The Genteel Lions of Britain

Geoffrey of Monmouth, in his History of the Kings of Britain, recounts the careers of many of Britain’s founding kings, none the least of which is Arthur son of Uther Pendragon, Belinus and his brother Brennius and the founder of Britain, Brutus. Throughout his history Geoffrey praises Arthur as a “great king” and “noble warrior” but the way in which Geoffrey presents the facts of Arthur’s kingship belie these more overt and empty accolades. It seems more apparent through a close reading of the text, that Geoffrey considered Arthur a tyrannical leader who leads his mob of soldiers on murderous campaigns throughout the known world on trumped-up legalistic charades, missions of pillage and later even pure bloodshed.

Belinus and Brennius execute an immense campaign against Germany and Rome simultaneously, inflicting summary executions and murderous harassment upon their enemies. Afterwards, Belinus is indirectly referred to as “…being himself a lover of peace and justice.” (Geoffrey, pg. 100) whose army fought against his brother’s in a chain of civil wars and barely vanquished the Roman vanguard armies.

Brutus, the founder of the British kingdom is often praised as a man of “great prowess” and nobility was said to “flourish in him”. Yet he was an incarnation of Mars himself. From his humble beginnings he leads men to slaughter their enemies in their sleep, inflict genocide upon the Gauls while burning whatever they can’t steal and wrestling giants to their eventual extinction. Geoffrey’s history offers an oddly bifurcated view of these seemingly noble and courtly men of Britain’s history.

Geoffrey’s punctuation of the immense bloodshed and cruelty of these kings by moments of tenderness, peace and courtly gestures only sets off in brighter colors their outstanding brutality. It also illustrates the attempt of these kings to somehow make themselves more acceptable to the populace and legitimatize their actions. Arthur twists the law to his ends, Belinus refurbishes villages (which he probably damaged fighting his brother) and Brutus justifies his Manifest Destiny to the island of Britain and all the costs up to it by his vision of the goddess Diana telling him the island is his. Through close examination of praising of these king’s actions Geoffrey’s condemnation of these kings slowly becomes apparent.

The first glimpse into the character of Arthur occurs the moment he is crowned at the age of fifteen. “Arthur … was of outstanding courage and generosity, and his inborn goodness gave him such grace that he was loved by almost all the people. … he observed the normal custom of giving gifts freely to everyone. Such a great crowd of soldiers flocked to him that he came to end of what he had to distribute.” (Geoffrey, pg. 212) A sagacious would-be conqueror, Arthur first buys the personal loyalty of the British army to consolidate his rule, which is a prudent course of action. From Geoffrey’s mention of ‘such a great crowd of soldiers’ it seems however that Arthur awarded gifts not only to soldiers of the realm but to mercenaries and possibly even foreign men-at-arms seeking
adventure and treasure. This would serve not to simply make Arthur a well-respected
king, but the head of a happy horde, a horde bent on profit that is useless except for war.
Arthur depletes his entire treasury buying warm bodies to carry spears, but this is a problem
which Arthur is quick to remedy.

Arthur then goes to war to line his pockets with the army he has just raised.
Geoffrey thumbs his nose at Arthur from the twelfth century in the words that
immediately follow, “… he made up his mind to harry the Saxons, so that with their
wealth he might reward the retainers who served his own household. The justness of this
cause encouraged him, for he had claim to the … kingship of the whole island.”
(Geoffrey, pg. 212) Simply going raiding to increase wealth is not a new concept.
England itself was the victim of many raids and winterings by men seeking adventure and
profit. Geoffrey’s choice of words paints powerful allegations against Arthur’s actions
here though. Geoffrey states that Arthur wished to “reward” only “retainers” that “served
his household”. This implies that Arthur wishes to give a small group of chosen warriors
that live with and close to him something for their service. Arthur has just poured the
entire national treasury into rewards and gifts for fighting men, the need for further gifts
is oddly ludicrous. Arthur also had soldiers “flocking to him” but Geoffrey states that he
only wanted to reward his household retainers. There also is the sticky fact that these
soldiers have not yet done anything to win these rewards.

