Helm on heved, sheld and spere, / Thanne to beye and selle ware" (162-4), for Havelok's broad shoulders and long body seem to belong to the chivalric classes rather than to the laborers and merchants. The light that shines from Havelok's mouth at various times in the tale is immediately, if somewhat ironically, recognized by his potential assassin-cum-foster

father, Grim, as a sign from God. Upon seeing the light, Grim shouts, “Goddot! . . . this is ure eir” (606), a casual oath that is changed by the circumstances into a moment of recognition of regal authority and the expression of divine power. The cross shaped birthmark and the angel’s voice that Goldeboru hears also mark Havelok as the recipient of divine sanction for his rule; there can be few sets of proof more definitive than having an angel declare, “He shal ben King strong and stark” (1270), a prediction that Havelok bears out by bringing peace and stability to two kingdoms.

Light and angelic voices are perhaps the least material of physical signs. Yet, they, too, are intrusions of supernatural power into the material world. They do not occur in dreams; in fact, the light prevents Ubbe from sleeping at one point. These emblems that demonstrate the worthiness of Havelok to be king

Horn is marked by fewer outward, material signs of divine favor, but his narrative serves as a powerful argument for the connection between the return of the proper king to his kingdom and the restoration of civil order. The Saracens who kill Horn’s father and ravish the kingdom are the most obvious threat to religious and civil society; as soon as they arrive, they begin to kill people, destroy churches (65-66), and according to Athulf’s father, to engage in forced conversions of the people they have conquered (1330-5). The greater and more subtle threat to civil order comes from within, though; Fikenhild betrays Horn repeatedly, getting Horn banished and then attempting to marry Rymenhild while Horn is away trying to reclaim his kingdom. While the largely faceless and anonymous Saracens present a threat to the safety and religious health of the kingdom, Fikenhild presents a personal threat as well as a political one; when he seeks to take Rymenhild off

to marry him and builds a nearly impregnable castle, the king “ne dorste him werne” (1418). The text does not clarify whether the king dares not to refuse Fikenhild’s attempts to woo Rymenhild or Fikenhild’s construction of a military stronghold; in many ways, it does not need to do so. Both actions are threats to the power of the monarch.

Horn, like Havelok, restores order to both kingdoms by killing the threats to civil order. Horn is marked as superior to the men around him through the various battles in which he engages and through the repeated references to his physical beauty, which is in some ways a reification of his inner worth. From the first lines of the narrative, Horn is introduced as “bright so the glas; / . . . whit so the flur” (14-15). This is not a simply description of comeliness, though it is also that; Horn’s beauty is transcendent and radiant. Like Havelok, he can light up a room, a quality Rymenhild notices when he first enters her bower, as Kimberly Bell points out in “Holie Mannes Liues” (263). Bell goes on to notes that the brightness of Horn’s body “aligns him with saints such as St. Edward the Martyr, whose body is discovered in a dark wood by a pillar of light” (263). Like Havelok, Horn is marked as more than mortal through the light that streams from him.

This superiority is further enhanced through the ring that Rymenhild gives him, which is supposed to support him in battle. Rymenhild claims that “stones beoth of suche grace / That thu ne schalt in none place / Of none dundes beon ofdrad, / Ne on bataille beon amad, Ef thu loke theran” (575-579). The ring functions like Aethelstan’s sword in the *Gesta Regum Anglorum*; it is an authorizing supernatural force that serves to explain why the hero-kings can do more than other men in battle, even though the ring is a token of human love, rather than divine favor, it nonetheless seems to convey some sort of

power to Horn. When he is hard pressed in battle, he looks upon the ring; suddenly he is able to kill a hundred Saracens (615-620) and to help to restore order to the kingdom. There is a redemption of the kingdom from chaos through Horn's worth, but it is important to note that this worth is only expressed through physicality, though physical light, through bloodshed that demonstrates Horn's valor, and through an apparently powerful ring.

All of the texts in this chapter depict and reinforce a particular concept of the king as a figure who stands between mankind and the divine. While that idea is not a new one, the significant point is that the expression of supernatural support for kings depends significantly upon material objects for its expression. Although divine sanction is requisite for a figure who stands as a mediator between man and God, the depictions of the way that favor is expressed says a great deal about the entangled concept of the material and the immaterial in the medieval period.

Endnotes

¹ All references to *Havelok the Dane* are to *Middle English Romances*. Ed. Stephen H. A. Shepherd. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995. All references to *King Horn* are drawn from *Four Romances of England: King Horn, Havelok the Dane, Bevis of Hampton, Athelston*. Kalamazoo, Mich.: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 1999.

² Giorgio Agamben presents this interpretation of the monarch's status and explores many of the complications of the monarch's ambiguous status as both part of society and distinct from it in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*.

³ Jacques Le Goff describes this depiction of a division in society as one in which the clerics are attempting to give priority to their mode of exercising power as one part of his discussion of the distinction between imagination and ideology. He refers to way "medieval clerics used the image of two swords, temporal and spiritual, to distinguish between royal and pontifical power" and says that "they were not describing society but imposing upon it an image intended to set the clergy apart from the laity, indeed to set the former above the latter" (2).

⁴ Delogu notes a similar parallel between the description of the lives of saints and histories of kings in speaking of Jean de Joinville's biography of Louis IX. She states, "[m]any scholars recognize the importance of typology to saints' lives . . . I believe that such typology is equally essential in the elaboration of kings' lives, where often the point is not to portray an individual, but to highlight a king's resemblance to his forefathers, or to depict an abstract ideal of kingship" (23).

⁵ Heng, Geraldine. *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003. See particularly her discussion of cannibalism during the first crusade in the section of her first chapter entitled "The Vocabulary of History: The First Crusade and the Narration of Horror and Trauma" (21-35).

⁶ Geraldine Heng briefly discusses the response in the twelfth century to Geoffrey's history in *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy*. William of Newburgh's response to Geoffrey's work in the prologue of his own history is quite telling in its disdain (though see the discussion of William of Newburgh below).

⁷ Seeta Chaganti analyzes this kind of figurative enshrinement of stories about people in her discussion of *The Pardoner's Tale* in her chapter on "Reliquaries of the Mind" in *The Medieval Poetics of the Reliquary: Enshrinement, Inscription, Performance*. Working from the inscriptions on reliquaries toward un-inscribed reliquaries, such as those carried by the Pardoner, Chaganti examines the way that the old man in the tale is enclosed by the physical accessories of death, that he becomes a "figure of figuration" representing the way in which objects take on meaning through their use in performance and their enclosure by other objects and language that signify that the enclosed objects, or people, represent the numinous. In many ways, the stories of the medieval kings in the histories function in much the same way; significance is piled on top of their particular actions until they (the actions and the kings themselves) are rendered as representatives of the heights of human greatness and the depths of failure.

⁸ There are several such studies that focus upon various areas of English identity. See particularly John Gillingham's *The English in the Twelfth Century, Imperialism, National Identity, and Political Values*, especially chapter one, "The Kings of Britain", Kirsten A. Fenton's *Gender, Nation, and Conquest in the Works of William of Malmesbury*, and Geraldine Heng's *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy*.

⁹ According to Isidore of Seville's *Etymologia* the wolf is given to a "frenzy of violence" and is "eager for gore" (253). That seems to be a reasonable equivalent for Mempricius's actions. Ron Baxter indicates that this characterization of the wolf would have been familiar to a medieval audience and notes that the Douce 167 version of the *Physiologus* includes the section on the wolf Isidore's *Etomologiae* in *Bestiaries and the Users in the Middle Ages* (143).

¹⁰ John Gillingham discusses the reception of Geoffrey of Monmouth's work in the period as part of his broader discussion of the use of histories in the creation of national identity in *The English in the Twelfth Century, Imperialism, National Identity, and Political Values* (Oxford, 2003). Among other possible interpretations of Geoffrey's motives, he discusses the possibility, raised by Valerie Flint in "The *Historia Britanniae* of Geoffrey of Monmouth: Parody and Its Purpose—A Suggestion," that some of the elements in Geoffrey's work may be parody, though he is quick to point out that parody can have a serious purpose. In that case, then William of Newburgh has missed the joke, for in his writing he appears to be quite irate with Geoffrey's history.

¹¹ P.G. Walsh discusses William of Newburgh's approach in his introduction to the translation and points out that William of Newburgh prefigures some of the approaches taken by modern historians in his careful skepticism, his interrogation of sources, and his deconstruction of Geoffrey of Monmouth's work. See pages 6-8 of that introduction.

¹² See particularly his reference to the events during the life of Bishop Wmund (103-7), especially the witness to whom William refers (107).

Chapter Three: Known Lands and Distant Wonders

Where the histories attempt to understand the character of a people and their relationship with the world through the actions of kings and the inherited customs and authority of the past, travelogues turn their gaze upon foreign lands, using the physical distance between the audience and its subjects to create a space for understanding the world and humanity's place in it.

The travelogues in this chapter, Gerald of Wales' *Itinerarium Cambriae* and *Topographia Hiberniae* and Mandeville's *Travels*, interrogate the nature of being human and humankind's relationship with the world through elaborate discussions of the supernatural that call attention to the differences between the subjects and the English audience of the texts. The texts frequently use miracles and marvels to raise questions about whether people in foreign lands are capable of relating to the physical and the supernatural world in the same way as the audience. At times that question is couched in terms of Christian salvation; at others, it is implicitly posed by the strangeness of the events in foreign lands and the reactions of the natives to them. By presenting alien lands as places that have monsters, half-human figures, bizarre events, and even saints who act differently than those of the English, the texts implicitly ask whether or not the people who are the subjects of the text are truly human. In doing so, the texts make a reflexive gesture back to the audience, too, allowing the audience to define itself through the distorted image of strange people and places from far away. The texts in this chapter employ those dual strategies in varying degrees and shades of response to "the other", moving from the hesitant demonization of Gerald of Wales's *Topographia Hiberniae*,

through his still greater ambivalence with the depictions of the various elements of Welsh and Norman-Welsh society in his *Itinerarium Cambriae*, and ending with Mandeville's seemingly more sympathetic *Travels*.

Similar processes occur in the romances, epics, and fables of the period, too. In many ways, it is even more difficult to distinguish between the tales in the travelogues and the deliberate fictions of romances and fabliaux than it is to see differences between the romances and the histories.¹ Each genre of text presents issues of identity through one distancing lens or another, whether that is through the physical dislocation of the travelogues, the temporal distance of histories, or the categorical displacement created by the difference of species in the allegories of the bestiaries and fabliaux. It is especially true in stories in which characters are depicted as intruders into the society depicted by the narrative. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* presents the intrusion of the magical and apparently un-killable other into the ordered structure of the Arthurian court. *The Nun's Priest's Tale* renders the potential treachery of the intruder into something more lighthearted than the screeds against the East in Gerald of Wales's works, but the threat posed by the outsider is still significant. The stories about animals in Chaucer's narrative and in the *Physiologus* use the differences between men and animals to create sufficient distance between the subject and the audience to allow for reflection while maintaining sufficient familiarity through the animals' imitations of humanity to permit the audience to recognize themselves, however distantly, in the animals.

The travelogues do not simply use the supernatural to interrogate "the other", though that facet of wonders and miracles does draw the greatest level of attention. The

three travelogues of the chapter also contain descriptions of marvels, wonders, and rituals that, like the texts about the supernatural in Chapter One, also depict an understanding of man's relationship with the world and of the borders of material existence. In all of these cases, the texts employ the exoticism of the unfamiliar and, at times, the immaterial, to allow for the closer examination of the self.

The idea that descriptions of "the other", however is it conceived, is used to define one's own existence has been treated extensively by many scholars, though not always in conjunction with the supernatural. In *Orientalism* Edward Said remarks upon the long association between Europe and the East, upon the East as a locus of desire and colonization, as the source of its languages and civilization, as a site of anxiety over cultural influence. This admixture of desire and fear, perhaps inferiority, leads to the result, as Said puts it, "that European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even an underground self" (3). Although Said is referring specifically addressing the cultural attitudes of the 18th and 19th centuries, his comments could be applied equally well to Gerald of Wales' attitudes toward the East, as, indeed, some notable authors have done.² The sense of comparison between the East and West is more or less explicit throughout all of the texts, but it is particularly striking in Gerald's condemnation of the behavior of the people in "the East" and his attempt to tally the qualities of the Irish against the flaws of Eastern behavior. Said suggests in his remarks about similar kinds of descriptions of foreign peoples that outright condemnation is just one of set of rhetorical positions that allows Westerns to adopt a variety of approaches toward foreigners without yielding a kind of "positional

superiority” (7). At the very least, the author of a travelogue is a spectator and an outside authority, controlling the depiction of the subject of his text for the audience.³

Nevertheless, it would be inaccurate to suggest that medieval worldview was simplistic, that it was composed entirely of the dichotomies of East and West, foreign and familiar, heathen and Christian. In fact, compared with Gerald of Wales’s descriptions of the Irish, Mandeville’s attitude toward is significantly more nuanced; those who live in the east are not universally worse than those who live in England. In “Cosmopolitanism and Medievalism”, John Ganim suggests that Said has only captured one aspect of the medieval world-view and that more recent studies, particularly Frank Grady’s *Representing Righteous Heathens in Late Medieval England*, allow us to see the ways in which the depictions of the Orient are a contested locus of impulses and that Grady, specifically, “makes us see an entirely different world, one in which the other becomes the most searching interlocutor of Western and Christian identity” (19).

The supernatural, whether figured as divine favor, the wonders of the natural world, or the hideousness of the monstrous, serves as a touch stone for that self-reflective interrogation; they serve as a kind of commentary upon the depiction of the subjects of the text. Magical events or divine favor are not particularly stable things when they are encountered personally; they are disruptive of daily life and are apparent intrusions of great and mysterious powers into human existence. Yet, those same forces also provide easy points of reference for the audience of a text when viewed through the distancing lens of a travelogue; they highlight points of characterization of a people or a place. In those cases, it is apparently not sufficient for the author simply to claim that the people of

a particular place are given to certain behaviors or only to offer human eyewitnesses to such facts; instead, the judgment must be ratified by an intercession from outside of the ordinary course of affairs, whether God's punishment or the strange behavior of the natural world. Put another way, the precise significance of a saint's miracle or curse may be unclear in a given moment, but the fact that the divine intervention occurs draws attention to the fact that the subjects of the text are somehow more or less worthy than others, and the fact that the author mentions it is. The instances of the supernatural serve to call attention to moments of anxiety within the text where the author needs to reinforce the commentaries he creates.

Such moments also act as ready explanations for differences among different societies. Indeed, the depiction of the peoples of various locales occurs within the medieval understanding of the effect of geography upon the individual. In "Medieval and Modern Concepts of Race and Ethnicity", Robert Bartlett notes that "one of the founding texts" of the concept of geographical determinism, "the Hippocratic *Airs, Waters, and Places*, put it, 'In general you will find assimilated to the nature of the land both the physique and the characteristics of the inhabitants'" (45). Bartlett goes on to wryly suggest that authors tend to see their own birthplaces as those with the most favorable conditions and notes that the genealogy of orientalism begins with such judgments (45-6).

If all of those forces drive a tendency to see the other as wholly different, there are other forces pulling in the opposite direction. A tension exists between the geographical determinism that sees people as markedly different and the impulses that

drive the production of common identities. One such force is the production of identity through religion. As John Ganim notes in his essay “Cosmopolitanism and Medievalism”, the Catholic Church’s claim to authority over the spiritual life of all people creates a concept of identity that crosses borders, as does impulse to create a recognition for canon law as the governing legal code for priests. He points out that the universalist claim is “most eloquently” made in “Boniface VII’s 1302 *Unam sanctam*, which also argues for the possibility of virtue among pagans” (13). However, these claims for a broader recognition of shared humanity among foreign peoples depend upon religion. That qualification explains the way that the travelogues continuously return to a central question of whether or not are those foreigners truly human, possessed of souls and thus endowed with the possibility of salvation.

