

Destroying the Legitimate Body: Embodied Nobility in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*

Don Hee Lee

1.

In chivalric romances, when a knight descends from a noble lineage, then he invariably has a superior body. Even when that lineage is unknown to the knight (as is the case in *Lybeaus Desconus*) or when it is intentionally made secret (as is the case with Sir Gareth), the body of the knight betrays his heritage as if it were a text from which the knight's family tree, as it were, can be read. The assumption underlying this romance convention is (1) that inherent nobility can be transferred through a noble lineage, and (2) that such nobility necessarily manifests itself in a correspondingly superior (masculine) body.

This romance convention, however, is more than just a convenient literary device employed by the author to help identify the hero. According to Danielle Westerhof, the idea that nobility resides in the body was an essential part of an essential part of aristocratic ideology in the late medieval England:

While their status was predicated on privileged access to social, political and economic resources, the ontological underpinning of the male aristocratic members was located in the concepts of physical superiority—thus excluding men from more modest backgrounds from the elite network on the basis of “inferior birth” and blood relations. (5)

Nobility was something at once *interior* and *innate* to the members of the aristocratic elite, and the idea of nobility was rendered visible or concrete within and upon the body of the aristocratic male, who was almost unthinkingly cast as a knight (Westerhof 34-35). The assumption was that some inherent quality (i.e., strength, prowess, loyalty, valor, grace, generosity,

honor, etc.) could be transferred through a noble lineage, which is essentially a *blood-line*, and consequently the body constituted the person's identity in an essentialistic sense. This idea was reinforced as the nobles distinguished themselves through their appearances. Not only were they dressed in such a way that their "nobility" was immediately recognizable, but their physical body actually seemed superior to that of the lesser men. As Reuter notes, the nobles "equipped themselves with a whole series of social marker of appearance, speech, dress, food, and rituals of social interaction. . . . [T]hey were better fed, and therefore larger" (89). The collective effect of all these social markers was to create an essentially classed world, where aristocrats were unmistakably different and instantly recognizable (Reuter 93). It is easy to see that such idea of "embodied nobility" could act as an ideological device that helped maintain and justify hereditary right in medieval English society. Thus, the romance tradition of coupling noble lineage with noble bodies accurately reflects the social reality where class differentiation went hand in hand with the differentiation of the body.

The aim of this paper is to discuss and deconstruct the *Alliterative Morte Arthure's* (henceforth *Morte*) preoccupation with "embodied nobility." My argument will be that *Morte's* effort to legitimize British past through Arthur's lineage is manifest in the poem's close attention to the king's body. The *Morte* constructs Arthur's body in such a way as to show it as evidence to his noble descent, but through a series of gruesome battle scenes in which knights' bodies undergo grotesque transformations, it simultaneously undermines its own idea of embodied nobility, and in turn, questions the very idea that legitimacy could be transferred from a distant ancestral origin.

2.

In the Middle Ages—and even in the early modern period—British monarchs attempted to authenticate their disrupted political genealogy by establishing a legitimate origin, a founding father, in the figure of King Arthur. Lee Patterson notes the potency of this "Arthurian legitimization" and places the *Morte* along this continued effort to develop and deploy Arthurian

legends as a kind of royal propaganda.