Geoffrey also holds up Arthur’s use of law to justify this gratuitous war. Arthur
sees attacking the Saxons for their wealth as just because they are occupying land that
Arthur has claim to. Arthur is not fighting to regain the land itself, to unite the kingdom,
but he revels in the fact that he can justify his war because of this claim. These few
sentences speak volumes already of Arthur. He drew a large force to himself by throwing
open the national treasury, then for the reason of giving further gifts to the men he just
showered the wealth of his kingdom on he invokes his claim to the entire island to raid
the land they occupy, which happens to be his own land under their rule. All of this
within the infancy of his reign.

Arthur goes on the drive the Saxons from his realm and conquer many other
countries, bringing them under the influence of his crown. Most of modern Europe is
under his governance as well as some of the Northlands when he finally comes home
(after unknown years in the field) and holds a court to celebrate his victories. At this court
Rome demands the tribute his ancestors once paid to them from Arthur. Geoffrey once
again shows Arthur manipulating the law for a reason to go to war, “Nothing acquired by
force and violence can be legally held by anyone,” Geoffrey has Arthur declaring this in
front of all the kings whose countries he has just taken by force. Of course some of them
were nobles from his own country whom he rewarded with dominion over the newly-
conquered lands, but some of the men before him were the rulers of their countries
before Arthur took them by force. Even though his argument against the Roman tribute is
rather questionable, it could be that Arthur saw the extraction of tribute and the
occupation of a country, specifically, as holding it by violence and not conquering it and
having its leaders swear fealty to you.
Arthur just finished decrying the Romans for their twisted logical and unlawful decree for British tribute, but in the same breath Arthur uses the same argument to show that the Romans own him tribute. Even if Arthur believed that his recent conquests were legal, by his own words any tribute forced by him from Rome now would be illegal. Geoffrey has Arthur grabbing the law with both hands and stretching it in impossible ways like so much taffy in order to once again justify a war. Once again the war is also based on money.

Geoffrey then shows that Arthur was not alone in perpetrating this scheme, “As soon as Arthur had finished his address, Hoel, King of the Armorian Britons, was told to speak first in reply. … no one could find better advice … than … your own … highly-skilled wisdom.” (Geoffrey, pg. 233) It seems that in order to cover up Arthur’s arbitrary use of the law and to get the momentum going, Hoel jumps in right at the end of Arthur’s speech and throws down the gauntlet by pledging his support and troops. At this point none of the nobles and kings present have a chance to question Arthur’s argument. They must either throw in their support or not while standing face to face with Arthur. Geoffrey shows what tactics Arthur is capable of even with his own nobles.

It is even more striking that the rest of the nobles are not so quick to voice their support, but realize they are trapped. The next to speak, “…began in the following words to say what he thought about this.” (Geoffrey, pg. 233) the next to speak did not jump in as Hoel did, although he does deliver a fiery speech. In fact, with this quote Geoffrey paints a picture where there is an implied uncomfortable silence which one of the nobles present seeks to fill lest they suffer Arthur’s wrath. The plight of the nobles is evident further in the fact that after the second noble spoke the rest said only “…what still needed to be said.” (Geoffrey, pg. 233) Which is easily read to mean that they are going through the motions of decision as they cannot resist what is going on, and that they only, “…promised Arthur as many men as they were required by feudal service.” (Geoffrey, pg. 233)

After conquering most of the known western world at the time Arthur then bullies his own nobles into another war on the grounds of an impossible legal argument after his motion is upheld by one of his petite kings who leaves no one time to disagree. Arthur now has the army and the ‘agreement’ from his nobles to take on the largest empire of the day, the Roman Empire, and by so doing expand the British Kingdom across almost every country west of the Ukraine. The effect of this entire passage depicts Arthur as a bloody conqueror shoving his nobles into a war against backdrop of his own courtly celebration of the end of his campaigns throughout the neighboring countries.