The other source of tension in the travelogues, especially Gerald of Wales’s is the impulse toward the establishment of empire, one that is both served and resisted by the presence of the supernatural. In Geoffrey of Monmouth’s history, that impulse toward a common national (or proto-national) identity drives the depiction of the Cornish under Corineus. The differences between the Cornish and the Britons are subsumed within the structure of a shared ancestry, shared hardships, and shared conquests. In some ways, the depiction of the Welsh and the Irish in Gerald of Wales’s texts share some of the same attempt to justify the inclusion of those peoples under the aegis of the English, at least by demonstrating that the Irish would benefit from English guidance; the stories of supernatural afflictions and human-animal admixtures works to present proof that the Irish are suffering and need the guidance of more civilized people in order to prevent the

barbarisms that drive an inappropriate relationship with the natural world and the anger that causes the Irish saints to lay curses.

On the other hand, the Gerald's attitude toward English domination of Wales is considerably more fraught. Considered in the light of his anxiety over his own mixed heritage way, the militaristic impulses of Gerald's works could be partial curtailed through the process of asking whether the subjects of the texts would make good subjects of the kingdom. There, the supernatural functions is two competing ways; on the one hand, the curses and monstrosities serve as a justification for invasion, and, on the other, the strangeness of the land and people can act as a cautionary note for the potential English invaders, suggesting that England might be better served by seeking more stable lands and more familiar people.

Gerald of Wales and the Disturbing Marvels and Curses of Ireland

Gerald of Wales's *Topographia Hiberniae* reveals a considerable tension among these competing forces, and the elements of divine intervention and marvelous beasts and landmarks serve to mark moments of interrogation of the qualities of humanity, spirituality, and political stability among the Irish. Gerald's text attempts to define the character of the Irish people through the land that they live in and the miracles and wonders that occur there.

The point of that characterization, though, seems to be to distance the Irish from the audience and to use the Irish as a reference point for making comparisons with other

foreigners, especially those in the eastern Mediterranean. The supernatural aspects of Ireland and the barbarous elements of Irish culture render the Irish, at times, into quasi-human, almost animalistic figures living in a dangerous and unstable country. Although Gerald admits that the Irish have their positive traits, they are largely viewed with distrust, and the way that the lines between the human and the animal are blurred raise the question about the degree to which the Irish are really essentially like the English.

In fact, the text is almost entirely mute about England, never mentioning the possibility that problems and events like those in Ireland might occur there. While other texts (such as Geoffrey of Monmouth's history) might note that strange, marvelous events have occurred in England, at least in the safely distant past, the closest that Gerald comes to suggesting that anything odd occurs in England is in reference to a few rather unremarkable miracles in Wales.⁴ Once Gerald begins to make comparisons with "the East" (and, to a lesser degree, with France), the depiction of the world in the text brackets England with potentially dangerous and troublesome. The effect is to suggest that English possess the normal experience of human life and that many outsiders may be quite suspect because of their bestial practices and their association with supernatural events.⁵ That is not to say that all of the references to foreign lands in the text are negative, but those references do tend to emphasize differences from England through customs and marvelous events.

From the opening of the text, Gerald of Wales describes Ireland as a fantastic land, full of marvels but equally endowed with problematic elements. Both the positive and negative aspects of Ireland tend toward the extreme in his description of the state of

nature on the island and the conditions of human society. It is “the most temperate of all countries”, where there is so little sickness that there is “scarcely any mean between constant health and final death” (53). The Irish people are shaped by nature to have “beautiful upright bodies and handsome and well-complexioned faces . . . fully endowed with natural gifts”, yet they “are so barbarous that they cannot be said to have any culture” (101).

As he describes the Irish, Gerald is at pains to ensure that they are not seen as superior to the English. Appearing to contradict himself at times, he attributes the relative poverty of the Irish both to the natural conditions of the island that prevent grain from growing well and, later in the text, to the immorality and laziness of the Irish. Although he will grant that the Irish have bishops and well-intentioned clergy, Gerald maligns the practices of the Church in Ireland, asserting that even there are many Irish who have no knowledge of the faith and that the problems may rest in the fact that Irish saints are unwilling to be martyrs (113). Indeed, Gerald asserts that even the saints of Ireland are different from those of England and are more apt to lay curses than to provide blessings (91). His strongest criticisms are backed by disturbing marvels and miracles that use the supernatural to underscore the comments that he makes about the Irish.

In Gerald’s deeply ambivalent depiction, Ireland is, on one hand, a place of purity and wonder, markedly different from Britain. The familiar trope regarding the absence of snakes and poisonous reptiles on the island is mentioned repeatedly. Gerald takes pains to say that the island’s quality of being antithetical to poisonous reptiles is a function of its nature and rejects the idea that Saint Patrick drove the snakes out. It is simply a

quality of the land to Gerald from “long before the laying of the foundations of the faith” (50) and is simply “something new and never heard of before, but is nevertheless benign, or some hidden force of the land itself that is inimical to poisons” (51). He states that even the boot tongs of its residents partake of this quality, claiming that in one test of this belief, a toad would not cross a circle made from an Irish boot thong. The toad actually bounced off of the circle as though “struck on the head” (52).

By attributing these strange powers to the land itself, Gerald suggests that Ireland occupies a kind of strange state, one that is marked as almost other-worldly by the frequency and oddity of the wonders that occur there. The absence of poisonous reptiles is only one indication of that otherness, but it serves as an important one in the text. Gerald remarks that the Isle of Man must belong to Britain, not Ireland, because snakes can live there (67); the difference created by the wondrous quality is the demarcation line between the familiar lands that are defined as English and those that possess a foreign otherness. Equally, he makes much of the fact that a frog was found in Ireland and that it was said to presage the coming of the English to the island. Gerald notes that it was thought that it could live there “for some time” only because it was not poisonous (52). Quite aside from the potential political allegory, the text suggests that the familiar modes of life have made an intrusion, albeit a temporary one, into a significantly different land through the presence of the frog, which must have come in on “a ship by chance” (52). The exclusion reinforces the idea that Ireland is somehow not the same as England, that certain things that are common in England can only have a tenuous hold on Ireland,

though in many ways, the lack of venomous reptiles and the brief tenure of frogs is the least of those qualities.

Several islands exist in the lakes throughout Ireland, too, which have wondrous properties that distinguish the land and the conditions of life in Ireland from those of his English audience. The text seems to use these anecdotes to suggest that some places in Ireland tend toward the extremities of existence that somehow prevent or at least disturb ordinary human life. There is, for example, an island where no female creature can live. Female birds avoid it, and female beasts die upon touching it (60-61). That would hardly be a desirable quality in a land where future military conquerors might want to live, even if it is almost ideal for the male religious. It is not, apparently, sufficient to say that women do not live there by custom; the island, the nature of the land itself, makes it impossible. Then, too, there are islands where, where no one dies, though they can become so ill that they long for death and leave the island, where corpses do not putrefy and there are no mice, and finally an island of two parts, one visited by angels, the other by evil spirits (61).⁶ The insistence upon the purity of certain qualities is, like the absence of poisonous reptiles, a way of signaling that Ireland somehow exists in a state where natural qualities become rarified and border upon the immaterial existence of the afterlife, where there is no death or decay and where devils and angels can be seen moving openly.⁷

Even Ireland's ability to support familiar human life and culture is called into question. While it is "rich in its fertile soil and plentiful harvests", it is a poor land for building a civilization "because of the small size of the grains, far smaller than the stalks

of the grasses should suggest, and because of the wind and rain storms to which the island, he says, is subject”, forcing its people to find sustenance from the forests and herding rather than from settled agriculture (24). Much later in the text, Gerald uses this quality to decry the Irish, claiming that they “are a wild and inhospitable people. They live on beasts only, and live like beasts. They have not progressed at all from the primitive habits of pastoral living” (101). Civilization and honorable behavior appear to be one of the elements of ordinary English life that Gerald appears to exclude from his depiction of Ireland.

That exclusion, though, sets Ireland up as a foil for the East. If Ireland is a bizarre place at the edge of Europe and the edge of the familiar world, the East, in Gerald’s conception seems to stand at the other extreme edge of the world, just as inimical to civilized life as Ireland in many ways, yet more even corrupt and dangerous. At this point, though, his focus is upon drawing comparisons between the lands of Western Europe and the East, a comparison that he uses in order to demonstrate the superiority of the West.

While that argument would seem to contradict the medieval world view encapsulated by the [T-maps] and its depiction of the world, it is really just an elaboration of the same kinds of concepts that drive such an understanding. The map is re-centered, as it were, upon England, not as the source of supernatural power and authority, but as a kind of center of normalcy set against villainy, vice, and treachery. Yet, Gerald is not willing to concede the supernatural superiority of the East, either. He repeatedly insists that the miracles of the West are equal to those found in the East. Thus, Gerald’s use of

Ireland as a locus for the extremes of both human behavior and of certain disturbing kinds of marvelous and miraculous intrusion into the world contains a kind of contradiction; Ireland is barbarous and dangerous, in part because of the odd events that take place there, yet the worst of the West is better than the East, so that Ireland is not as bad as it could be. Most significantly, it is the disruption of the supernatural, of the marvelous, miraculous, and the simply unusual and threatening, that allow the text to explore the margins of humanity and to expose the excesses of the places that the text figures as remote.

Gerald's argument appears at the end of the first part of the book; he contrasts the healthful qualities of Ireland with the defects of the East, namely earthquakes, pestiferous water, and a litany of seemingly innocuous actions, such as sitting on marble, uncovering one's head to feel the breeze, eating too much, all of which can cause death in the East (54).

In comparing the East with Ireland, he states that the deficiencies of Ireland are actually to its benefit, and Gerald uses his comments about the dangerous elements in nature in the East to cast aspersions about the Eastern people. He follows his complaints about lightning, cataracts, and earthquakes in the Orient with a quick reference to bears and tigers and then switches to an implication that guests must be fearful of being poisoned in the East. In Ireland, Gerald claims, no one, not even an enemy must fear being poisoned by one's host, step-mother, or enraged wife (56). He works in the appearance of marvels, wonders, and miracles to continue the conceit that the western lands are not less blessed by God's grace and that one ought not to Gerald's insistence

upon the superiority of the western lands smacks of feelings of insecurity. The text is adamant that the West is not less than the East; he does not express it as a matter of course, nor does he seem to think that his audience will do so, either. In fact, he calls attention to the comparison between the two regions in his introduction to the second part of his text when he says “just as the marvels of the East have through the work of certain authors come to the light of public notice, so the marvels of the West which, so far, have remained hidden away and almost unknown, may eventually find in me one to make them known even in these later days” (57). The vitriol that Gerald levels against the East suggests that there are deep issues of identity at play, at once confirming Said’s point about the need for the chronicler to assume a position of superiority and the points of Ganim and Grady about the self-referential elements of those judgments. Gerald may be seeing the West through the attention paid to the East during the crusades, with all of the attendant strife and horror, and finding either a need to assert that the West is deserving of as much attention or, at the very least, the West is in need of an advocate for its image.⁸

Despite Gerald’s description of the follies and treacheries of the East, Gerald paints Ireland’s people with much the same brush in the final section of his book. As much as the West in general ought not to be seen as inferior to the East, Ireland is by no means superior to England. He describes incest and treachery as common practices in Ireland, suggests that the Irish are simply lazy in everything except music and attributes the failures of the harvests to the lack of diligence of its people. Perhaps the most significant point is that he regards the Irish attitudes as contagious, as a threat to the

moral character of outsiders. He claims that “to such an extent are habits influenced by one’s associates, and he who touches pitch will be defiled by it; that foreigners coming to this country almost inevitably are contaminated by this . . . inborn vice of the country”, that of treachery (109).

Gerald acknowledges the fact that the marvels and wonders of the lands he describes are present in the text in order to allow the reader to understand the character of the people who live there. The opening of the final section of the text confirms this focus upon the people of Ireland; he openly states that in comparison with the description of the land and the living creatures, the people of Ireland are “the most worthy subject of our investigation” and that they are the reason “we have treated of the other things” (92).

As with the *Physiologus*, the *Topographia Hiberniae* uses animals as mirrors for the qualities of humans, giving some space between the audience and the commentary; yet, there is a distinct discomfort with the boundaries between men and animal, too, which suggests a fear that the boundaries between them can be too easily crossed.

Gerald employs the eagle as a metaphor for contemplatives who seek to understand God, who “gaze fully with their minds, and without any turning away, upon the very nature itself of the divine majesty” (40). Cranes are used as metaphors for the way that men should pay attention to their religious obligations, for the crane is supposed to hold a stone in one of its claws while it stands guard so that the sound of the dropped stone will awaken the crane should it fall asleep (40-41). The osprey, which in Gerald’s view always holds one claw open for grasping and the other closed for swimming, is used as a metaphor for Satan’s wiles; the tempter is imagined to approach with the “peaceful claw”

while ready to rend with the other (43). These figures of the natural world suggest a desire to impose regularity upon life, a set of orderly rules that can be reduced to a simple set of easy metaphors and neat definitions that can encapsulate life's problems. Such simplicity can lead to a kind of naïve didacticism, yet there is considerable potential in the form for nuance, too.

Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale* demonstrates the kinds of complexities that can be conveyed through the use of animals to interrogate humanity. On one level, it is a story about a rooster that allows his pride to prevent him from heeding a warning, and who then uses cleverness to extricate himself from the clutches of a fox. As the Nun's Priest puts it, the "moralite" is that the story demonstrates what it means to "be reccheless / and necligent, and truste on flaterye" (3436-7). The Nun's Priest cautions the audience in Saint Paul's words to "Taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille" (3443), a wise warning, given that there is considerably more fruit in the tale than his simple summation would suggest.

The Nun's Priest's sly hint that the tale is considerably more than a folly about a fox, a cock and a hen points back to the lengthy discussion between Chauntecleer and Pertelote about the ways that a man ought to behave and the relationship between men and women that the rooster, with unwitting wisdom sums up in the line "*Mulier est hominis confusio*" (3164). Although Chauntecleer claims that the line means that "Womman is mannes joye and al his blis" (3166), the manner in which Pertelote argues against Chauntecleer's misgivings about his dream, chides him for being a coward, and calling his masculine status into question with the jab, "Have ye no mannes herte, and

han a berd?" (2921), suggests otherwise. The story actually interrogates the contest over authority among the genders and the definition of masculinity as much as it is a criticism of blindly allowing oneself to be driven by pride, though the Nun's Priest distances himself from the conclusions about the dispute further by saying that he "kan noon harm of no womman divyne" (3266).

The depiction of animals and the regular natural in the *Topographia Hiberniae* becomes a similarly subtle tool for raising questions about people and things that seem to challenge neat definitions. Disrupted nature and marvelous, corrupted forms become vehicles for raising questions about aspects of other lands that seem to fall outside of the familiar order of things. In Gerald's text, the perceived differences between the audience and the subjects of the text are usually depicted as the result of corruption among the Irish, but he does not allow those portrayals to rest entirely unchallenged any more than the *Nun's Priest's Tale* allows the narrative to fall neatly into the simple moral that the Nun's Priest offers and then undermines at the end of his tale. Instead, Gerald raises the questions over the differences between England and Ireland by presenting horrific descriptions of corrupted nature and then draws his generalizations back by presenting moments that undermine the simple definition of Ireland as a land of monsters.

