Medieval English Arthurian narratives do not in themselves make up a solid tradition, more a series of differently situated and shaped responses to disparate source materials. Their supposed common identity often cannot disguise wide differences. *Sir Launfal* and the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*, for instance, contemporary romances of love and magic set in Arthur’s reign, are worlds apart in ethos and literary conduct. But if we look beyond self-contained bachelor-knight romances to English narratives attempting a broader chronological treatment of Arthur’s career, what might be called Arthurian biography, a much stronger sense of tradition and intertextuality emerges, from Geoffrey of Monmouth to Malory, including the *Brut* books of Wace and Laron, Robert Mannyng’s *Chronicle*, and the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*.¹

Within these texts, Arthur’s story centres the changing representation of military power, political organisation and right to rule; narratives of war provide the main discursive resources for doing so. A term like ‘war biography’ would best describe the treatment of Arthur in these texts, for the king and the conduct of the wars are inseparable. Less often noted, the representation of peace is also a persistent and significant Arthurian interest. However warlike their outlook, those writing the reign of Arthur were inevitably required by their material to construct imaginative sequences in which the establishment and breaking of peace, the alternations of peace and war—‘blysse and blunder’²—were accounted for in terms intelligible and meaningful to their audiences. The question of peace assumed greater importance in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries because of new political developments. The growing importance of parliament in England, the dependence on it for financing war, the obvious costs of war to the commons, the prolonged and inconclusive nature of the war with France, the adoption of more widely destructive military tactics, the bad experience of civil war, all apparently gave the benefits of peace a stronger voice than they had

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previously had. \(^3\) Especially in the clerkly tradition of moral poetry, the literary discourse of peace became newly invigorated in Chaucer’s time and beyond. ‘Al werre is dreadful, vertuous pees is good, / Striff is hatful, pees douhtir of plesaunce’, Lydgate could write. \(^4\) How, if at all, do English Arthurian writings respond to these developments? Do militarist values of prowess and conquest continue to dominate the representation of Arthur, as in Geoffrey, or is their influence at all contested or moderated? What is the value of Arthurian peace?

John Barnie, referring to the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* (c.1400), long ago suggested that it gave out a mixed message on war issues: ‘Arthur .. is presented as a great chivalric and national hero, as well as a proud and avaricious tyrant.’ ‘Arthur ... may be the subject of far-reaching criticism, but he is still “Sir Arthure of Inglande”, “owre wyese kyng”’. \(^5\) Barnie was responding to the assumption that a poem which described such destructive wars must inevitably be an ‘anti-war’ poem. For all the horrors of war it depicts, he and Karl Heinz Göller were both surely right that the Alliterative *Morte* is ‘ambivalent’ on the issue; it does not simply identify itself as an anti-war statement, \(^6\) let alone as a work in the near-pacifist spirit of some later medieval moral poetry. In this study I attempt a further articulation of its ambivalence, through analysis of peace and war as sequential and inter-related, rather than separate and adversarial, in the English tradition of Arthurian war biography. Rather than offering global assessments of these Arthurian texts as pro- or anti-war, militarist or pacifist, I make a comparative analysis of the particular ideological relation each establishes between war and peace, especially at the difficult narrative junctures which explain the transition between these states.

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Lori Walters and Ad Putter have shown that early Arthurian verse romances adopted a cyclical alternation of peace and war. They strictly bound themselves to respect the temporal authority of chronicle prose history by situating their adventures interstitially, in the ‘unused story time’7 of peace between Geoffrey’s wars. Wace draws attention to the ‘time of great peace’, after the king’s return from France, in which the marvels and adventures of Arthurian poetic fiction are placed.8 The association of peacetime with romance invention marked its original subordination to a war-history schedule. It is as if the narrative authority of war could never be challenged by the fictions of the poets, only complemented and structurally buttressed. As Elizabeth Edwards puts it, ‘the romance of errancy is ... instituted as the project of the now politically stable court’.9 In time, Ad Putter has shown, English Arthurian romances, once supported by French prose, developed enough of their own authority to make new gaps in the chronicles, further breaking up the ‘historical’ fabric to insert more fictive adventures.10 I shall argue here that the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, imaginatively re-working Arthurian history at the seam of war and peace, fashioned a new critique of Arthur’s wars. Some unusual narrative and structural features of its Arthurian war biography vary and partly disable the traditional cyclical relation of war and peace, ultimately supporting the suggestion, not that all war is dreadful, but that the king’s war goes on too long.