From the beginning of the poem, the *Morte* engages in creating a connection with a legitimate ancestral past. The poet explicitly states that his purpose is to provide a story “[o]f elders of olde time and of their awke deedes” (13), thereby establishing a distant but definite lineage between Arthur and the intended reader. Once this connection is established, the poem attempts to ensure the legitimacy of Arthur’s lineage in an episode where his legitimacy as a sovereign is challenged: A group of messengers from Rome arrives and announces that the Roman emperor Lucius demands that Arthur pay tribute to him as his father before him (Uther Pendragon) did. The emperor bases his claim on historical “facts” written down in official documents—that is, in “our rolles” and “the regestres of Rome” (111-12)—which say that dating back from the time of Julius Caesar, Britain had been subject to Rome. In an ensuing Round Table discussion, Arthur provides a counter-argument to the emperor’s claim. After scolding Sir Cador for speaking recklessly in favor of war, Arthur proceeds to argue that it is in fact *himself* who should ask tribute of Rome, as the hereditary right to Rome’s imperial throne lies with him whose ancestors conquered Rome: “I have title to take tribute of Rome; / Mine auncestres were emperours and ought it themselven” (275-76). He then questions the present emperor’s legitimacy by asking what “evidence” he has for his imperial right: “Thus have we *evidence* to ask the emperor the same, / That thus regnes at Rome, what right that he claims” (276-87 italics mine).

The first part of the poem, therefore, presents a kind of genealogical debate, which is carried out in terms of who can provide the more legitimizing piece of information. The emperor offers tangible documents for his argument (“rolles,” “regestre”), but his claim only extends so far as the time of Arthur’s father. In contrast, Arthur counters Lucius’ claim with a more powerful argument that goes further back in history to the time of ancient Troy, but he lacks the concrete proof needed to support his claim. The debate leaves both parties unsatisfied as it fails to determine whose claim is more legitimate. And it is this need to provide a decisive proof—a desire to *enforce* one’s claim onto the other—that drives the latter part of the poem.

As Arthur decides to go to war with Rome, the initial historical debate is

replaced by a battle of physical forces. The “evidence” that Arthur wants to “ask the emperor” (276) is now asked in the form of war. And as the problem of determining whose lineage is more legitimate becomes the problem of determining who has the superior military power, whoever wins the war *becomes* the legitimate one.

This *translation* can be observed in the following scene where a verbal “battle” over the authenticity of lineage is followed by an actual, physical battle. In the battlefield, the king of Syria challenges Sir Clegis’ ancestry by questioning the legitimacy of his coat of arms: “Yif thou hufe all day thou bes not delivered! / But thou sekerly ensure with certain knightes / That thy cote and thy crest be knowen with lords, / Of armes of auncestry entered with landes” (1688-91). In response, Sir Clegis indignantly gives a full history of his coat of arms:

Mine armes are of auncestry eneverd with lords,
And has in banner been borne senn Sir Brut time;
At the cite of Troy that time was eneseged,
Oft seen in assaut with certain kinghtes;
Forthy Brut brought us and all our bold elders
To Bretain the Brodder within ship-bords. (1694-99)

Sir Clegis’ exposition is again countered by another enemy knight, Sir Sextynour, who replies, “[f]or there shall never Roman that in my rout rides / Be with rebawdes *rebuked*, whiles I in world regne!” (1704-705; italics mine). Here, it is revealing that the word “rebuked” is equated with being defeated in battle, and that this genealogical debate is closely followed by an actual battle in which Sir Clegis proves himself victorious over the king of Syria, further illustrates the suggestion that the problem of authenticating one’s lineage is being solved by battle.

Since battles depicted in chivalric romances are primarily body-to-body encounters between armored knights, the problem of proving one’s lineage (or disproving the other’s lineage) is translated into the language of the body. As I have discussed earlier, if the knight’s body acts as a kind of historical text (much like the emperor’s “registre”) on which the knight’s hereditary

identity is inscribed, then proving the “authenticity” of his body through battle amounts to proving the authenticity of his heritage. In chivalric romances depicting a “fair unknown” (such as *Sir Gareth* or *Lybeaus Desconus*), the knight’s bodily superiority is, as a rule, immediately recognized by others from the beginning, and through a series of battles from which he emerges victorious he authenticates his superior lineage, which in turn authenticates his superior body.

The *Morte* affirms Arthur’s legitimacy in two ways: (1) by presenting Arthur’s armored body as proof of his legitimacy, and (2) by threatening his enemy’s bodily integrity.