The people of the island suffer the most in Gerald's depiction of the qualities of "otherness" in the island. There are several anecdotes that suggest the natives of Ireland are given to bestiality, including the story of a cow which bears a partly human child and a goat that has intercourse with a woman (74-75). These stories occur in a section that recounts a series of tales that suggest that the distinction between the animal and the

human is somehow blurred outside of England. The tales involve a man who has deformities that make him appear to have the hooves and facial features of an ox, a woman with a beard and a mane down her spine, and an elderly couple who are under a curse so that they have been changed into wolves. He follows that section with a discussion of the political life of Ireland, in some cases asserting that the practice of bestiality extends beyond private set of failures to a broader social condition. In particular, he claims that the kingship rite of Kenelcunill in Ulster involves the presumptive heir having ritual intercourse with a white mare that is then butchered and eaten (110). Cain notes a similar shift in Gerald's focus in the text, suggesting that the personal sins of bestiality "never really became Gerald's chief preoccupation in the *Topographia Hiberniae* . . . Rather it served as a useful trope that neatly conflated what Gerald regarded as the two principal failings of the Irish, their rampant sexual immorality and their irrational methods of political organization" (39). Whatever Gerald's particular focus, though, both the inability to govern sexual impulses properly and to organize people politically align the Irish people with animals more than men. In essence, all of these depictions blur the lines between the human and the bestial, calling the identity of the Irish into question.

For all of these depictions of strange Irish behavior in the text, not all of the moments that suggest a blending of the human and inhuman are condemnatory. Gerald's approach to Ireland is ambivalent; he does not present a screed that abrogates any connection between the Irish and humanity at large, nor does he dismiss the Irish land and people as a place wholly unfit for the presence of the English, either as travelers or,

implicitly, as conquerors.⁹ Instead, he presents an interrogation of the nature of the Irish and raises questions about the degree to which they can or should fit into the definition of humanity through the wondrous and miraculous events he relates.

The most telling incident occurs when a wolf walks into the campsite of a traveling priest and begins to talk, reassuring the priest and revealing that he is, in fact, human. The wolf claims that he and his wife are the latest couple who have been cursed to take the form of wolves for seven years and that he has sought out the priest so that his wife, who is ill, can receive the last rites. Although the priest is reluctant, the wolf proves his identity by giving a “Catholic answer” in response to all of the questions and adjurations upon the Trinity that the priest puts to the wolf (73). The priest stints at providing the sacrament of the Eucharist, though, until the wolf pulls off his wife’s pelt, rolling it back to reveal her human head and torso.

This story is enmeshed in issues of identity and humanity. The curse that creates this situation was laid by a saint upon an entire territory, and it causes two people from Ossory to “go into exile not only from their territory but also from their bodily shape” (70). The afflicted people suffer because of their identities as residents of Ossory. The saint is able to perform the curse because of his identity as a saint, because his judgment of the unworthiness of the people is ratified by God. Yet, the cursed retain their identities as humans; they seek out forgiveness and demonstrate the capacity for salvation. Quite literally, they show that they are human underneath the imposed difference.

The travelogues are not alone in expressing such ambivalent and conflicted conception of the human or, indeed, of the divisions among all types of beings. That

question of the proper divisions among kinds of beings and the distinctions between men, animals, and angels is a central concern in medieval philosophy¹⁰. In *The Natural and the Supernatural in the Middle Ages*, Robert Bartlett refers to Gregory the Great's discussion of types of beings, those angels, men, and animals, as a way of opening his discussion of figures that stand outside of those definitions and that straddle the boundaries between them, a list that includes figures as various as demons, witches, werewolves, dogs, and dog-headed men (72). The concept of people with the heads of dogs is a particularly engaging one for the question of the dividing line between men and animals; as Bartlett points out, Saint Christopher is referred to as a Dog-head in the *Leabhar Breac*, which made him part of a group that, according to that text, "had the heads of dogs and ate human flesh" but that Saint Christopher "meditated much on God . . . [though] at the time he could speak only the language of the Dog-heads" (qtd. in Bartlett, 95). These are beings that possess the ability to reason, speak, and, most significantly, contemplate God, which implies that they are possessed of souls and are capable of salvation, even if they wear strange bodies.

Bartlett notes that in the letter from Ratramnus of Corbie to a priest named Rimert on the subject, a letter Bartlett dates prior to 865, some of the other qualities that defined such creatures as human were that they lived in villages, practiced agriculture, and wore clothes (97), which is interesting, given Gerald's depiction of the Irish as men who do not practice agriculture. If, as Bartlett maintains, dogs offer a safe set of figures by which to enquire about the division between the human and animal because they are "benignly close to the human/animal line but showed no dangerous tendencies to transgress it", the

question of the humanity of the anthropophagic Dog-heads or the barbarous Irish is a step closer to a more threatening dividing line.

Like the travelogues, the histories and romances that monstrous human figures make a further move closer to that dividing line, probing at the definition through excessively fantastic depictions of otherworldly creatures. In his guise as the Green Knight, Sir Bertilak in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a threatening figure, a veritable giant, who resides near a devil haunted mound on the far side of a trackless wilderness. Yet, Sir Bertilak is not an unrecognizable monster; he participates fully in the chivalric norms when Gawain is a guest at his castle. In fact, it is Gawain who proves himself to be the less honorable, less civilized figure when he fails to yield up the girdle at the end of the third day of the contest between the two knights. In the end, like the couple cursed to live as wolves, the Green Knight proves to be fully human underneath his appearance and serves as a means of challenging Arthur's court (and, presumably, the audience of the text) to reflect upon the degree to which they live up to their own identities.¹¹ The giants defeated by Corineus and Arthur in Geoffrey of Monmouth serve a slightly different function, acting as supernatural tests against which the kings can prove their superiority to other men through combat. Yet, the giants still serve as a means of defining humanity, of showing that which is not human and that must be overcome, either to gain control over land, as in the case of Corineus's contest with Godmagog, or to defend "true" humans against a supernatural outsider who rapes old women and devours his human foes. As Heng has pointed out, the references to cannibalism serve as a means of giving a concrete form to the fears of the distant and

wholly other figures encountered in the romances and in Gerald of Wales's *Topographia Hiberniae*.

Ambivalence in Gerald's Journey through Wales

The absence of cannibalism in Gerald of Wales's *Itinerarium Cambriae* signals a different kind of relationship with the people depicted in the travelogue. Where the supernatural events and conditions of Ireland are sometimes to be used to show problems with the Irish as a whole, the intrusions of the miraculous in Wales tend to be focused upon matters of personal justice, healing, and, more significantly, some of the differences among the Welsh and between the Welsh and the English. Although this use of the supernatural differs in its effects from the depictions of marvels in the *Topographia Hiberniae*, both texts are still using the supernatural to explore the differences among people and to probe at the reasons for those differences.

Identity and politics in Wales are frequently the subjects of the supernatural occurrences in the text, particularly the immediate political events that surround Gerald's progress through Wales with Archbishop Baldwin. While not every case of supernatural incidents seems to offer commentaries upon politics, the simple fact that miracles in Wales are retold in conjunction with the account travels of the English Archbishop of Canterbury at the very least suggests that the text is offering a countervailing weight of miracles to offset the English claim of spiritual authority. Then, too, the proximity of the

events occasionally seems to have particular weight, although the political implications are not always completely clear and do not always seem to side against the English.

In one set of political commentaries that is rather pointed, Gerald presents a tale that involves the attempt to wrest land from the Church and demonstrates God's wrath against men who do so. In this story, a priest has a dream that directs him to confront a noble, William de Braose, who is holding land that supposedly belongs to the chapel of Saint Nicholas. The most important aspect of the dream is that it ends with a threat delivered as a quote from Saint Augustine; that quote promises that those who refuse to pay tithes and rents to the Church will lose their property. The noble, of course, supposedly does lose his land, and Gerald uses that moment to discuss the folly of "great leaders who seize the possessions of the Church . . . and hand over to mercenary soldiers what they should have left in the hands of their priests" (82). Gerald specifically rebukes Henry II for doing just that (82).

The political implications of the vision become particularly acute when Gerald takes pains to explain that William de Braose is actually a good man. Gerald discusses William's piety for a rather lengthy paragraph, noting William's piety and submission to God, his generosity to clerks, and his habit of praying whenever he saw a church or a cross. The lapse in his behavior regarding the dispute over land is excused by Gerald's statement that "nothing that is human can be perfect and . . . to know everything and yet not to sin is an attribute of the Godhead rather than of man" (82). Yet, Gerald does not excuse Henry II for his similar, though admittedly much more damaging, actions.

One possible explanation for Gerald's impulse to excuse William de Braose is that he and William occupy a similar position in regard to both England and Wales. Like Gerald, William's is of Anglo-Norman descent, but his family has held lands in Wales for generations. Rhonda Knight remarks on Gerald's mixed ethnicity and its effect upon his treatment of the Welsh in "Procreative Sodomy: Textuality and the Construction of Ethnicities in Gerald of Wales's *Descriptio Cambriae*".¹² As she points out, Gerald must negotiate an elaborate set of cultural identities as one who is only one quarter Welsh but whose ancestors were originally vassals of Norman barons and who came to power through both military conquest and intermarriage in Wales. Then, too, Gerald is both part of the English Church and active in the attempt to "reestablish" the Archiepiscopal status of the see of Saint David's.¹³ These identities lead Gerald to make accommodations with the various forces and loyalties at work in his life and to couch what seem to be political statements in extremely nuanced ways. Knight notes that when Gerald discusses the identity of David the Welshman, he is quite careful to explain his fellow Anglo-Norman's identity as a Welshman "by nation and not by blood" (53), differentiating David both from the ethnic Welsh who dominate the rugged highlands of Wales and the English who hold the more settled lands outside of Wales.

Similar kinds of negotiations take place in Gerald's deployment of supernatural events and the implications they hold for the spiritual and social identities of those involved. Such entanglements do not always lead to clear and univocal statements of the type found in the *Itinerarium Cambriae*, but they still serve to render particular judgments about the people and politics depicted by the text.

One such set of supernatural occurrences set in close proximity to political events occurs early in the text when Archbishop Baldwin is about to preach in Hereford and Radnor in order to recruit men for the crusades. Gerald notes that a number of the canons of St. David's objected to his journey and attempt to persuade Rhys ap Gruffydd, who ruled over the South Wales (Thrope 75 n40), to forbid the Archbishop from entering Wales, though Rhys refuses their request. Immediately after discussing Archbishop Baldwin's successful work in recruitment of men for the crusades, Gerald mentions several miraculous or marvelous incidents. There is a story in which a man is struck blind after sleeping for a night in a church with his dogs, another tale that involves a staff that could feel tumors if the afflicted person were to offer a silver penny but that would revoke the cure if the petitioner were to try to avoid paying, and a third in which a town is burned to the ground when soldiers show disrespect to a bell that is supposed to be the relic belonging to Saint David.

All of these incidents involve the punishment of those who fail to show the proper respect for the Church, for its tithes, and for its relics and appear to be offering some commentary either on the canons' attempts to bar the Archbishop or on the failure of the English to respect Welsh prerogatives. Those stories alone could seem simply to have coincidental placement in relationship to the argument over the rights and standing of the Welsh clergy, if it were not for a second set of supernatural events and the gloss that Gerald provides for them.

Three other incidents occur in close succession to two other three stories that involve the disruption of nature and the deaths of English kings. Upon the death of

Henry I, a lake in the Elfael district bursts its banks and relocates, along with all its fish, to a valley two miles away (79). When Henry II dies, the fish in a pond near Sééz in Normandy turn upon and massacre each other (79). The only gloss that Gerald provides is that “Wales recalls with horror the great number of terrible disasters which, as the result of the miserable desire to seize possession of land, have occurred in our time” (80). While the precise political intent of these events is unclear, it is worth noting that while Henry I invaded Ireland, Henry II took lands from the Church, and it is Henry II’s death that is accompanied by the more disturbing supernatural event. The presence of the events at least shows that Gerald is not above using supernatural occurrences to render political judgments, and the proximity of these anecdotes to the stories of the Anglo-Norman Welsh lord William Braose and to the tales of the other miracles and marvels surrounding Archbishop Baldwin’s preaching suggest that he is using the supernatural to add additional weight to his discussion of the identities and actions of the many and varied ethnicities of the Welsh people.

One such close examination of a specific group within Wales involves a group of non-native Welsh. Gerald asserts that the use of rams’ bones as tools for divination is common to the Flemings, who had been sent to Wales as settlers by Henry I (141). They have a partially foreign identity, but, like the Anglo-Norman lords, they, too, are Welsh by nation, and the practice is handled sympathetically and in a manner that depicts the Flemings as following customs that support civilized life. It would have been quite easy to castigate them for employing barbarous rituals and possibly pagan magic, but he does not. He illustrates the discussion of the practice with four anecdotes, each of which show

the practice being used to promote justice and civil harmony by exposing a cheating wife, by avoid the loss of goods from a war, by exposing a mild curse in a way that allows the “victim” to scold the offending party, and by bringing a thief to justice (146-7). By treating these marvelous practices as beneficial and supportive of the community, Gerald avoids calling the morality of these Welshmen by country into question. He allows for the possibility that one can be from outside of Wales by ancestry yet still have a place within the larger society of Wales.

Despite the approval of those who might be seen as intruders over the native Celtic people, Gerald is not necessarily always dismissive of the Welsh themselves. Gerald expresses a kind of admiration for the native Welsh people’s resistance to the English occupation, despite own his association with the Norman conquerors. Cohen discusses part of that resistance in “Hybrids, Monsters, Borderlands” in his discussion of Guaidan, dean of Cantref Mawr, and a knight sent by Henry II to scout Pencader for conquest. The dean, who is supposed to lead the knight through the easiest possible tracks, instead drags the knight through difficult terrain, making a point of eating grass at each meadow so as to give the knight the impression that the people of the region were so poor and bestial that they “lived on roots and grasses” (qtd in Cohen 86). The knight, of course, reports back to Henry quite discouraged by the dean’s strategy of, as Cohen notes that Homi Bhabha calls it, “sly civility”, a resistance concealed within polite obedience. Although this moment of pretense on the dean’s part is not an actual marvel or disruption of nature that blurs the lines between man and animal, the knight thinks it is. The moment in the text becomes one where the supernatural thought of as a disruption of

nature affects the beliefs and actions of the audience, even though the author is fully aware that the event was false.

The discussion of the metropolitan status of St. David's, too, is a point of resistance against over-whelming English authority and another case where spiritual authority is used to bolster political claims, even though, in this case, too, there are not explicit supernatural events supporting Gerald's contention. The curious thing is that in this case Gerald reveals his ambivalent sense of cultural identity even as he makes spiritual claims. Gerald takes pains to point out with an apparent sense of torn pride and divided loyalties that "no Archbishop of Canterbury, except Baldwin, the present one, has ever entered Wales, either before the subjugation or after it" (164). Whatever Gerald might think of Baldwin, and he does express considerable personal admiration for him, Gerald seems to think that the absence of the English Archbishops bolsters his people's claim to spiritual authority and supports his own attempt to become an Archbishop.

All of these incidents are not to say that all of his comments about the Welsh are positive, though they tend to be more favorable than those directed toward the Irish. As Cohen puts it, Gerald himself embodies the middle ground between the English and the Welsh, a hybrid as were all of the noble families who held the Welsh March (97), and Gerald's ambivalence toward the Welsh appears in his stories about some of the anecdotes that he relates. As in his description of Ireland, there are animal-human hybrids in Wales. In one case, a knight gives birth to a calf. Gerald does not extract a moral that condemns the people of the community from the incident, though, as he does with the Irish. Instead, he suggests, "Perhaps it was a portent of some unusual calamity

yet to come. It was more probably a punishment exacted for some unnatural act of vice” (88). It could have been a private misdeed, that is, rather than a failure common to the region, or it might have stemmed from some future disruption of nature that would not necessarily reflect badly upon the community. Nonetheless, Gerald does acknowledge that bestiality *could* happen in Wales, even if he is far from direct about saying it.