Geoffrey praises Arthur the most when he is fighting. All of his campaigns to gain wealth and territory are no exception, but he is portrayed most heroically during his assault on the forces of Rome. When his forces are failing against the defense of Romans
Arthur himself brings up his personal division and enters the fray, “Arthur dashed straight at the enemy. He flung them to the ground and cut them to pieces. … He hacked off their heads and bundled them off to hell.” (Geoffrey, pg. 255) Arthur is depicted almost like a Norse berserk, rushing forward directly into the heart of the enemy defense and smashing men all about him in an incredible fury. The picture of the fierce Arthur is omnipresent in Geoffrey’s descriptions of him.

During the sieges on the Saxons Geoffrey says Arthur actually, “… went berserk, … He drew his sword … and rushed forward at full speed into the thickest ranks of the enemy.” (Geoffrey, pg. 217) Later, however, Arthur takes pity on the Scots and Picts and allows them to live in his land since their, “… patriotism moved him to tears.” (Geoffrey, pg. 220) Moments before Arthur had, “… treated them [Scot and Picts] with unparalleled severity, sparing no one who fell into his hands.” (Geoffrey, pg. 219) From Geoffrey’s depiction of him, Arthur is best at combat, powerful and merciless, always in the front and fighting as if berserk. Arthur seems to have spats of mercy occasionally, when begged for terms. Throughout the entire section dealing with Arthur he is not at war in only two instances of his kingship, when he is crowned and when he is at his great Plenary Court after he conquered Gaul, from which he leaves directly to pursue his war against Rome. From the evidence above, Arthur mostly ignores the affairs of state, being off at war constantly and uses the law simply to justify his actions.

Of the kings before Arthur who were praised most by Geoffrey, next was Belinus. He and his brother had fought a civil war over the kingship of Britain which ended in a treaty which was broken by his brother, Brennius. Many abortive invasion attempts were tried by Brennius until he was finally repulsed and became a king in his own right on the Continent. He then came once again to join in war with his brother until their mother stopped them and they went to war with the Germans which brought them into war with Rome instead. (Geoffrey, pg. 90-97)

The brothers split up and both are seen to be just as bloodthirsty as Arthur. When Belinus fought the Romans, he, “… made a sudden charge at them and attacked them with great ferocity. … never pausing in his slaughter until night came on and prevented him from completing his massacre.” (Geoffrey, pg. 98) When they join to assault Rome they are incensed when the Romans resist them so they execute their most noble prisoners directly in front of the city. (Geoffrey, pg. 98) These brothers are the best treated kings between Brutus and Arthur (receiving ten pages which is only bettered by the unfortunate Lier). They are also equally bloodthirsty and succeeded in an assault on Rome. Once Brennius conquered Rome he, “… stayed on in Italy, where he treated the people with unheard-of savagery.” (Geoffrey, pg. 99) Belinus at least, “… returned to Britain and … governed his homeland in peace.” (Geoffrey, pg. 99)

These two brothers fought multiple civil wars with each other, damaging their own country and were brought to peace more than once. Later they attack Germany which sparks off a blood war in Rome. Afterwards one of the bothers brutalizes the conquered populace. For his credit the actual king of Britain, Belinus is more peaceful then his brother, but Geoffrey’s history does not fully focus on him, but on his wild brother. Even
more brutal still was the original founder of the British kingdom, Brutus, whose accolades are many.

Brutus’ first great feat is the organizing of a civil war when he finds some repressed Trojans. He wins despite the numerical superiority of his enemy by finding a way into the capitol under cover of night and, “… went into the sleeping-quarters of the unconscious enemy and with deadly effect dealt blow after blow.” (Geoffrey pg. 60-61) In a reenactment of the same strategy decried by the Trojans that was used to destroy Troy, Brutus slaughters the Greeks in their beds. Surveying the slaughter, “… Brutus was beside himself with joy.” (Geoffrey, pg. 61) Geoffrey then has the Greek king call Brutus, “… a

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young man of great prowess. The nobility which flourished in him, and his fame, which is well known to us…” (Geoffrey, pg. 63) This the Greek King says after Brutus joyfully tore his slumbering men to shreds. The praising of Brutus after the horrible tactics he used, which were decried by his own race, is utterly ridiculous. Brutus “flourishes with nobility” when he slaughters men in their sleep. It is poignant that Geoffrey mentions that the king is pleading for his life. This sets the stage for these incredible praises. This king has had his entire army decimated and is now pleading for his own life, offering Brutus anything he wishes. The king offers Brutus money, a portion of his kingdom and even his daughter as well as false praise in order to keep himself breathing.