Right before his battle with the Giant of Mont Saint Michel, Arthur dresses himself in elaborate armor (900-14), which the poet spends considerable lines to emphasize its significance. The poem describes the process of putting on the armor in minute details. Starting from the undercoat (“aketoun”), a leather jacket (“jerin”), a coat of mail (“gesseraunt of gentle mailes”), and a tunic (“jupon”), the poet moves on to describe the headpiece (“bacenett”), the visor (“vesar”), the face guard (“aventail”), gloves, and finally the sword and the shield. Arthur’s armored body thus constructed is a powerful image of chivalric masculinity in all its magnificence, while the exquisite ornamentality of each piece of armor embedded with precious jewels express the owner’s regal authority. As the king of Britain (as well as the legitimate heir to Rome’s imperial throne), Arthur’s armored body must necessarily reflect his remarkable heritage. The *Morte* materializes Arthur’s hereditary legitimacy into his armored body, which literally encloses the blood of his ancestors—the bodily “evidence” of his lineage that he can offer to Lucius in battle.¹⁾

The belief that Arthur’s legitimacy is embodied in his actual person is again demonstrated in the episode where Arthur boldly walks “at leisere” near the enemy wall without wearing any armor or holding a shield, despite the danger of being shot by enemy’s cross-bowman (2424-31). Arthur scorns Sir Ferrirer, who worries for his safety (2431-37); instead, he claims that he cannot be

1) Here, we must first note that Arthur’s armor is essentially an extension of the body enclosed in it. As Geraldine Heng points out, “armor, even more than clothing, counterfeits the body and projects a surrogate body piece by piece” (168).

killed by mere worthless men: “Shall never harlot have happe, through help of my Lord, / To kill a crowned king with crism anointed!” (2446-47). Again, the idea is that Arthur’s body is intrinsically different from that of the “gadlings” or “harlots,” in that his legitimacy as a “crowned king” and the just cause of his war prevent him from bodily harm. (Notice that at this point, Arthur had already defeated the usurping Lucius, and the sense of his legitimacy is at its peak; hence the *Morte*’s emphasis on the invulnerability of his body seems justified).

Because the sense of legitimacy is so closely connected to the body, however, it is easily threatened when the body itself is compromised. And the *Morte* is conscious of the way the destruction of bodily integrity can cause a sense of degradation. The giant of Mont Saint Michel’s obsession with collecting the beards of kings (Arthur’s in particular) suggests that the ultimate form of dismantling the authority of a king is by forcefully subjecting his body to shame. Arthur commits similar attacks on the body when he shamefully shaves the beards of the captive Roman senators (2334-35) or when he mocks the emperor’s dead body by parading the coffin that contains his corpse on an elephant (2335). Sir Cadur’s strong desire to bash the brains of Rome’s “chivalry noble” and the “richest and real kings” (2269-72) suggests his desire to disgrace and destroy their noble status by violating their body in some shameful and gruesome way.

While demonstrating Arthur’s legitimacy by idealizing his body and making it invulnerable, the *Morte* attempts to refute the enemy’s legitimacy by making a grotesque mockery of their body’s destruction. Göller observes that the *Morte* juxtaposes the grotesque with the humorous and the farcical (24), which brings out the effect of shaming and mocking the body’s owner. In a kind of grotesque bodily comedy, Arthur kills the giant of Golapas by first cutting his knees to let his upper body fall to the ground and then finishing him off by cutting his head; then he delivers a macabre joke about the giant’s height: “‘Come down,’ quod the king, ‘and carp to thy feres! / Thou art too high by the half, I hete thee in trewth! / Thou shall be handsomer in hie, with the help of my Lord!’” (2126-28). Another characteristic example of the narrative’s grotesque mockery of the body is when the body continues to move after it is

dead. An enemy knight riding on a horse is horizontally sliced in half, and his lower body continues to ride away as his upper body topples down to the ground: “He merkes through the mailes on the middes in sonder, / That the middes of the man on the mount falls, / The tother half of the haunch on the horse leved.” (2206-208).