Other hybrid creatures appear in the text, too, though they are potentially even more disturbing. In one case, a red haired man named Simon turns out to be the child of an incubus, though the noble family that he has served as a steward only realizes that is the case after he has lived with them for quite some time (154). The soothsayer Meilyr gains the ability to understand the occult and communicate with spirits after an unfortunate encounter with a demon that has taken on the form of a girl. The extent of that contact is, delicately, left unspecified; the text merely states that he is “enjoying himself in her arms and tasting her delights” (116) when her true nature is revealed. When the demon transforms itself, Meilyr is driven mad for a time, though afterwards he gives reasonably accurate predictions about near future events, reveals the sins of lust of two abbots, and confirms the presence of an incubus in the neighborhood (116-9). Meilyr gains the knowledge possessed by the demons through their willingness to share the information with him and through his contact with the “girl”.

While both of these figures have apparently positive effects upon their communities, there are aspects of the stories that suggest unease with them. Simon slipped all too easily into the household and served for forty days before someone spotted him “conversing with his fellow demons by the water-mill and pool” (155). Meilyr gains

certain abilities, especially an instinctive ability to spot falsehood and sins, from his contact with demons, but he is also tormented by them and only the presence of Gospel of Saint John in his lap can prevent them from harassing him (117). Meilyr becomes, in effect, a hybrid entity, able to converse with demons and gaining what Gerald can only assume must be “some supernatural sort of physical vision, rather like that in the book of Daniel, when King Belshazzar saw the writing on the wall” (120). There is something sinister, too, in the fact that he draws attention to the moral failings of the abbots, even if it is ultimately to the benefit of their souls. Added to that issue is the fact that he only reveals that a woman has been sleeping with an incubus when he is asked about it; he does not act preemptively to prevent the woman from committing such a sin. Instead, he allows the problem to fester.

Both of these events suggest that hybrids, outsiders and intruders can be threatening and can appear in the false guise of friendship, whether as a helpful steward or as the innocent girl that Meilyr think she enjoys. That may be the reason that Gerald ends the section about Meilyr with the comment that “Wales knows only too well how, in this same neighborhood and in our times, through a blind lust for conquest and a rupture of all of the ties of common blood and family connection, evil example has spread . . . and good faith has disappeared” (121). The possibility of the intrusion created by conquest and the disruption engendered by strife among people could create the possibility of dangerous figures who simply appear in a region or threatening hybrids whose loyalties to the human and familiar might not be sure. Gerald appears to feel this

sense of threat despite his own status as a person of mixed blood whose presence in the land was only possible because of the conquests of his Anglo-Norman ancestors.

Yet another instance of the presence of dangerous intruders appears in an anecdote that is one of the closest analogues to the romances of period, though it reverses the trope so that it is the human who presents the threat to the supernatural creatures. In this story a child who is encounters a group of small folk. These people are faeries, though Gerald never specifically identifies them as such; he describes them simply as merely small, perfectly formed men and women who live in underground halls with lovely woods, meadows, and rivers but no sun, moon or stars, who “never gave their word, for they hated lies more than anything they could think of” (134).¹⁴ Like Sir Orfeo, the child goes into the underground realm of the faeries. Like Sir Launfal, the child is given gifts, is treated royally, and repays those gifts with treachery, albeit a fairly minor act of betrayal. His mother asks him to bring her “a present of gold, a substance which was extremely common in that country” from his time spent with these people, and the boy steals a golden ball that he “used when he was playing with the king’s son” (134). The object is obviously not worth very much to the small folk; it is a child’s bauble. It is the betrayal of trust and hospitality that appears to incense them so much that the child is never able to return to their realm again, or even to find them, for that matter.

In a text that is so deeply involved with the identity of the Welsh people and with the relationships among the native Welsh, the Anglo-Norman descended lords of the March, and the English, to whom Gerald gives both explicit instructions for invasion and reasons for deciding not to invade (267-274), this supernatural tale of a child’s intrusion

among apparently magical and peaceful people and the treachery that prevents them from living together peacefully is weighted with meaning. The small folk's language is etymologically related to Greek, and Gerald makes much of the connection between Welsh and the Greek brought to Briton by Brutus without ever saying that the small folk are stand-ins for the Welsh dealing with ungrateful intruders in their lands (135). It would seem to suggest that Gerald is skeptical that the invaders can live peacefully among the Welsh (or those who are already established in Wales, the Welsh by country), and it reverses some of the moral superiority of the English audience.

All of these issues could have been presented as simple facts, perhaps as a series of political and social actions. The conflicts between the Welsh and English and among the different ethnicities of the Welsh could have been explored solely through events such as wars, skirmishes, legal disputes of all sorts, moments of social snobbery, and rumor-mongering among neighbors. While Gerald does provide some examples of overt conflict, he uses supernatural events to flesh out his narrative and provide glimpses into the tensions surrounding the issues of politics and identity brought to light through the over-arching narrative of Archbishop Baldwin's progress through Wales. The supernatural serves, as it does in the histories and the romances, a kind of adjectival function; it adds depth, color, and meaning to the events, allowing material objects and the actions of people to carry a greater weight of emphasis than they would otherwise. A suspect steward or an imperious and ungrateful noble present interesting and potentially useful figures for political and social commentary, but a steward who consorts with demons, a grasping lord who is punished by God, and a young boy who is cast out of an

enchanted realm for his mother's greed deliver a far greater and more fraught set of condemnations.

The use of the supernatural to shape the depictions of identities in the *Itinerarium Cambriae* is less polemic and far more nuanced than is the case in the *Topographia Hiberniae*, in part because of Gerald's own involvement in the region; it is closer to home, as it were, and so less subject either to outrageous marvels or to pure excoriation. That tendency to depict more distant lands in a more pejorative fashion is not necessarily a quality endemic to medieval travelogues, though it is probably safe to say that greater distance affords the author more opportunity to depict lands in more fantastic ways. On a practical level, the fewer witnesses there are, the less opportunity the audience has to contradict the author. Yet, there is something else that is likely to be at work, too. The more distant a land is, the less certain that an author and audience is about the character of the land and people, the more the author may need the supernatural elements to explore and explain the differences between the subjects and the audience, whether those differences are seen as positive or negative.

The Wonders of the World in Mandeville's *Travels*

The Travels of John Mandeville offers a more even handed approach to the depiction of exotic lands and people than Gerald of Wales does in the *Topographia Hiberniae*, but still, as in Gerald's writing, the deployment of the wondrous and miraculous increases the farther the narrator travels from the lands familiar to his

audience. Then, too, while Mandeville treats the inhabitants of foreign lands with greater sympathy than does Gerald, the depictions of “the other” are as self-reflexive as those in the *Topographia Hiberniae*, if in a slightly different direction. While the text does raise the question of the degree to which strangers share the common bonds of humanity with the audience, Mandeville’s *Travels* uses the differences to challenge, at times quite explicitly, the moral and ethical failings of the English audience. Cannibals and inhumanity exist in the world outside of England in the *Travels*, yet true humanity exists everywhere, even in some of the people who appear to be most different. The *extremes* of behavior can be found in the broader world, though, and the supernatural events test the differences between the subjects and the audience of the text as much as they do in the other texts in the chapter and even, to some extent, the romances and the texts about the supernatural in the other chapters.

Nonetheless, those differences and extremes of behavior are present in order to provide a distorted reflection of the audience of the text. As noted earlier in the chapter, a number of critics have described the tension that exists between the use of the depictions of “the other” as a means of asserting a species of superiority and as a means of defining the self. Said suggests that even when the other is depicted as holding some sort of advantage in action and morality, the author maintains a positional advantage, at least to the degree that the writer controls the depiction of the subject. Ganim and Grady have noted that the depictions of the East in the medieval period are as much involved in helping the West to understand itself as they are about the foreign subjects of the texts.

The presence of the explicitly supernatural objects and people, whether miraculous, wondrous, or marvelous, in Mandeville's texts adds an additional layer of complexity to those depictions. The most striking of these involves a satyr-like figure that a hermit encounters in Egypt. Mandeville states that when the hermit asks "him, in God's name, what he was; and the beast answered and said, 'I am a mortal creature, as God has made me'" (64). There is an implicit argument in the "beast's" answer. If he is mortal, he is not a demon, angel or faerie. The fact that he is half man and half animal would seem to suggest that he is an offense against nature, some process of miscegenation such as those figures that Gerald of Wales claims are the product of incest in his texts. Yet, the claim that he is as God made him reminds the audience that his existence, in and of itself, cannot be wrong or evil, which stands in sharp contrast to the depictions of vice and immorality that lead to the quasi-human figures in Gerald's texts.

The satyr-like figure complicates the issue of his categorization when he asks the hermit to pray for him and reveals that he knows of Christianity by describing Jesus's birth and Passion as well as the promise of eternal life that Jesus's sacrifice entails (64). That request shows that he is capable of understanding God, that he possesses reason and the ability to contemplate the divine, and implies that he could have an immortal soul that could be saved. These qualities locate him firmly within the definition of humanity, a situation which in and of itself creates an implicit argument about all of the foreign people in distant lands throughout the text. If this figure that challenges the definition of what human is, even though it appears to be half-goat, is possesses the capacity for

salvation, then the other people in the text, who are much more like the audience than this satyr is, surely must be as well.

That argument might not hold up under close scrutiny in and of itself for a skeptical audience, but Mandeville supports it through his depiction of other foreign and non-Christian figures throughout the text. The important element in this case is that Mandeville uses the status of this hybrid figure, who appears to be outside of the bounds of the course of nature, to mark the outer limits of humanity, to show that anything that is less strange than this figure could be human. The supernatural, expressed both through the sanction granted by the “beast’s” comprehension of God and his liminal status as a hybrid figure, again serves to add additional weight to the argument that the “other” might well be human.

This idea is supported by the more mundane aspects of his comments about foreigners, too. Mandeville recognizes that differences in locales and customs may not create real differences between peoples and suggests, rather, that those differences are reasonable and appropriate to the place. He notes that “[i]n Cyprus it is the custom that all men, lords and others, eat their food on the earth. . . . For that land is hotter than it is here. At great feasts, and for foreigners who go there, they set tables and benches as men do in this country, but they would rather sit on the earth” (56). The Cyprians are capable of the kinds of behavior that would be considered polite, familiar, and appropriate to his English audience; the land itself demands changes in behavior without necessarily changing the nature of the people.

Mandeville grants Muslims a certain kind of authority to speak about the problems of Christianity as it is practiced in the West. In speaking of the Muslims in general and the Although Mandeville insists that the Muslims do not follow the correct faith, he grants that their beliefs are so close to Christianity that they ought to be able to be converted easily. Mandeville advances one significant criticism, that the Muslims only follow the letter of their beliefs and do not understand “Holy Writ spiritually”, a problem that Mandeville says that they share with the Jews (107). That “weakness”, though, places the Muslims in a perfect vantage point for delivering criticism upon the Christian west. According to Mandeville the Sultan that he serves and the Muslim nobles of his court are able to list a series of failures endemic to the west, such as the failure of priests to act as examples for other men, to observe holy days in worship, to keep oaths, and to avoid lies. Standing outside of Christianity and Western European culture and having been acknowledged as rigorous in their own customs, the Saracens of Mandeville’s text are perfectly positioned to act as commentators upon that culture, a position allows Mandeville to show his audience a reflection of itself, whether or not it is an accurate reflection of the foreigners who are nominally the subject of the text. Still, these purportedly accurate descriptions of the Sultan’s court do serve to reinforce the argument that Mandeville advances through the supernatural elements of the text, that these peoples outside of Europe may be as human as his audience and as capable of understanding God.

Mandeville even goes so far as to suggest that even those who are foreign to the Christian faith may not be automatically damned. The threat of eternal damnation is one

of the preeminent gestures of exclusion, since it literally separates those whom God favors from those he refuses to accept into heaven, and, of course, that social and supernatural threat is employed as a political and social means of control by the Church through excommunication. Mandeville's *Travels*, on the other hand, appears to remove that hazard of exclusion without ever specifically stating that non-Christians will be saved, saying of the pagans encountered later in the text, "even if these people do not have the articles of our faith, nevertheless I believe that because of their good faith that they have by nature, and their good intent, God loves them well, and is well pleased by their manner of life, as He was with Job, who was a pagan" (180). That statement employs the supreme imprimatur, as it were, of God's love to emphasize the concept that people even in distant lands can be worthy of respect and fellowship.

That is not to say that Mandeville's definition of humanity is universal. He uses the supernatural, the wondrous, and the bestial to mark the outer, lower limit of his inclusiveness. Set against the positive moments of the recognition of similarity by the audience with some people in distant lands are descriptions of the cannibals and grotesques that he imagines in the lands beyond the Holy Land. Among the people of Lamory, although they do not wear clothes out of respect for God's creation or argue over possessions, the practice of cannibalism is rampant and commonplace (127); however innocent they may be in some ways, their practices are still on some level horrifying. As Heng suggests, it is a designation reserved for the dangerous outsider, for "[w]itches, Jews, savages" and monsters (29). The deployment of that trope set on an island of libidinous innocence is wrenching; it is a distortion in otherwise unthreatening

figures. Mandeville continues with that depiction of distorted human nature as he describes the physical forms and the practices of the people in the Andaman Islands. These are the islands where people worship a devil within an idol that judges whether a man can be cured of an illness or whether he ought to be killed and eaten by his family and friends (136). The bodies of the islanders echo those suspect spirituality. There are people with no heads, with mouths on their chests or their backs, some with no noses or eyes, and people with animalistic features, some with “feet like horses”, some who “walk on their hands and their feet like four-footed beats” (137). The appearance of these creatures, twisted out of forms familiar to the audience, marks the far side of the border with humanity.

It may be asking too much of Mandeville and his period to expect a statement of universal humanity, even though Boniface VII’s declaration regarding the status of pagans may indicate a growing acceptance of those from foreign lands. It may have to suffice that Mandeville presents several instances of foreigners who are, in some respects, at least morally equal to his audience, if not superior, and that he ends his discussion of his travels with the description of the Earthly Paradise at the spiritual antipodes. Rather than painting the outside world with an un-nuanced brush, Mandeville’s *Travels* demonstrates wild swings among the extremes in its depictions of the spiritual qualities of foreigners. In the extreme East, he enters the islands of Prester John and the lands of Christian men where missionaries have been wildly successful. Yet, he also encounters the Vale Perilous where devils there kill five of Mandeville’s companions. There are patterns of threat and refuge, of disturbing people and reassuring

normalcy throughout Mandeville's account of the lands to the east of the Holy lands and the hyperbole allowed by the presence of distorted nature and the supernatural allows him to explore the limits of humanity and human nature.

The Role of Magic in Distant Mirrors

The use of miraculous, marvelous, and wondrous elements causes the texts to engage in a description and definition of the interaction of the material and immaterial world almost as much as the texts explore humanity. In some instances, there are elements of a direct discussion of magical theory (or at least a discussion of the occult workings of nature and the elements that bears a great deal of resemblance to magical theory) of the sort that appears in the *Liber Iuratus Honorii*. When combined with the presentations of apparent distortions of nature and the blurring of the lines between animals and humans, the travelogues interrogate man's relationship with the natural world and with the immaterial forces in the guise of divine favor, sin, and the hidden marvels of nature.

In both of Gerald of Wales's texts in this chapter, Gerald employs extra-natural elements in order to explain the character of the people and lands that he describes. This is a conscious move on Gerald's part; the second part of the text opens by claiming that Gerald will address those aspects of Ireland that appear "to be contrary to nature's course" and are "worthy of wonder" (57). Part of Gerald's motivation is to demonstrate that the lands of Western Europe participate in "the wonders that [God] has worked on

the earth” (58), but part of it involves an attempt to depict the Irish people and land through the natural and the supernatural.

