



1.7 Harold swears an oath to William. Detail from the Bayeux Tapestry. C. 11th.

female presence better recollects OE heroic poetry, as (the Saxon) Rowenne bears the wine-cup at the feasting (Barron and Weinberg, ll. 7135–57, [A]). The influence of French *chansons de geste* such as the *Song of Roland* is discernible in the central role treachery plays as the cardinal sin, while honour – the cardinal chivalric virtue – is everywhere celebrated in the swearing of oaths on relics. We get a sense of the legal, religious and emotional importance of oath-taking from the Bayeux Tapestry’s depiction of Earl Harold’s swearing on sacred relics to William of Normandy. In vouching on holy relics, he swears in the immediate presence of God himself – something not done lightly in an age when the very elements were called on to ‘witness’ to the guilt or innocence of a person through the ordeals by fire and water. The Tapestry’s message is clear: in subsequently claiming the crown of England, Harold broke that oath to William, who fought a just war to claim a throne that was rightfully his.

Arthur’s arming scene in *Brut* (10542–62), in which each piece bears its own name and genealogy, is a narrative sequence that looks both backwards to *Beowulf* (1441–72) and forwards to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (566–669) or the alliterative *Morte Arthure* (Benson, ll. 900–19 [A]). Such descriptions, along with those of fights and tournaments, as in Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale*, re-enact martial rituals of deep cultural importance. These affirmations of manly prowess connect directly to the question of good rulership. A king must be as brave as the best of his men, yet also be something more, the repository of justice, administrator of law, mediator between warring factions and peacemaker, despite his fighting renown. The short reign of Aurelie well displays the qualities of good kingship: he listened to wise counsellors; respected the voice of the people through hustings; established Christian observance; had churches and halls built, and lands tilled; and administered the law (Barron and Weinberg, ll. 8433–71 [A]). As if reversing the description of William I’s oppression in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, the poem celebrates his true kingly conduct.

He letten stronge walles, he lette bulden halles,  
and rihte al þa workes þe ær weore tobrokene,

and aȝef heom alle þa laȝen þe stoden bi heore ælderne dæȝen;  
he makede þer reuen þan uolke to reden.

(He had the walls strengthened, halls built, and all the buildings restored that were formerly broken; and gave them back all the laws that stood in the days of their elders; and he appointed magistrates there, to rule the folk.)

(Barron and Weinberg, ll. 8459–62, [A]).

This interest in good rulership continues throughout the more thoughtful examples of medieval romance. Where Havelock in *Havelock the Dane* rules both by right and by consent, and is a consensus builder, the usurpers Godrich and Godard act autocratically out of self-interest, the sure mark of the tyrant. By accepting oaths of fealty (*mandrede*) from the entire people (*Havelock the Dane*, 2252–73 [A]), Havelock interrupts the devolved system of feudal mutual obligation and directly commands loyalty from the heart of each subject.

The preoccupation with right rule and with public integrity, if a constant, also reflects political circumstances of the period. One of the most popular Arthurian episodes refers to how the young boy proved his birthright as rightful king of England by pulling the sword from the stone. Malory elaborates the episode from his French sources, and in doing so obliquely comments on the dynastic conflicts between Lancastrian and Yorkist, Plantagenet and Tudor, and on the civil war that oppressed fifteenth-century England. And in Mordred's treachery against Arthur, Malory's commentary becomes explicit:

Lo ye all Englysshemen, se ye nat what a myschyff here was? For he [Arthur] that was the moste kynge and nobelyst knyght of the worlde . . . and yet myght nat thes Englyshemen holde them contente with hym.

(Malory, 3:1229 [A])

Old stories these may be – indeed, romance delights in the antique nature of its material – yet their very antiquity becomes for romance writers an awareness of historical tension between the past, usually idealised, and the corrupt present: 'And ryght so faryth the love nowadayes, sone hote sone colde. Thys ys no stabylyté. But the olde love was not so' (Malory, 3:1120 [A]). '[F]or such custom was used in tho dayes: for favoure, love, nother affinité there sholde be none other but ryghtuous jugemente' (ibid., 2:1055 [A]).

For all the continuity between epic and romance in its masculinist interests, romance's more feminine preoccupation with courtliness, love and marriage is central to the genre. Love interest is often wrapped into tales of marvels and faerie such as *Sir Orfeo* and *Sir Launfal*; yet even these stories retain their interest in kingship and courtly integrity. Romance also shares striking parallels to hagiographic stories with their adventures of young Christian women as victims of lust or malice: the blurred line between saint's life and romance is evident in Gower's *Tale of Constance* in *Confessio Amantis* (ll.587–1598) (Gower, 2:146–73 [A]). *Apollonius of Tyre*, dating