However, while it is true that the *Morte*'s treatment of the enemy's body has an element of mockery in it, it is also true that the bodies of Arthur's knights are subjected to bodily mutilations in ways not much different from those of their enemy. Although not as explicitly derogatory as the examples mentioned above, the bodies of Arthur's knights are also distorted, mutilated, and abused during numerous battle scenes. Details of emasculation abound, with Arthur's knights wounded in their loins or haunches; Sir Kay is pierced “through the felettes and in the flank after” (2174). Indeed, as if the poet took perverse delight in the body's destruction, deaths in numerous forms are related with morbid fascination, and the bodies of knights are sliced, pierced, disemboweled, and discarded, in extensive details.

Of course, there is nothing strange about knights being wounded or killed in battle. Suffering wounds is a necessary part of being a knight, and chivalric romances often employ scenes of bodily wounds to illustrate and enhance the chivalric ideal of manhood (Hodges 1). This is also true in the *Morte*, where knightly wounds are often valorized and where certain knightly deaths retain a sense of tragic glamour. For example, Sir Kay is struck in the back by a coward knight who disembowels him by piercing his loins and flanks with a lance (2172-76). Despite this fatal wound, Sir Kay revenges himself on the knight that struck him, goes to Arthur, greeting him and asking that his body be properly buried, and dies on his knees while the King's confessor absolves him of his sins (2184-94). Although Sir Kay's death involves details of his emasculation and disembowelment, it is a characteristic example of a heroic death through which the poem demonstrates and celebrates the chivalric ideal. Heng argues that the gruesome deaths in battle scenes described in the *Morte* are “ultimately more reassuring than troubling” since “the centrality of the knight's role on the battlefield is defined with utter clarity and affirmed at the moment when the knight's body is spectacularly and memorably undone

in death” (170).

Nevertheless, it is difficult to dismiss the fact that there is something undeniably grotesque about the displays of knightly body parts—something that refuses to be characterized or beautified by the rhetoric of heroic death. In short, there is something more gory than glorious. As the following description of the battleground strewn with corpses shows, once the bodies are destroyed and discarded they become virtually indistinguishable and unidentifiable:

Swordes swangen in two, sweltand knightes
Lies wide open welterand on walopand steeds;
Woundes of wale men workand sides,
Faces fetteled unfair in feltered lockes,
All craysed for-trodeen with trapped steeds,
The fairest on folde that figured was ever,
As fer as a furlong, a thousand at ones! (2146-52)

Thousands of dead bodies mingle in a clotted lake, their faces grotesquely disfigured (“fetteled unfair”), trod down by tramping steeds, and whether they were British or Roman, Christian or heathen, are rendered irrelevant. Even more disturbing is the fact that the knight’s body once reduced to flesh and entrails is no different from that of a monster, namely, the cannibalistic giant of Mont Saint Michel. Although the exterior of the giant is an inhuman hybrid of animal body parts, the soft and vulnerable inside of his body is revealed to be that of a *man* (Heng 126). The *Morte* makes no narrative difference in its description of the giant’s guts and gore being spilled (“Both the guttes and the gore gushes out at ones. / That all englaimes the grass on ground there he standes!”; 1122-23) and that of a knight’s disembowelment (“That all the filth of the freke and fele of his guttes / Followes his fole foot when he forth rides!”; 2782-83); in fact, the two descriptions are identical to the point that they are almost interchangeable. Consequently, the *Morte*’s depiction of bodily disintegration threatens the boundaries that distinguish national or religious identity, or even species, by reducing the body to its essential physicality.