At one point, Gerald explains the prevalence of curses in Ireland through his description of the Irish temper. After describing the vengeance taken upon Hugh Tyrrell, who stole a cooking pot from a group of clerics, upon an archer in the army of Hugh Laci, who raped a woman in a mill, and upon a two horses who ate grain stolen by Hugh Laci’s army from churches and from that same mill, Gerald states that it is the Irish temperament that causes the problems, for “just as the men of this country are during this mortal life more prone to anger and revenge than any other race, so in eternal death the saints of this land . . . are more vindictive than the saints in any other region” (91). This is a fascinating explanation for the fire that destroys Hugh Tyrrell’s lodgings, for an archer who drops dead from a burning sensation that begins in his genitals and spreads throughout his body so that he dies in one night, and for two dead horses. The physical world, the supernatural, and the personalities of the Irish people are inextricably linked in Gerald’s conception of these events. It has to be granted that Gerald is engaging in a disturbingly racist essentialism in his description of the Irish, yet, all troublesome aspects of his beliefs aside, Gerald is still locating the power that drives these physical occurrences in the character of the people who are involved in the events.

Gerald’s fascination with the supernatural causes of things does not end with the actions that are connected with saints, though. He discusses the nature of fire as a supernaturally potent element, claiming that fire is “hostile to phantoms”. He proves this theory through a story of an island that had been appearing and disappearing and is

forced to remain stable and habitable after it is touched with an arrow of hot iron and with stories of phantoms that fall into swoons upon seeing fire. Gerald attributes the power of fire to the element's association with the heavens, for "the sky is of fire; the planets are of fire", and with its use as a medium for messages from God. Gerald makes reference to the burning bush and to the Holy Spirit's approach to the disciples as tongues of fire (66).

Gerald also presents several instances in which supernatural events are associated with water. Although he never addresses the concept that water possesses some sort of inherent power, in the way that he does with fire, places associated with both water and wonders and miracles appear frequently. While there are some odd instances of wondrous events involving water and fish, there are a few that touch more directly on the association between humans and the world. There are two wells that address aging, one makes a man's beard go grey, the other makes it retain its natural color (62). Another well in Connacht can only be drunk by men, not beasts (62-3). Another well in Munster causes rain if anyone touches it or even looks at it. The rain is supposed to continue until a priest "virgin both in mind and body" celebrates a Mass in a nearby chapel (63). While the text simply presents these events as facts, and Gerald specifically says that the rite to make the rain stop is "without rime [sic] or reason" (63), the descriptions of these events show that there is at least a desire on the part of the author or audience to see a close connection between man and the elements, the fundamental forces of the universe in the ancient and medieval understanding of the cosmos.

The specific aspects of the anecdotes may be less significant than the desire on the part of the author or the audience to believe that any person may touch the numinous and affect the world in ways that go beyond the physical, even while they express the fear that such an ability may be beyond the capacity of most, if not all, mankind. Much like the rituals of the *Liber Iuratus Honorii* and the *Lacnunga*, though, there are ready explanations for the failure of any individual to achieve that desire embedded in the wondrous events themselves. The wells are distant from the audience and are reported through hearsay; Gerald himself has not seen the wells in person, he has merely met a man who supposedly “washed there one part of his beard” (62). The ritual for ending the curse that brings rain in Munster requires a rather strict definition of virginity; a cynical person might point out both that it probably rarely ceases raining in Munster and that the tale may have been created to shame priests by repeatedly “proving” that any celebrant who attempts to say the Mass must be corrupt in some way. All of these events seem to suggest a common desire to believe that the material world is mutable and, ultimately, under mankind’s control, even while there is a simultaneous fear that it might not be as accessible as one might wish. Gerald remarks upon that when he says of the desire to understand these events, “There is a limit to human capacity [to understand] Envious nature has locked and hidden away for herself among her secret wonders the causes of these and other such things” (63).

The issue of limits appears in Gerald’s *Itinerarium Cambriae*, too. When he remarks upon the interpretation of dreams, Gerald expresses a very real concern over the limits of mankind’s capabilities. He acknowledges the validity of the belief in the power

of dreams, saying, “It is true that many treasures have been discovered as the result of dreams, and in all sorts of circumstances”, but he cautions, “It seems to me that dreams are like rumours: you must use your common sense, and then accept some but refuse to believe others” (170). Sometimes, as it were, a cigar is just a cigar; sometimes the material world does not yield up information simply through the power of a person’s dreams.

Gerald also discusses the impotence that men can have in the face of supernatural forces. In discussing spirits who torment people in two particular houses in Pembroke, Gerald describes the various ways that the spirits would destroy clothing in one house and would argue with humans and “upbraid them in public for every nasty little act which they had committed from the day of their birth onwards” (151). In both cases, Gerald claims that the use of holy water and religious rites did nothing to drive the spirits out. He reaches the conclusion that “the sacraments and things pertaining to them protect us from actual harm but not from trifling insults, from attack but not from our own imaginings” (152). Similarly, Gerald relates the story of a woman in Poitou who is tormented by a devil who caused her to argue cleverly and to reveal the secrets of all of those around her. Placing relics upon her simply forced the devil to move to different parts of the body, and administering sacraments in did nothing, for the devil would say, “You are giving her food for the soul, not for the body. My power is over her body, not over her soul” (152). The ability of the people attending the woman is limited both by their understanding of the way that the supernatural forces work and the tools that they have for manipulating those forces. By relating these events, Gerald is circumscribing

the limits of the things that mankind can understand as much as his descriptions of people and customs in distant lands define the limits of humanity; in effect, both elements of his travelogues raise questions about how much of the world is familiar and under human control, and how much is outside of our power to govern.

Mandeville raises similar issues in his *Travels*, though, as is true of his approach to other issues, his perception of the marvels of the world is more positive. Mandeville still describes things that are outside the borders of humanity and human understanding; the Vale Perilous where he loses companions is one of them. His horizons are simply broader. Mandeville seems to be quite content to explain the workings of diamonds, which he speaks of as living creatures that “grow together, male and female, and are fed with the dew of Heaven. And according to their nature they engender and conceive small children” (118). He cites authorities to demonstrate the breadth of human understanding of such things, specifically Isidore of Seville and Bartholomaeus Anglicus regarding the properties of diamonds, which he says will make a man bold and keep “his limbs healthy”, will give him the “grace to overcome his enemies, if his cause is righteous, in both war and law”, keep him free from sorcery and wild or poisonous animals (119). Mandeville apparently knows the hidden workings of the universe and is quite happy to share that knowledge. He even claims to have found a well that “some call . . . the Well of Youth; for he who drinks of it seems always young” (123). Mandeville supports this claim by saying that he drank from three times, along with his companions, and that he has felt healthier ever since (123).

However strange this claim regarding the discovery of the Well of Youth might seem, the presence of such a beneficial wonder in distant lands where horrors might also be encountered is an example of Mandeville's consistently even-handed attitude toward both supernatural events and the humans. There are treacherous things and people in Mandeville's vision of the world; cannibals exist, even though some of them are strikingly innocent of greed and covetousness (127). There are partially human figures abroad in the world, but some of them are so human they can engage in learned religious discussions. Devils haunt the Vale Perilous, but "good Christian men . . . can enter that valley without great harm if they are cleanly confessed and absolved and bless themselves with the sign of the cross" (173). Events are under human control to a far greater degree in Mandeville's text than they are in those of Gerald of Wales. That is not to say that there are no supernatural dangers in the *Travels*. Mandeville tells tales of remarkable dangers, such as the women of one island who have precious stones in their eyes and who can kill a man with "an angry intention . . . as the basilisk does" (175) or the legendary daughter of Hippocrates, changed by the goddess Diana into a dragon who killed two knights because they ran in fear of her (54). Yet, these are isolated incidents, surrounded by tales of people who are quite familiar and human in Mandeville's depiction, even if some of them have strange appearances.

Those tales of people, along with the descriptions of wondrous places and marvelous events, allow the texts of this chapter to interrogate the definition of humanity through the lens of the supernatural. They examine the implications for the divisions

between man and animal, man and object, and man and God, often by using the marvelous and miraculous to blur the lines among the groups so that a true interrogation of the nature of things can take place. Those interrogations are frequently influenced by issues of control, whether those issues involve physical control over places, control over ethnic identity and the covert resistance to changes in the status quo, or control over the depictions of subjects through writing. The significant aspect of those interrogations is that they reveal some of the ways that the conception of the material world, and its relationship to immaterial forces, shapes political and social exchanges.

Endnotes

¹ Stephen Greenblatt remarks in *Marvelous Possessions* that difference between Mandeville and the authors of other travelogues is that Mandeville is, at least, a “steady liar” but that they are all “frequent and cunning liars none the less, whose position virtually required the strategic manipulation and distortion and outright suppression of the truth” (7). Such strategies create part of the difficulty in discerning difference between the travelogues and the outright fictions of the romances. The other is the anecdotal nature of the presentation of the encounters in the travelogues, which Greenblatt also notes, distinguishing between the anecdotes and “totalizing, integrated . . . histories” (2). The short stories of encounters by the narrators with odd people and events are pointillist depictions of their subjects; there is a great deal of space for accurate representation around the events upon which they comment, and a great deal of need for totalizing assumptions on the part of the audience to draw a portrait of the whole group of people from the representations of individuals.

² See particularly, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen does in “Hybrids, Monsters, Borderlands: The Bodies of Gerald of Wales” in *The Postcolonial Middle Ages*.

³ Greenblatt discusses the way that the technology of writing is used to govern the social aspects of the depiction of native peoples and lands and the legal aspects of control and ownership of new territories in *Marvelous Possessions*. While he challenges Todorov’s conception of the significance of writing in the moment of the initial encounter and the progress toward domination of the new lands (11), Greenblatt goes on to explain the way that European assumptions about the significance of certain things and their exclusion of other elements that fall outside of their cultural norms and expectations shapes the records of their encounters in the travelogues (see ch. 4, particularly 94-5 on the “cynical calculation” of travelogues).

⁴ That is not to say that Wales is necessarily and unequivocally part of England. See the discussion of Gerald’s *Journey Through Wales* below.

⁵ Gerald’s attitude toward Ireland and the East reflects both Said’s conception of the positional superiority taken by outsiders describing a foreign culture and Grady’s explication of the self-reflective elements of asserting an interpretation of the East.

⁶ The absence of mice on an island where corpses do not putrefy is a rather odd quality, unless it is present to suggest that there is a complete lack the things that cause decay in that place. This could suggest that the island is being envisioned as a place outside of the realm of decay in the mortal world, a kind of Avalon.

⁷ James Cain discusses the issue the connection between the physical placement of Ireland on the edge of Europe and the extremity of the depiction of the behavior of the Irish in “Unnatural History: Gender and Genealogy in Gerald of Wales’s *Topographia Hiberniae*.”

⁸ Geraldine Heng suggests in *Empire of Magic* that part of the West’s depiction of the East may involve a reaction to trauma; she speaks specifically about the incidents of cannibalism at Ma’arra and Antioch and about the way that those acts rupture the barriers between the cannibals conceived of as “the other” and the crusaders who are emblematic of Christianity and Western Europe (21-35, but see particularly 22, 25, & 28). She also notes that “intensive historical writing” is spurred by disruption of and threats to national identity (35); Gerald’s travelogues about the threatening “other” occur in moments when invasions of Ireland and Wales are being contemplated, if not carried out, and, in the case of *Itinarium Cambriae*, while Archbishop Baldwin is recruiting for further crusades.

⁹ Cohen explores the strategies of justification for and resistance to conquest in “Hybrids, Monsters, Borderlands”. In his discussion of the grass-eating Welshmen in *Itinarium Cambriae*⁹, he notes that “In

promulgating an association between the people of Wales and beasts, *England* was employing a tactic already ancient by the twelfth century: An indigenous people are representative as primitive, subhuman, incomprehensible in order to render the taking of their lands unproblematic” (87, my emphasis added), to show them to be easily conquered and in need to the paternalistic care of the English. Yet, Gerald does not present an easy set of justifications for conquest in his depictions of either the Irish or the Welsh. As much as the Irish are bestial in some ways, his discussion of their temper, their treachery, and the corruption suffered by their associates would argue against conquest as much as do the supernatural elements, such as the discussion of frogs or the island where women cannot live. In essence, both the nature of the people and the marvelous nature of the land itself stand as arguments against conquest.

¹⁰ Arthur Lovejoy traces the development of the medieval understanding such divisions in *The Great Chain of Being* and notes that the differences among types of beings are demanded by Augustine’s interpretation of Plotinius’s argument and that Augustine’s answer to the question of why there must be differences among types of beings can be reduced to the statement, “if all things were equal, all things would not be” (67).

¹¹ See my discussion of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in Chapter Four.

¹² The sodomy referred to in Knight’s title is part of Gerald’s discussion of Welsh history and his attempt to locate what he sees as a barbarous practice safely in the past for the Welsh and to negotiate a series of challenging identities. For Gerald, “[s]odomy functions as a critical category of cultural differentiation which allows Gerald to construct an imperial history for the Marches, to justify Marcher imperial desires as well as to mark their ethnic difference from the Welsh and the Normans” (60).

¹³ Lewis Thorpe discusses Gerald’s involvement in the politics surrounding the Church in Wales in his introduction to his translation; see particularly pages 17 – 22.

¹⁴ Gerald uses this same trope to describe the Icelanders in *Topographia Hiberniae*. It may simply be a device for quickly suggesting a kind of moral superiority, though the implications for speaking versus silence (that one is more likely to be lying when one feels the need to insist that one is telling the truth) are interesting for a text that does nothing but claim to tell the truth about unfamiliar people.

Chapter Four: Magic, Identity, and the Boundaries of Possibility

Medieval romance is steeped in excess, a state that allows it to explore the limits of human nature and the material world. Worthy knights are often not simply noble; they are heroic in the face of horror and overwhelming adversity. Virtuous ladies are usually not just honorable and loyal; they maintain their fidelity in the face of complex situations or overwhelming threat. Clothing and other possessions serve multiple roles as markers of class and, frequently enough, as symbols of the interior lives of the characters, of their faithfulness or their valor.

With the addition of supernatural, the natural concerns of the nobility are inflated almost to the point of hyperbole. Sir Gawain in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* does not simply risk his life to defend Arthur and the honor of his court; he faces a giant who can laugh at his own decapitation. Sir Orfeo does not demonstrate loyalty to his wife; he abjures his wealth and travels to the underworld to bring her back. Even Dorigen's fears for her husband's safety and her desire to protect her honor, familiar concerns to the audience of the period, are brought into juxtaposition and magnified by the possibility of using magic to permit her husband's passage through the sea. In all of these cases, the situations are excessive. The readers are invited to stand in awe, not simply at Gawain's fear and temptation at the Green Chapel, the spectacle of the beauty of the fairy women in a number of stories, or the gentility allowed to Launfal through the production of endless wealth, but also at the weight of significance that is brought to bear upon the moment through the imposition of the supernatural upon the more quotidian elements

such as a love affair or the even more mundane spectacle of an exchange of blows by knights.

This moment of super-position of meaning upon moments and objects is one of the roles of magic in medieval romance, particularly in *Sir Launfal*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Sir Orfeo*, and *The Franklin's Tale*. Magic serves as an amplifier of significance in these texts, allowing objects and events to carry more weight than would be possible without the presence of the supernatural. Concomitantly, though, that process of amplification illuminates the limits of material objects to convey meaning, and, consequently, the boundaries of the medieval understanding of materiality itself.