Later Brutus is wed to the king’s reluctant daughter who, “… wept and sobbed at being forced to leave her homeland; … Brutus soothed and caressed her, putting his arms round her and kissing her gently.”(Geoffrey, pg. 64) In this act Brutus is as oddly duplicitous as Belinus, Brennius and Arthur, they all war with great savagery and mercilessness only to do a complete about-face and gravitate to the opposite polarity of peaceful and kind virtues on rare occasion only accentuating the fact that such actions are the exception, and not the rule.

While in Gaul, Brutus inflicts great slaughter in his quest for riches as well as merciless genocide on the populace of Aquitaine while scorching the earth as he marches across the land. (Geoffrey, pg. 69). As Brutus and his army rampage across the countryside, they are all impressed with Corineus’ power in battle and their own inroads while Goffar laments, “How sad my destiny is! These ignoble exiles have pitched their camp in my kingdom.” (Geoffrey, pg. 68-69) The same tender and caring Brutus who comforted his weeping bride kills wholesale the people of a country when its leader asked them to seek permission to stay. Brutus, when asked to acknowledge the rightful rule of the king whose country he landed in responded with unheard-of cruelty and destruction.

Brutus continues his campaign of destruction until he, “…was in doubt as to whether he could oppose the Gauls any longer; and he finally chose to return to his ships in the full glory of his victory…” (Geoffrey, pg. 71) Brutus then sails off to the isle of Britain which is populated by giants. Brutus and his men drive them into caves and when the giants counterattack Brutus slays them all excepting one who is kept alive only for Corineus to slay hand-to-hand in a wrestling match as sport. (Geoffrey, pg. 73)
From the mercilessness of these founding kings, the extenuating circumstances surrounding their praise and the clever setup of seemingly kind moments which upon examination are almost comical, Geoffrey portrays these ‘great men’ as tyrannical brutes. The purpose, however, of this portrayal is unclear. Geoffrey could simply be trying to dispel myths of these men who founded Britain. This alone could be a comment on the almost nonstop warfare that embroiled the island of Britain. This effect also could serve to slander the Norman courtliness that was infecting the nation at this time. By the same token Geoffrey’s tyrant yet ‘courtly’ kings could be a backhanded insult directed solely at his benefactors whom he is struggling to get work from. It could also be a subtle reminder that Britain was founded by ruthless conquerors and that their people have been conquered before and have overcome their oppressors. It is unclear from the text precisely why Geoffrey portrays the founding fathers of his homeland as maniacal warlords, but the evidence of this portrayal is clear.

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Probably more likely, however, is the changing meaning of nobility and virtue. These kings had lived and warred long centuries before Geoffrey was born. In that time the most successful kings were often the cruelest warlords. The more land and wealth a king could obtain the more capable and strong he was regarded as being. In the twelfth century the character of kingship had changed but the ancient descriptions of the renowned kings of Britain didn’t. In the twelfth century courtly and genteel kings were praised as being more courtly and civilized. The royal sword was of course not beaten into a plowshare, but the nature of kingship focused more towards established, legitimate, central rule with peaceful transitions of power between monarchs. Such was the emerging definition of ‘nobility’ when Geoffrey wrote. It seems most probable that old histories evolved along with the idea of nobility, injecting certain qualities and actions into the characters, attempting to make them seem like what the people of the time thought of as truly ‘noble’ although closer reading of the text reveals the a more basic view of Britain’s famed kings.