Moreover, some of the descriptions of knightly corpses are clearly intended to evoke a sense of repugnance. Although the images of disfigured faces trod

down by tramping horses, bashed brains, intestines pierced to the end of a lance can arouse various responses depending on the context, together they create a *tableau macabre* reminiscent of the cannibalistic feast of the giant, and its one obviously dominant effect is disgust and horror. At one point, the *Morte* explicitly describes the inner content of a knight's body as "filth" and "foulness" (2782). The knight's corpse, in the *Morte*, is something at once familiar and unfamiliar, as it retains just enough features to be recognized as human, but deformed and dehumanized enough to create a striking sense of the grotesque. As a result, the depiction of knightly corpses in the *Morte* alienates the knight from his noble identity, as the sense of its utter physicality and grotesqueness combined threaten the idea that a knight's body is inherently noble; the knight's body thus transformed can no longer function as a text of genealogy.

In this respect, the *Morte* contradicts itself: at one point the poem tries to establish a connection with a legitimizing past through Arthur's body, but at the same time it undermines its own effort by revealing the body's physicality and fundamental grotesqueness.

After a series of gruesome bodily destructions, the *Morte* relates an episode that restores the body's nobility: Gawain goes on a foraging expedition, during which he encounters an unknown knight (Priamus) and defeats him in battle. During the battle, both knights are severely wounded—Priamus's liver is exposed and Gawain loses much blood—at which point Priamus declares that they must quickly form a "blood-bond" lest they die ("Sir, you're struck! / We must set a blood-bond between us before you go pale"; 2573-74). Then the two knights exchange each other's genealogical history, where Priamus reveals that he descends from an ancient lineage, and that he is heir apparent to Alexander. After a brief moment of pretending to be a knave in Arthur's court, Gawain too reveals his noble lineage and emphasizes its authenticity by mentioning that the truth of his lineage can be proved by official record ("kalender"). After this exchange of information, both knights ride to where Gawain's fellow knights are waiting and are miraculously restored by a magic potion that Priamus provides.

Patterson notes that Priamus represents the classical warrior, heir to

the heroic virtues of the ancient world, and that Gawain's encounter with Priamus is an allegory of the transaction between the past and the present (220-21). It is revealing, therefore, that Gawain's body is resurrected through the formation of a "blood-bond" with Priamus; when Priamus declares, "We must set a blood-bond between us before you go pale" (2574), he implies that the formation of the "blood-bond" (or blood-connection) is literally the cure that will prevent the destruction of Gawain's body. Once drained of all his blood ("In all the body of that bold is no blood leved!" 2797), Gawain dies (he is described as a corpse, "corse," at one point) and is *reborn* through a kind of blood transfusion from the legitimizing past which is Priamus.

Similarly, when Gawain dies in the hand of the treacherous Mordred (the epitome of illegitimacy), the *Morte* tries to save his body from disintegrating into grotesqueness. Although Gawain dies with a knife stuck on his head (3857-58), his death is extensively eulogized both by Mordred and Arthur, and his body, instead of losing its former identity, is memorialized, consecrated, and transformed into an emblem of knightly virtues as Arthur collects the blood (again, the bodily *essence* that symbolizes his noble lineage) from Gawain's corpse and stores it in his war helmet. Also through a series of funeral rituals, his body is kept from degenerating into a mere corpse:

"Lookes it be clenly kepted," he said. "and in the kirk holden;
 Don for him dirges, as to the ded falles,
 Mensked with masses for meed of the soul;
 Look it want no wax, ne no worship ells,
 And that the body be baumed and on erthe holden. (2016-20)

By embalming his body, lighting candles around it, and singing dirges to it, the poem to some extent retains the sense of nobility in Gawain's body. However, even in this scene of romanticized tragedy, the *Morte* succeeds in creating a tension between the idealized virtues of Gawain's body and its fundamental grotesqueness, as Arthur's beard is covered with Gawain's blood after kissing his dead face, and he is made to look as if he just bit the life out of some beast ("Als he had bestes brittened and brought out of life"; 3972). By juxtaposing the image of Gawain's dead body with that of a beast

and associating Arthur with some savage (or a cannibal much like the giant of Mont Saint Michel), the *Morte* once more calls attention to the fact that Gawain's body is not only a token of knightly virtue, but a compound of flesh no different from that of an animal.