Where material goods cannot adequately convey identity or emotion, the presence of the supernatural, such as that of a headless green knight, serves to give expression to a sense of wonder and potential, whether in human activity or in the possibility of divine or magical intervention. Conversely, those stories in which knights are supported or confronted by magical creatures or objects implicitly call into question the degree to which chivalric ideals could ever be made manifest in the mundane world without the challenges and the calls to heroism imposed by titanic foes. Thus, the Green Knight is not simply a threatening figure who challenges the honor of Arthur's court; he is a monstrous creature who threatens the chivalric identities of the knights by exceeding the limits imposed by mortality and testing their willingness to do the same, and he represents an opportunity for Gawain to prove the mettle of the Round Table through a supernaturally charged challenge. Bertilak's girdle, whether it is magical or not, becomes, through Gawain's *belief* in its magical powers, both a preserver of life or virtue

and a means of underscoring his failure. For Sir Launfal, the superabundance of wealth presented by the ever replenishing purse calls attention to the dependence of nobility upon material possessions for their status and identity, yet his transformation into an apparently eternal symbol of chivalry through the intervention of the fairies calls attention to the limits imposed by material goods, for he could not achieve that apotheosis without the addition of magic.

Such a desire to exceed the limits of the material world is not limited to the romances, though. Quite aside from the histories and travelogues of the earlier chapters, the impulses to probe the limits of materiality expressed in the romances have parallels in texts dealing explicitly with magical techniques and practices. The herbals and texts of ritual magic, notably the *Lacnunga* and the *Liber Iuratus Honorii*, reflect the same attribution of meaning and potency to objects that the narratives do. The texts about magic deal particularly with liminal objects, times and places, those which are perceived as somehow more than physical, either because these things are believed to possess occult natures, because of significance imposed upon them by ritual, or both.

These liminal objects, times, and places serve as a bridge between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the natural and the supernatural. For example, the direction in the *Lacnunga* for the creation of a “holy drink” to ward off “elfish magic” and the “temptations of the devil”, requires the use of a paten, consecrated wine, and masses sung over it in a Church (XXIX, 17).¹ These are things, that have already been made sacred through their association with making God manifest to his worshipers, that all have imposed meanings and that are, thus, created objects, and these created objects are used

to invest another object with supernatural qualities, to transform a concoction of herbs and clean running water drawn by a virgin into a protective elixir.

This transformative process, this movement from the quotidian to the marvelous, expresses the same attitudes toward material culture and the conception of the division between the material and the immaterial that appears in romance narratives. Here, too, places and times are used, in addition to the more obvious magical objects. Sir Gawain faces his own beheading in the Green Chapel, having been removed from the familiarity of Arthur's court through his journey through the wilderness, his confrontation with giants and beasts, and his arrival in a place where "Þe borne blubred þerinne as hit bouled" and where "myzt . . . Þe Dele his matynnes tell" (l. 2174 & 2187-8),² that is, in a place where nature appears to be so distorted that water boils in a stream and where the devil himself might engage in supernatural workings. Gawain's temptation and the possibility of magical invulnerability appears to need the trappings of other "otherworldly" things in order to become plausible. Sir Orfeo's wife is stolen, not in the middle of her court or from her sitting room but while she is asleep from her orchard under a grafted tree, a place where nature and human control are juxtaposed. Even Aurelius's brother's knowledge of astronomy in *The Franklin's Tale* is distanced from the normal scope of knowledge through the Franklin's description of its source. It does not come from England, but from "Orliens in Faunce" from "artes that been curious" and "swich folye / As in oure dayes is nat worth a flye" (1118, 1120, and 1132). Although the narrator is skeptical of the value of this knowledge to allow supernatural influence over the material world, he still creates a sense of wonder around it through its exotic source.

That type of exoticism is particularly penetrating for one rather common “object” in the romances and in the texts about the supernatural. The power of speech and sound is recognized throughout both sets of texts. In addition to the persuasive and transformative power of speech in the romances and the use of prayers and incantations in the rituals, there is a special recognition of the power of music. This attitude may reflect an ascription of liminality to music and sound, of an ambivalent nature that partakes of both the material and the evanescent, that appears both in philosophical tracts and in discussions of magic in the later medieval period, particularly in Ficino's *De Triplica Vita*. The status of music and speech as a thing that can pass between the corporeal and the immaterial makes the effect of Orfeo's harp in *Sir Orfeo* particularly trenchant to the discussion of the role of magic in medieval romance, especially since a harp and a pilgrim's mantle are the only objects that Orfeo takes with him both when he leaves his kingdom and when he enters the realm of the faeries and given that it is the persuasive power of Orfeo's eloquence that allows him to triumph over the faery king.

Taken together, the use of the supernatural to enhance significance of magical objects, the use of things that straddle the line between the material and the immaterial in order to attempt to reach past the boundaries of the material world, and the process of building gradually from the mundane to the supernatural delineate both some of the medieval attitudes toward the limits of life and the material world and the concerns about the manner in which those limits shape human experiences.

While many scholars have offered alternative interpretations of the effects of the presence of magical elements in the romances themselves, a great deal remains to be said about the way in which the supernatural interacts with the meaning of carried by material goods. Most often magic is treated in modern literary criticism as a means of creating or illuminating differences among groups, such as creating distance between the audience and the text,³ showing the differences between genders,⁴ or maintaining differentiation between cultures for the medieval audience.⁵ Those interpretations are quite valid and useful; however, the presence of magic also indicates desire. By associating the most noble deeds and most heroic figures with the supernatural, the narratives locate the source of real value and worth outside of the material, suggesting that mundane objects and nobles are less than they might be, that they cannot reach their full potential without the addition of something more than the material world. In that way, the narratives trace the limits of the material world and reaches past them for something greater, be it a way of expressing the greatness of a king, value of honor, or the belief that a hero might to transcend the limits of the material world itself.

That the genre of romance should participate in that kind of imposition of additional meaning upon material objects is not surprising, given that romances are marked in general by hyperbole and excess. W. R. J. Barron claims in *English Medieval Romance* that the characteristics of romance stem from a blending of the mythic, romantic, and mimetic modes, and he draws upon Aristotle's definition of the hero in the *Poetics* to point out that in these three modes, the hero is distinguished from others either by being "superior in *kind* to other men and their environment", "superior in *degree* . . .

by virtue of his superlative, even supernatural, abilities”, or “superior neither to other men nor to the environment . . . he is subject to the criticism of others”. In the first two cases, that superiority needs to be marked and explained in some fashion; as Barron points out, supernatural qualities are often used to provide that point of differentiation between the hero and the other characters or between the hero and the audience. In the third case, though, the supernatural is still often, though not always, present, inserting itself into the environment in the challenges that the characters face. This addition of the supernatural, whether divine in origin or drawn from natural or demonic magic, tends to enhance the effect of the criticism that Baron describes. Thus, in medieval romance, the hero or heroine is more or less worthy to the degree to which he or she surmounts the obstacles put in his path; the helpful or hindering magical elements add complications that make their triumphs or failures all the more significant.

Michelle Sweeney describes a similar interpretation of the role of magic in *Magic in Medieval Romance from Chrétien de Troyes to Geoffrey Chaucer*. Her reading of the effect of is that supernatural challenges allow the characters to face excessive tests that serve as gauges of their morality and worthiness, and she spurns the idea advanced by Auerbach that "the courtly romance is not reality shaped and set forth by art, but an escape into fable and fairy tale" (22).⁶ According to Sweeney, the presence of the supernatural challenges serves to delimit the boundaries of heroism or proper chivalric behavior from the more mundane realities of the other classes.

Corinne Saunders suggests that the supernatural allows a similar kind of probing of the boundaries of social mores in “Violent Magic in Middle English Romance”,

although her focus is on the ability of the supernatural to expose ideas that might be unpalatable to a medieval audience and to reconcile conflicting beliefs and ideas. In speaking particularly of the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, Saunders points out the transformative role of magic for the narrative itself. She suggests that the transfiguration of the "loathly old hag" to a beautiful mistress gives her a "didactic role that might seem more appropriate to a wholly different kind of otherworldly figure, such as Beothius' Lady Philosophy" (231). In her interpretation of the tale, magic serves as a force that allows for a kind of moral *mouvance*; the knight becomes the subject of "magical violence [that] reverses the knight's rape of the lady at the start of the tale", which causes the narrative to become "a complex exploration of desire, force, *maistrye*, and mutuality" (231-2). In this interpretation of magic's effect, the presence of the supernatural allows for an interrogation of human nature and social construction by allowing characters to be tested by otherwise "impossible" challenges.

However, while Saunders, Sweeney and Baron note the importance of magic in expressing social concerns and engaging the audience,⁷ the authors do not consider the implications for the depiction of the relationship between the material world and the immaterial concepts embodied in magic. The medieval romances struggle to make manifest ideas that necessarily exceed physical limitations by through material goods and common situations.

Such tension between the possible and the nominally impossible may explain, in part, the presence of hyperbole in the descriptions of magical elements, the increasing levels of the fantastic as the narratives attempt to express the ineffable. In *Sir Launfal*, it

is not sufficient that the knight is challenged to remain true to his lover. She must be the daughter of the king of faerie, and the value of her love is demonstrated through a series of increasingly improbable events. Sir Orfeo's playing is charged with such power that beings from base animals to faeries are charmed by his music, a quality that is demonstrated first in the natural world with natural creatures and later in the faerie realm with supernatural beings. The Green Knight, too, is not simply an outsider; he towers over Arthur's court and seems to be a phantom or faerie (237–240) from his entrance. By the time that he leaves, he has survived beheading. In each case, increasingly excessive descriptions serve to heighten the impact of the situation, raising the conflict from the quotidian realities of court life as if doing so would allow the story to represent all possible permutations of that story, to serve as an exemplar of the type of conflict and the reactions of the characters to it. In effect, the tale attempts to express the nature of the challenge in ways that the simple signification of material goods cannot capture through a gradual transformative process.

Here, too, there is a parallel between the romances and the texts treating magic as real force at work outside of narratives. In the rituals of the *Liber Iuratus Honorii* and the *Lacnunga*, magic does not simply happen. There are elaborate steps that need to be taken in order for the supernatural to be made manifest. The long series of purifications of the practitioner and of the objects involved in both texts serve to distance the magical ritual and object from quotidian actions and uses. Like the fictional narrative, these texts use repetition to create the sacred and the magical. It is as if both types of texts implicitly acknowledge that in the power of situations and objects must be created gradually, that

the sacred and the ideal, whether magical or heroic, can only be approached indirectly and by slow steps.

Sir Launfal and the Material Ideal

The narrative of *Sir Launfal* employs all of these devices, from the use of repetition to express the difference between the supernal beauty of the faeries to the depiction of magic in ways that call attention to the dividing line between the material and the immaterial. Materiality is particular point of attention in the narrative, for *Sir Launfal* is thoroughly invested in the depiction and employment of wealth and material goods without calling attention to the production of that wealth. In creating that dynamic, it exposes the relationship between goods and status on the one hand, while concealing the way that the depiction of the magical production of value renders the real achievement of chivalric ideals, as they are presented, impossible.

Sir Launfal tells the story of a knight of Arthur's court, a man of great generosity who is cast into ruin through the spite of Queen Gwenore. In a kind of exile (whether self-imposed or not is unclear), Launfal flees Arthur's court and takes up residence in the country out of shame. He is not able to support himself properly, and all of his goods begin to fall into ruin. He is only redeemed from utter poverty by the appearance of Tryamour, the daughter of the King of Faerie (279-280),⁸ who gives him a squire who is supernaturally swift and able to become invisible, a fine horse, and armor that will protect Launfal from any "dente" "in were ne in tournament" (132 & 131). Most importantly, she gives him a purse that is enchanted so that whenever he puts his hand into it he receives a mark of gold. The only thing that she requires of him in exchange is his

silence; he cannot tell anyone that she is his lover, cannot even make them aware of her existence.

In granting Launfal that purse, Tryamour protects him from the greatest threat in the story to his chivalric identity, his poverty. The text makes clear the connection between wealth, generosity, and status throughout the tale. Launfal is introduced in the beginning as Arthur's steward, a position he earned through extravagant generosity, having exchanged goods for social status, for he "gaf gyftys largelyche - / Gold and sylver and clothes ryche" (29). The nobility of his nature represented by such charity is confirmed by his refusal to dishonor Arthur by becoming one of Guenevere's lovers, "So [many] ther nas non ende" (48), a decision that earns her enmity and leads to his departure from the court.

Yet, for some reason, Launfal is not able to maintain the means that produced his wealth once he has left the court, and this reversal, too, underscores both the connection between noble status and wealth and the text's refusal to discuss the production of goods. It is his generosity that leads to his undoing, for "So savagelych hys good he besette / That he ward yn greet dette, / Ryght yn the ferst yere" (130-2). It reaches the point that he cannot maintain his retainers, Arthur's nephews who have traveled with him (139-141). The two fellow knights conceal Launfal's lack of wealth; when they return to Arthur's court, they claim that their state of disarray stems from the fact that they were returning from a hunt when they took their leave of Launfal (169-174). Gwenivere calls further attention to the dependence of the nobility upon wealth by asking Arthur's nephews when they return, "How faryth the prowde knight, Launfal? May he hys armes

welde?" (158 – 159), suggesting that state of their clothing and Launfal's inability to properly care for his guests must reflect some incapacity on Launfal's part to fulfill any of the aspects of his noble identity, even his ability to engage in combat.

With all of this attention paid to material goods as the marker of status, one might expect some reference to the means of its production; the text, however, is mute on that subject. There is no mention of the lands that ought to be supporting Launfal as a knight, for example. The text does point out that mayor with whom Launfal attempts to find shelter is a former servant of Launfal's, but it does not examine his failure to behave as one who has failed to meet the reciprocal obligations of the feudal system. Otherwise, the story elides any other mention of the source of Launfal's wealth, describing his ability to be generous and to dispense gifts as the source of his advancement to the position of steward in Arthur's court without discussing the lands (and rents) that ought to serve as the basis for his status. The pragmatic realities of production seem to be of little interest to the text. Instead, it focuses upon effects.

By introducing this source of limitless wealth, the story is able to interrogate the connection between wealth and noble identity in ways that a more mundane explanation of the source of his wealth would not. The fantasy of fairy gold divorces the source of nobility from the labor that produces it, leaving Launfal's identity as a knight unsullied by the grim reality of maintaining an estate and peasants. This is a story entirely devoted to the production and interrogation of chivalric identity, a fact that is confirmed by the way in which Launfal is treated after he receives the wealth.

With the magical source of goods, Launfal regains his status in Arthur's court. If that were all that there were to the story, the supernatural elements would be rather insignificant. However, Launfal is not simply a knight upon his return. His armor and the assistance of the magical squire Gefré make him a superlative warrior, so much so that Sir Launfal faces an entire army of knights at a tournament and "abated her bost / Wyth lytll companye" (563-4). He even embodies the virtues of charity to an even greater extent that he is able to earlier in the story. This is the point where the amplifying and additive force of magic truly comes into play. If Launfal is generous enough to be praised at the beginning of the tale, he becomes a paragon of charity with the limitless wealth provided by the purse. An entire stanza is devoted to the repeated phrasing "Launfal fedde pover gestes . . . Launfal bought . . . Launfal yaf" (421-432).

Launfal's generosity might make it appear as though material goods could convey significance without resort to the imposition of magic, but the hyperbole of the descriptions and their magical sources argue otherwise. Tryamour's goods demonstrate her elevated status, for even the breast strap of her palfrey is worth an earldom (958-960). Here the goods move beyond the physical; the comparison between a material object and an earldom, which bears social status, in addition to the physical wealth it represents, implies that even Tryamour's minor possessions cannot be bound by the strict limits of materiality. This overwrought description suggests that the goods are really not able to capture the wonder brought into the mundane world through the visit of the daughter of the King of the Faeries, nor is it able to convey the elevation in status that Launfal is able

to achieve through limitless wealth divorced from the means of production and through the addition of magic to the mundane.