3.

I have discussed *Morte's* attempt to create a legitimizing past in Arthur by examining its treatment of the body. Like most chivalric romances, it equates nobility with having a noble body, most notably in the depiction of Arthur's armored body. But at the same time, the *Morte* contradicts itself by creating a troublingly realistic picture of the body's grotesque disintegration that reduces all bodies—regardless of religion, social distinction, species, etc.—into an indistinguishable mass of body parts. The *Morte's* indiscriminate depiction of bodies makes it impossible to regard certain body as essentially noble, since the ideology of embodied nobility relies on the distinguishability of bodies to justify itself (one must be able to *tell* a noble body from one that is not). As a result, the *Morte* undermines the idea that nobility can be transferred through a lineage originating from a distant origin.

That said, I admit that the *Morte* is not a subversive text that sets its purpose to dismantle the myth of the originating past. Indeed, throughout the poem it explicitly engages in authenticating Arthur's lineage. My point is that through its treatment of the body, the *Morte* subverts the notion that any inherent quality can be transferred from the past at all. To put it more simply, the *Morte* implies that even if one descends from Alexander, it does not necessarily follow that one inherits the qualities of Alexander. And since the whole notion of aristocracy is grounded on the assumption that some kind of hereditary right can be transferred from the past, the *Morte* is in fact a subversive text that threatens the underlying ideology of hereditary nobility.

Works Cited

Primary Source

King Arthur's Death: The Middle English Stanzaic Morte Arthur and Alliterative Morte Arthure. Ed. Larry D. Benson and Rev. Edward E. Foster. Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute, 1994.

Secondary Sources

- Göller, Kalr Heinz. "Reality versus Romance: A Reassessment of the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*." *Alliterative Morte Arthure: A Reassessment of the Poem.* Ed. Karl Heinz Göller. Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 1994. 15-29.
- Heng, Gerandine. "Warring against Modernity: Masculinity and Chivalry in Crisis; or, The *Alliterative Morte Arthure*'s Romance Anatomy of the Crusades." *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy.* New York: Columbia UP. 2003, 115–79.
- Hodges, Kenneth. "Wounded Masculinity: Injury and Gender in Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*." *Studies In Philology* 106.1 (2009): 14-31.
- Patterson, Lee. "The Romance of History and the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*." *Negotiating the Past: the Historical Understanding of Medieval Literature.* Wisconsin: U of Wisconsin P, 1987. 197–230.
- Reuter, Timothy. "Nobles and Others: The Social and Cultural Expression of Power Relations in the Middle Ages." *Nobles and Nobility.* Ed. Anne J. Duggan. Woodbridge: Boydell, 2000. 85-100.
- Westerhof, Danielle. *Death and the Noble Body in Medieval England.* Woodbridge: Boydell. 2008.

ABSTRACT

Destroying the Legitimate Body: Embodied Nobility in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*

Don Hee Lee

The idea that nobility derives from, and can be located in, the body served to perpetuate and justify the social order of the later middle ages. Chivalric romances conventionally employ the theme of the noble body, which at once manifests and proves the nobility of figure of the knight. *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, too, in its depiction of King Arthur's body, employs this theme in a narrative effort to legitimize British history. Arthur's body is elaborately constructed through the depiction of his armor, but the very same impulse that underlies this effort to construct a legitimate body undermines itself when the poem creates a troublingly realistic picture of the body's grotesque disintegration that reduces all bodies to its essential physicality. Reduced to indiscriminate body parts, which are then associated with horror and disgust, the ideology of the embodied nobility, which depends on the idea of the body's essential distinguishability is undermined. By problematizing the very idea that nobility can be transferred through a lineage originating from a distant past, the poem reveals the inherent contradiction within the ideology hereditary nobility itself.

Key Words body, nobility, identity, chivalric romance, King Arthur, legitimacy, subversion