A series of descriptions of virtue and physical beauty running throughout the text engage in a similar arc of hyperbole in the relationship between the two competing women in the story. Gwenore is not simply a lecherous and treacherous woman who falsely accuses Launfal of malfeasance; she "hadde lemmannys under her lord, / So fele nas noon ende" (47-8), so many that they were without end. The implications of indiscretion on Gwenore's part stand in stark contrast with Tryamour's insistence that Launfal maintain the secrecy of their tryst. Tryamour's beauty, too, bears a similar sense of an attempt to grasp after a quality that cannot be caught through simple explanation. The effect of her physical presence is expressed through the two sets of ten maids who precede her, the lowest of whom could be more beautiful than a queen (851-2). Each time one of the sets of women appears, the knights assume that Launfal's lover must have arrived because of their beauty and the richness of their clothing. Yet, each set of women is more beautiful than the previous group. When Tryamour herself finally appears, Gwenore and her ladies appear as the moon during daylight hours does to the sun. The queen is not even granted the dignity of being a fully visible astronomical object; the comparison renders her almost invisible in Tryamour's presence. These descriptions, beginning with the perfidy of Gwenore, moving through the possessions of Tryamour, and ending with the appearance of the Fairie King's daughter before Arthur's court move the audience through increasing levels of social power and complexity until the only remaining outlet, the only manner in which more meaning can be carried by the

characters and objects, is the supernatural. That particular set of increasingly hyperbolic descriptions ends in an expression of magical power when Tryamour literally takes away the last of Gwenore's light by blinding her with a breath (1008).

In writing about that final expression of Tryamour's superiority, Tory Pearman points to the problematic status of justice in the story, the weakness of Artour as a king, and the corruption in Artour's court. Pearman suggests, in "Deviance, Blinding, and the Supernatural in Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal*", that the intrusion of the supernatural justice of Tryamour is, in part, a commentary upon "the inefficacy of the human system of justice at work in Chestre's tale and society" and, following Furnish's analysis, suggests that the faerie realm is being used as a "counter-court", a more perfect exemplum of the potential that Artour's mundane court fails to reach (133). While that reading could suggest that the supernatural is being used as a means of pointing out the limitations of the material world, Pearman focuses the particular corruption of Artour as a failed king, not on the status of the material world in general, and upon the gender dynamics of the story, describing Tryamour's actions as the creation of "a female counter-court, a direct alternative to Gwenore's unproductive sexuality and Artour's corrupt court" (144). That interpretation is interesting and plausible, yet there is another side to Pearman's point. While he focuses upon magic as a measuring device for the particular circumstances of Arthur's court, he does not consider the implications for the material world, for the possibility of realizing justice in a realm that is necessarily imperfect.

By the conclusion of the tale, Launfal himself escapes that imperfect realm and becomes the ideal image of a knight, and, even though he fails to maintain the secret of

the source of his wealth, he is effectively rewarded when he is taken to the fairy realm and allowed to return to the mortal world for one day each year. Significantly, on that day he fights whoever challenges him, completing the depiction of the chivalric ideal (1024-32). Through magic, Launfal is relieved of the necessity of accounting for his wealth, he is apparently made immortal, and he is given the opportunity to act out the epitome of his knightly calling through yearly honorable combat without physical consequence.

However, this apparent apotheosis is not without its problematic aspects. If Launfal is able to achieve this state, if he is serving as the kind of exemplum for discussion that Sweeney, in *Magic in Medieval Romance*, suggests that the romances provide (13), the fact that he needs magic to do so renders him inimitable by his audience. The production of wealth by the ever-full purse is clearly not something that his audience could match, but neither is the martial prowess that he displays after gaining the assistance of Geffré. Through the addition of magic, Launfal's station becomes one to which his noble audience might aspire but that they must recognize that they could not reach without some similar means of exceeding the boundaries of the material world.

The main ritual of the *Liber Iuratus Honorii* promises just such a method of exceeding those boundaries. Its process is remarkably similar to the elements of the narrative of *Sir Launfal*, though its audience is quite different. It does not promise to provide excellence in chivalric combat, nor, in its standard form, worldly wealth or power (although the *LIH* does off-handedly provide variations for the ritual that would do just that).⁹ Instead, it offers another means of attaining an apotheosis, of eliminating the

distance between the material and the immaterial; it promises to allow the ritual worker to have a vision of God while the worker is still alive and in the material world. Roughly speaking, this is, for a mystically oriented person, the same kind of achievement that Sir Launfal experiences. It is the achievement of the goal of the spiritual life as much as the opportunity to fight in noble combat while attended by a beautiful lady and possessing, at least implicitly, the limitless wealth of the faerie realm is for the chivalric and noble audience of the romances.

Then, too, like *Sir Launfal*, there is a process and a series of actions that removes the ritual worker from his daily life. There are a series of eight purifying prayers and other requirements for celibacy and abstinence prior to the beginning of the ritual itself. As As Gösta Hedegård notes, taken together, the description of these rituals instructs the person intending to conduct the operation "to spend well-nigh all his time praying, fasting, and going to mass for 75 days . . . to perform the proper ritual" (35). Sir Launfal is asked to perform a similar kind of abstinence, even while he enjoys the company of Tryamour. He is required to keep her presence and identity a secret, to avoid fully revealing the details of his life and experiences to his fellow knights even while he engages in the exchange of goods and honor through tournaments and gifts. Then, too, the gradual introduction of Tryamour's beauty, again, serves as a kind of distancing mechanism, a means of demarcating the limits of normal, physical reality and of separating Sir Launfal's experience of the world from ordinary life.

All of this is not to say that the author of *Sir Launfal* had specific knowledge of magical practices. Yet, there is a commonality to the beliefs about the means by which a

person can be transformed, can make contact with the immaterial, that underlies the descriptions of both texts. The ritual in the *LIH* promises to purify the operator and to elevate him to a position where he can experience the divine. The narrative of *Sir Launfal* removes the knight from the petty conflicts of politics and poverty, grants him first a kind of material perfection in his ability to engage with courtly society by giving gifts and maintaining friendships and then a quasi-spiritual perfection as an eternal warrior. The end goals are different, but the essence of their promises is the same, as is the attitude toward the material world. In both cases, the quotidian world is a fallen place, from which people must struggle to escape through purification and trial.

A similar kind of interrogation of the concept of nobility, honor, and materiality occurs within *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, for there, too, magic and a hyperbolic description of goods and people challenges the ability of unassisted mortals to realize the ideals of chivalry. Yet, in this case, the tale marks the limitations imposed by mortality and fallibility.

Where Sweeney's interpretation of the role of magic in medieval romance might suggest that Gawain's worth is tested against supernaturally enhanced standards and where Saunter's interpretation might say that magic allows a single individual to pose a threat to the entirety of Arthur's court and, thus, to stand as a figure who challenges the chivalric ideals of Arthur's knights, it is worth bearing in mind that there is another kind of interrogation going on. Gawain's ultimate failure really probes the limits of man's potential to make lofty ideals manifest in the real world. Even with the lengthy descriptions of Gawain's worth, even with the long journey through the wilderness (a

period of time not dissimilar to the wilderness sojourns of scriptural figures), and even with Gawain's probity in the face of female temptation, this epitome of knighthood cannot enact one final requirement for perfection, the ability to face death, the end of material existence, without flinching.

It is as if Gawain's story is one of a failed ritual. The operation described in the *Liber Iuratus Honorii* promises to make a vision of God appear to the worker; Gawain's journey ought to have made him into an epitome of chivalry. Both rely upon the slow accretion of liminal elements around the central figure, and both have a period of trial and purification. The only difference is that, unlike Sir Launfal, Gawain cannot fulfill his role.

As in *Sir Launfal*, material goods seem to be inadequate to convey the full weight of meaning imposed by the supernatural. This tale, too, resorts to surplus and excess that builds to a break between the mundane and the magical. The story roots itself in the history of the Trojan past and the coming of Brutus to Britain. Moving to Arthur, the tale begins to invoke the language of hyperbole. Arthur is not merely a king; he is the noblest of them (26). Bertilak's appearance as the Green Knight is marked by excess, and from the moment that he appears in the hall, he poses a challenge to the identities of the knights in the court. This moves from the purely physical, from the fact that he is "an aghlich mayster, / On þe most on þe molde on mesure hyghe" (136-7), literally as Andrew and Waldon suggest in their footnote, "'one the biggest" . . . an idiomatic superlative, not yet to be confused with the weaker 'one of the biggest'" (212n); his size alone makes him greater than any other man on earth. The story moves quickly to

distance him from the purely mundane, though, describing him as "Half-etayn", half giant (140). The supernatural quality of the threat that he poses is confirmed a few stanzas later through the reaction of his audience, for "[a]l studied þat þer stod and stalked hym nerre . . . Forþi for fantoum and fayryze þe folk þere hit demed" (237 – 240). It is at this moment that Arthur's court fails the test posed to them; for, confronted with this magical figure, "non wolde kepe hym with carp" (307). The Green Knight taunts them, "Where is now your sourquydrye and your conquests / Your gryndellak and your greme and your grete words" (311-312). They have apparently reached the end of their ability to act, even to speak. Arthur is forced to take the challenge until Gawain belatedly begs permission to face it himself. Here, the limits of valor and fidelity are tested by the presence of the marvelous and the threat posed by a challenger to Arthur's court is amplified through the presence of magic.

Just as the threat posed by this invader exceeds the limits of the mundane world, Gawain himself is marked by excess. He appears to be the very epitome of knightly virtue in the beginning of the story. There is an emphasis placed upon the material goods that seems to drive Gawain's knightly status. His armor is "gyld gere that glent" (569) on the "tulé tapit", literally gilded gear that gleamed on the silk carpet, and "[h]is gold spurs spende with pride" (586). The story firmly links Gawain with virtuous behavior. After donning his arms to go on the quest, Gawain "herknez his masse / Offred and honoured at þe hege auter" (592-3) and courteously takes his leave of his lord and lady (594-5). All of these outward signs and appearances are simply confirmed by the pentacle "bytoknyng of trawþe" (631) and his status as one "funden fautlez in his fyue wyttez" and

who bears a studiedly manifest affiliation with "the fyve woundes / That Cryste kaght on the croys, as the crede telles" (641-643). Even this moment of purity is marked by attention to his faultlessness, for the description continues for the entire stanza, including the account of the presence of the image of Mary on the inner face of his shield (647-50). Seemingly, he is the very image of knightly virtue, and the presence of the symbols of supernatural qualities, Mary's image and the pentacle, serve to re-inscribe and reinforce that identity in ways that the purely material signifiers of armors and weapons apparently could not. The gold chasings of his armor mark his class and status, but the text does not stop at that point. It continues to heap descriptions of his inner qualities upon him until it reaches the signifiers of the ineffable.

This emphasis upon his status as a marked figure bearing the weight of supernatural significance is not an accidental quality of the text, nor is it simply the product of literary tradition. Ann Derrickson makes the point that "in other tales Gawain's emblem is a griffin or an eagle, and the anomalous use here of the five-pointed star seems to bear an intentional relationship to the author's individual conception" (13). There is something particular to this text's recounting of Gawain's identity that differs from past depictions of his character. The addition of the supernatural increases Gawain's status and the burden of the audience's expectations upon him.

Then, too, this lengthy assertion of Gawain's status occurs within the context of his literary history. Catherine Batt claims that "Certainly, the idea of Gawain as a 'known' figure is integral to the poem. If readers of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* approach its protagonist with certain presuppositions . . . no less do the figures in the

poem" and notes that Bertilak taunts Gawain when Gawain flinches by "calling to mind his knightly reputation" (119). Before the tale begins, the medieval audience would have had certain expectations of Gawain from his role in other tales. He is already invested with the force of his prior reputation before the text reinscribes his figure with the significance and symbolism of his armor and religious trappings, marking him as one of the highest expressions of chivalry.

The girdle similarly develops as a redundantly marked figure and locus of signification for Gawain's guilt over the course of the tale. As Albert Friedman and Richard Osberg suggest, there is a "the symbolic polarity between the pentangle painted on the knight's shield . . . and the green girdle the tempting Lady bestows on Gawain" (301). If it is the equal and opposite of the pentacle, if, as George J. Englehardt puts it, "The endless knot has been superseded by the knot of green silk" (qtd. in Friedman and Osberg 301), it is also the site of the loss of Gawain's honor, an artifact of Morgan la Faye's plot to reave Arthur's court of its wits and honor, and the means of Gawain's renewed acceptance by the court.

The reduplication, the overly insistent signification and the magnification of meaning associated with the imposition of the supernatural upon material objects serves to draw attention back to Gawain's status as a marked figure at the end of the story (as the pentacle does in the beginning), to the supernatural aid that he seeks *in addition* to the support that he already has, and allows the story to interrogate the concept of honor *in extremis*. Had there not been a magic girdle, had Gawain faced the certainty of death, his failure to stand against the Green Knight's blow would have been more reasonable, even

though his flinching would still have marred his status as a perfect knight. The fact that Gawain is not able to maintain his troth with Bertilak and is not able to face the blow with the assistance of the girdle increases his humiliation in the face of Bertilak's challenge.

Yet, this test, fraught as it is with supernatural effects, forces Gawain to the limits of human endurance, a point that Bertilak acknowledges. He notes that Gawain's sin is less because he acted "for no wylyde werke, ne wowing nauþer, / But for 3e lufed your lyf" (2367-8) (not for greed, nor for vengeance). Despite Gawain's speech belittling himself in front of Arthur's court, Gawain is one of the best of knights, a point made plain by the description of the pentacle and of Gawain's relationship to it. The text seems to suggest that, if even Gawain would falter in the face of this test when he believes he has magical assistance of his own, any mortal, material creature would fail. The communal decision of Arthur and his court at the end of the story that all would bear a baldric in remembrance of the green girdle acknowledges the frailties common to all and the distance between themselves and the chivalric ideal that is demonstrated through the amplifying effects of magic upon significance.

In the end, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* focuses upon the limits of human endeavor, of the apparent impossibility of reaching past the boundaries of the material world. Yet, it also plays upon the desires and the expectations of the audience to see those limits overcome. In making this gesture, and particularly in placing the means of supernatural control in the hands of mortals such as Sir Gawain or Sir Bertilak, the text

interrogates the nature of material existence and the promise inherent in the possible perfection of the immaterial.

The Wife of Bath's Tale and Magical Humiliation

The tendency to juxtapose the experience of frailty and failure with the perfection of the ideal is another of the functions of magic and the supernatural in romance.

Corinne Saunders suggests this type of function in "Violent Magic in Middle English Romance", and she focuses upon magic's ability to reconcile conflicting beliefs and ideas as she explores this concept.

In speaking particularly of the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, though her comments also embrace and include *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Sir Orfeo*, Saunders points out the transformative role of magic for the narrative itself. She suggests that the transfiguration of the "loathly old hag" to a beautiful mistress gives her a "didactic role that might seem more appropriate to a wholly different kind of otherworldly figure, such as Beothius' Lady Philosophy" (231). In her interpretation of the tale, magic serves as a force that allows for a kind of moral *mouvance*; the knight becomes the subject of "magical violence [that] reverses the knight's rape of the lady at the start of the tale", which causes the narrative to become "a complex exploration of desire, force, *maistrye*, and mutuality" (231-2).

Yet, there is another type of transformation occurring here, too. The presence of magic allows for the reconciliation of otherwise irremediable conflicts. In this case, the knight is bound by social pressure and the expectation of the court to fulfill his oath to the "old wyf"; prior to the old woman's transformation, though, the knight faces humiliation

through the marriage. His first lament is "Allas, that any of my nacioun / Sholde evere so foule disparaged be!" (1068-9), and he later makes clear that he is as troubled by the fact that she is "comen of so lough a kynde" as much as he is by her hideousness or age (though, to his mind, her appearance is a *result*, "therto comen of so lough", of her baseborn status (1101).

The magical transfiguration at the end of the *Wife of Bath's Tale* not only serves as an object lesson for the knight and his peers; it allows the knight to fulfill his social obligations of *gentilesse* without suffering on-going humiliation by being bound to a hag. That humiliation would have formed a challenge to his identity as a knight, much as Sir Launfal's poverty or Sir Gawain's natural fear for his life.

Yet, Just as magical, limitless wealth serves to allow Launfal to participate fully in reciprocal exchange with his peers, simultaneously eliding and calling attention to the dependence of nobility upon the production and acquisition of material wealth, the supernatural in the *Wife of Bath's Tale* eliminates the material challenges to the desired immaterial goal. The distance between material reality and the immaterial, between the actual and the ideal, is seemingly eliminated through the presence of the supernatural.

That elimination is not without cost, though; just as the gestures of *occupatio* call attention to Theseus' exploits in the *Knight's Tale*, the easy reconciliation of social expectation with unpleasant duty in the *Wife of Bath's Tale* would have reminded the audience of the gulf between experienced, material reality and the immaterial and unrealized ideal.

Sir Orfeo and Liminal Figures

Sir Orfeo reflects this same kind of interrogation of that gulf between the real and the ideal that the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, *Sir Launfal*, and *Sir Gawain* do. However, where Sir Gawain faces a test of virtue that is made more incisive through the presence of magic and where Sir Launfal eventually internalizes the presence of the supernatural to the extent that he becomes a kind of quasi-material representative of his ideals, Sir Orfeo appears to remain in some ways detached from the supernatural powers around him. He employs music to charm animals and to impress the faeries who have stolen his wife while she lay sleeping in an orchard. The fact that Orfeo only appears to have abilities beyond those of any other man while he plays his harp would seem to suggest that the tale is about the nature of music itself. However, Orfeo's status as a king, already a figure that stands between the mundane and the divine,¹⁰ combined with his decision to leave his kingdom in the hands of his steward and to give up all of his material goods except a pilgrim's mantle and his harp, places him upon the threshold of the material and the immaterial. The text further explores the nature of that border through its presentation of different kinds of power and through figures who occupy similarly liminal spaces.

It would seem natural that a story involving music should be particularly interested in the kinds of power that material and immaterial objects can exert. D.P. Walker discusses the connection between music and magic in *Spiritual and Demonic Magic*, particularly in Ficino's use of music to "sustain, move and affect the spirit, soul, and body" in ways that are similar to the manner in which "celestial figures act by their

movement; for these, by their harmonic rays and motions, which penetrate everything, constantly affect the spirit secretly, just as music does openly" (15). Essentially, Walker notes that Ficino's theory is that music, though the element of air, is closest to the spiritual because it conveys rational meaning (unlike the "lower" senses of touch, taste, and smell) and is comprised of movement (like the heavenly spheres). Although Ficino is in the later medieval period, his work draws upon Platonic discussions (particularly in the *Timeus*) of the nature of music and its influences upon the spirit (1-11), there is ample reason to think that this kind of understanding of the ambivalent nature of music appears throughout the period; from the concept of the music of the spheres to the attempt to describe both music and astronomy as regular and regularizing forces, the connection between music and the celestial and ephemeral is of long standing.

Bruce Holsinger traces some of those currents of musical theory in *Music, Body, and Desire in Medieval Culture*. Although his work is not principally concerned with magic, he points out the connections between the effects of music upon the body and upon the soul, and he traces the development of musical theory. He notes, for instance, that Isidore of Seville places music in the quadrivium with mathematics and astronomy and that Isidore considered music to be "an integral part of what the human is and serve[s] as a constant reminder of the limits of what the human can achieve" (297-8). Similarly, Holsinger describes the work of Baudri of Bourgeuil a Benedictine monk and archbishop in eleventh century France, who "shows a deep awareness of the hermeneutical tradition that envisioned biblical musical imagery as an allegorical model of human life" and who, in referring to the Orpheus myth itself, shows an awareness of

"phenomenological shiftiness" of the voice, of an ability in the singing of a young boy to blur the lines of identity between the masculine and feminine, between the child and the adult (304-6). In effect, Holsinger is describing an awareness in writings of this eleventh century monk of music's ability to maintain a liminal position between the material and the immaterial.

Ficino's understanding of air as a conjoining element between the material and the immaterial also appears, in a fashion, in the fourteenth century in the *Liber Iuratus Honorii*. That text instructs the user that "Aer est elementum corruptibile, liquidum et subtile inter cetera nobilius passibiles recipiens qualitates et est simpliciter invisibilis set ipso composito videtur" (III.cxvii.4), that "Air is a corruptible element, liquid and fine, capable of receiving qualities from the rest and is simply spiritual [or invisible] but it is considered to be composed of itself [perhaps unadulterated?]" . It is the most easily reached and influenced of all of the rest of the elements, perhaps because of its liminal status, because it is felt, but not seen; it is obviously real but difficult to measure or contain. Then, too, its physical position between man and the heavens might contribute to the view that it can serve as a mediator between the material and the immaterial realms.

That position on the threshold of reification is crucial to *Sir Orfeo*. While Orfeo is a king, his physical efficacy is limited throughout the story; it is only when he begins to move beyond explicitly corporeal power that he manages to overcome the challenges facing him. After all, his power as a warrior and ruler is insufficient to prevent the faeries from taking Heurodis. When she falls asleep in the orchard and is driven wild by

the faeries, Orfeo "asked conseyl at ich man; Ac no man him help no can. / A-morwe the under-tide is come, And Orfeo hath his armes y-nome, / And wele ten hundred knyghtes with him / Ich y-armed, stout, and grim" (180-184). Neither counselors nor knights can help him; the power of the fairies surpasses unassisted mortal might and intellect to the degree that, despite the fact that they form a "scheltrom", a shield-wall, all around her and pledge to die before the queen should be taken, "yete amiddes hem ful right / The Quen was oway y-tvight, / With Fairi forth y-nome" (185-193).

As in *Sir Gawain* and *Sir Launfal*, hyperbole and excess are used to approach the evanescent. It is not sufficient to simply say that Orfeo's guards are ineffective; the poem presents a thousand knights gathered with interlocked shields in order to capture the way in which the faeries embody a state that, like music, moves within the physical realm (for they capture and carry away Heurodis) and beyond it. Heurodis herself is "[t]he fairest levedi, for the nones, . . . Ful of love and of godenisse - / Ac no man may telle hir fairnise" (53-56), a description that seems to attempt to capture the extent of Orfeo's grief over the loss of his lady. Heurodis's reaction to the presence of the faeries is marked by excess, for it transforms her from one "That ever yete hast ben so stille / And now gredest wonder schille?" and changes her body from one "that was so white y-core" to one that is "With . . . nailes is al to-tore" (103-106). Even the faeries themselves are separated from the mundane through expressions of superlative physical beauty; Heurodis says, "I no sighe never yete bifore / So fair creatours y-core" (147-8) and describes their king as having a crown that is not of silver or of red gold, but of precious stones.

Here, too, the descriptions of physicality lead to an expression of super-physical power, for the king carries Heurodis off whether she would or no, takes her on a tour of all of his lands, and returns her before anyone misses her with the promise that he would return in a day to take her to "live with ous evermo" (169). As in *Sir Launval*, the faeries are able to promise apparent immortality, a translation in the flesh out of the mortal realm. In this story, though, that transformation is a great deal darker.

The faeries appear to prey upon folks who are somehow positioned in liminal spaces. As Stephen Shepherd points out, Heurodis and the other men and women that Orfeo sees in the fairy realm have been captured in places where they are out of their proper places in society, at the moment of death or transformation, or, in Heurodis case "sleeping at the wrong time [midday], possibly also in the wrong place" (184n). The story acts to draw attention to the limits of men's power in the world in the description of the prisoners of the fairies, of "folk that were thider y-brought, / And thought dede, and nare nought: / Sum stode withouten hade, / And sum non armes nade, . . . And sum were in water a-dregynt . . . Wives ther lay on childe-bedde, / Sum ded and sum a-wedde" (389-400). The fairies have fixed these folk in the processes of transformation, in the process of giving birth or dying. As Shepherd suggests, some appear to be caught between life and death, for they have "thurt the bodi hadde wounde" or "armed on hors sete" (393 & 395), as if they are so newly dead that they still sat upon the horses.

If this is a story about the power of magical creatures over those borderlands between the physical and non-physical, it is also about Orfeo's use of music and of his knowledge to achieve a similar kind of power. Orfeo assumes a liminal state, too; having

left his kingdom in the hands of his steward, he becomes a king without a retinue, without the material signifiers of his power. Pledging to live with beasts in the woods, Orfeo takes with him "Bot a sclavin", a pilgrim's mantle, "He no hadde kritel, no hode, Schert, no no nother gode - / Bot his harp he tok algate, / And dede him barfot out atte gate" (228-232). Both the pilgrim's mantle and the harp are particularly trenchant, since both music and pilgrimage attempt use physical activity in order to achieve a non-physical and, perhaps, spiritual effect.

Yet, he is not fully removed from his former status as noble, either. He finds Heurodis because he is drawn to watch ladies hawking, saying "there is fair game! . . . Ich was y-won swiche werk to se!" (315 - 317), and Orfeo only wins her back from the fairy king because he knows the usages of honor. When the king grants Orfeo a boon as a reward for playing and Orfeo requests to have Heurodis, the fairy king is reluctant because of Orfeo's appearance. Having spent ten years in the wilderness, Orfeo "lene, rowe, and blac, / And sche is lovesum, withouten lac" (459-60). The fairy king is apparently punctilious about propriety, for he states that "[a] Lothlich thing it were, forthi, / To sen hir in thi compayni" (461-462). Orfeo, in his turn, points out to the king that it wolde be "a wele fouler thing / To here a lesing of thi mouthe" than to allow Heurodis to go away with Orfeo. While this is not a complex exchange over points of honor, it still demonstrates Orfeo's ability to negotiate an assertion of social power, to win the battle of words over ownership of Heurodis.

The tale makes clear, though, that his ability to assert this facility with words and a discussion of honor, this mark of his noble status, is only made possible through the

intervention of his music. His physical force and authority alone is insufficient in the orchard when he is surrounded by knights. Orfeo must exceed the limits of the material world in order to exercise his proper authority.

That tendency to present the experience of the supernatural by through a slow accretion of elements is not simply limited to the narratives that present figures who are directly influenced by magic; it is also true for characters who are surrounded by supernatural forces without being involved immediately with them. They, too, face a kind of amplification of their conflicts. In *The Franklin's Tale* and in *The Man of Law's Tale*, Dorigen and Custance are not just called upon to be virtuous and patient; they are confronted with and sustained by supernatural forces that demonstrate through excess the challenges that women face. Dorigen is confronted with the threat to her virtue posed by the magic that apparently causes rocks to disappear, and Custance is supported only through God's grace during her trials upon the sea. Magic, in these cases, enhances the effect of the elements of the tale until the women serve to explore the utmost reaches of patience and fidelity in ways that could not happen without the amplifying effects of the supernatural. This type of hero is the figure that Baron would describe as "superior neither to other men nor to the environment" (4) the qualities of the heroine are rendered in starker contrast because of the challenges created by the supernatural.

In the end, all of these texts demonstrate the degree to which medieval romances are involved with the production and amplification of significance in objects through the imposition of the supernatural. In doing so, they grapple with the distinction between the physical and the immaterial and indicate the limits of purely material objects and

situations to act as signifiers, through the degree to which additional significance is brought to bear through magic. The slow building of exaggerated physical attributes leads, in these texts, to the presence of magic.

One could argue that hyperbole is simply a function of the genre of the romance, that *everything* is exaggerated, not simply the supernatural elements. The heroes are titanic; the villains and challenges likewise. Nature, likewise, ought to be exaggerated, if only to provide for more entertainment through the heightened sense of wonder at the extraordinary marvels and challenges that the heroes face.

Yet, the neither the entertainment value of the material nor the ubiquitous presence of exaggeration alter the effect of magic as an amplifying device, nor is such amplification limited to texts that entertain. Texts dealing specifically and directly with the description and practical application of magical techniques and practices demonstrate similar kinds of issues. Especially in discussion of elements that are generally called natural magic,¹¹ the addition of the supernatural extends the material qualities of the goods, probing at the limits of materiality

In fact, the use of the supernatural suggests a kind of dissatisfaction with the limits of material goods and a desire to find something more to bridge the gap between the audience's desires and their quotidian reality. Juxtaposing such texts with the moments of contact with the supernatural in the romances exposes just how thoroughly invested both sets of texts are in probing the limits of material and mortal life and how much yearning for some sort of control over those limits there was in the culture.

Endnotes

¹ See also the discussion of this charm in Chapter One.

² All quotations from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* refer to *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript: Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 5th edition.

³ See Auerbach *Mimesis* and Todorov's *The Fantastic*.

⁴ Susan Crane takes up this discussion extensively in *Gender and Romance in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* (138-164).

⁵ See particularly Geraldine Heng in *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy*.

⁶ Susan Crane, too, takes issue with Auerbach's dismissal of magic as a functional narrative element and asserts instead that it engages with valid social concerns.

⁷ Sweeney in particular draws attention to Marie de France's assertion that "The custom among the ancients . . . was to speak quite obscurely . . . so that those who were to come after . . . might gloss the letter" (13) and so come to a better understanding of the material (13), suggesting that the supernatural is a device used, like Augustine's explanation for the use of parable in Scripture, to cause the audience to think more deeply about the subject of the work.

Saunders suggests something similar, though her interpretation of the way that the supernatural allows for the interrogation of social situations by expanding the range of possible actions and juxtapositions comes closer to my analysis. However, while Saunders occasionally makes mention of the magical objects that mark the figures in medieval narrative as different, her focus is almost entirely upon the challenges that the supernatural allows, not upon the relationship that the physical qua supernatural elements have with the narrative and with the medieval understanding of the material world.

⁸ All quotations from *Sir Launfal* are to the Norton Critical Edition of *Middle English Romances* edited by Stephen H. A. Shepherd

⁹ See Chapter Two for a more detailed discussion of the elements of these rituals.

¹⁰ See Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies* and the discussion in Chapter Two.

¹¹ See particularly Kieckheffer *Magic in the Middle Ages* for a discussion of this category.

Conclusion

The various texts of this study engage in an interrogation of materiality and of the understanding of the world and humanity's place in it. They do so indirectly, of course, but introducing the supernatural inevitably raises the question of why immaterial force is needed, of what the material world lacks.

The supernatural amplifies the virtues and foibles of the characters of romances, the qualities of distance and otherness in the travelogues, and the characteristics of kingship and governance in the histories allows the presence of the supernatural in the texts. In doing so, the presence of magic and miracles raises questions about what the limits of recognizable humanity are, of what a person might accomplish as a hero or a king without supernatural support.

Likewise, the imposition and accretion of power and value upon objects through the presence of magic or the divine becomes a means of defining the point at which unadorned materiality is not sufficient. A purely material sword does not capture the potency of Aethelstan's might as a ruler in quite the same way as a sword that has a nail from the Crucifixion worked into the hilt; divine favor expressed through the imposition of immaterial power upon a material object acts to explain and to ratify Aethelstan's worth. Sir Launfal is not simply a great knight who possesses some chattle; he is redeemed and transformed into an apparently immortal figure of chivalry and given unlimited wealth through the power of magic. Even land is not sufficient in and of itself to bear the weight of unadorned signification; the depiction of Ireland in Gerald of Wales's writings and the lands beyond the East in Mandeville's *Travels* must be

bolstered with fantastic beasts and marvelous geographical features before it can convey the authors' understanding and judgment about the lands and people they describe. The purely material is simply not enough.

The presence of the supernatural serves to highlight the difference between the audience's quotidian experiences and their dreams, to draw attention to the need for something more: for a more comforting and easily comprehensible explanation for why good and bad things happen to kingdoms, for an encounter with something strange and different that would allow the audience to more easily understand themselves, and for heroes and villains who press the limits of human existence and human nature to give the audience a sense of who they could be, if only that dividing line between the material and immaterial could be easily breached.

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