King Arthur’s peacetime role became more important after his twelfth-century transformation from *dux bellorum* to *rex*, but always remained overshadowed by his wars. Geoffrey of Monmouth (c. 1135) made Arthur a leader hastily crowned in wartime11 and glorious in conquest, perhaps in

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contrast to the saintly kings of earlier clerical tradition. Geoffrey’s Arthur tries to make peace with the Saxons, but their duplicity disrupts his plans, sparking a holy war of extermination. Later, Geoffrey passes over twelve years of Arthurian peace in a few lines. Then, after extensive wars in Gaul, he devotes considerable space to Arthur’s glorious return. The more the king conquers in foreign war, the more splendid his subsequent peacetime life is shown to be. But Geoffrey breaks up Arthur’s Whitsun celebrations, where the king renews ‘pacts of peace’ with his chieftains, by introducing Rome’s demands for tribute, and these precipitate further wars never brought to an end, because the rebellion by Mordred in which Arthur dies interrupts his final push on Rome. As glorious as Geoffrey made Arthur, he left the king’s last wars able to be seen as both unduly prolonged and inconclusive, failing to meet the expectation of total victory raised by previous campaigns against the Saxons, Frollo and Lucius, or to achieve the expected peacetime aftermath.

In the Historia and its successors, peace is principally treated as the precondition and the result of war; it is first a state of unrealised potential, then a temporary period of triumph and repletion, the one becoming the other through a transformative intervening space of war. Geoffrey’s highest form of peace is Arthurian—the plentiful feast, the full court, the huge numbers of royal and noble vassals in attendance, the display of luxury, the sports and games with their sexualised ambience. He represents peace mainly as the ‘fruits’ and spoils of war, complementing his overall theme that loss of military prowess brings eventual disaster to a people. Whilst in the moral tradition of the later medieval period, war and peace could be understood as separate, and in opposition, they are here quite interdependent, necessarily alternating but not truly alternative states, being parts of the one generative strategy within a continuing narrative. Though interdependent, their status is not equal. Peace is ancillary to war, a space of leisure in which success in past war is celebrated and displayed, and new war prepared and justified. If any problem in the relation of these two states arises, it is represented as a cyclical hitch: not peace versus war, but too long a peace without war.

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14 Historia, p. 446; Thorpe, p. 222.
Accordingly, in the crisis posed by the Roman challenge Geoffrey shows almost no prudential assessment of war and peace as alternatives. Arthur’s council is of the kind Chaucer would much later attack in Melibee as ‘a moeyng of folye’—assembled in anger, covetousness and haste, tainted with flattery, and preempted by the king’s expressed desire for war. But Chaucer’s Prudence is speaking out of a ‘desire for peace as a temporal condition’ not much known to Geoffrey of Monmouth. Geoffrey’s characters regard peace itself as the problem; it has lasted too long. Duke Cador of Cornwall, in a tradition going back at least to Tacitus, complains that even five years of peace have made the Britons degenerate—cowards, lechers, dice-players—and rejoices that war has come again.

Two succeeding Brut-poems, by Wace (1155) and Laamon (c.1185-1216), add different responses to Cador’s counsel in Geoffrey. The reply Wace makes Walwein give to Cador implies a seasonal sequence and continuity between war and peace:

‘De neient estes en efroi
Bone est la pais emprès la guerre,
Plus bele e mieldre en est la terre;
Mult sunt bones les gaberies
E bones sunt les drueries.
Pur amistié e puir amies

20 Lowe, p. 5.
21 Cornelii Taciti De Vita Iulii Agricola, De Origine et Moribus Germanorum, ed. J. H. Sleeiman (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1952): Chapter 14: ‘si civitas in qua orti sunt longa pace et otio torpeat, plerique nobilium adulescentium petunt ultro eas nationes, quae tum bellum aliquod gerunt, quia et ingrata genti quies...’. Tacitus, Germania, trans. M. Hutton (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970): ‘Should it happen that the community where they are born is drugged with long years of peace or quiet, many of the high-born youth voluntarily seek those tribes which are at the time engaged in some war; for rest is unwelcome to the race’.
Funt chevaliers chevaleries.’

‘... you are upset about nothing. Peace is good after war and the land is the better and more lovelier for it. Jokes are excellent and so are love affairs. It’s for love and their beloved that knights do knightly deeds.’

Though Wace’s peace is leisure after work, a youthful re-generation after old winter, a feminised time of plenty, it is also a time for motivating arms. And yet, after some point in the time of peace, apparently, rest becomes idleness, health becomes sickness, pastime becomes vice, women’s company stops inspiring men to arms and makes them effeminate and unmartial. Wace’s Cador and Gawain disagree about the timing, but they both understand the same period of peace as after the last war, before the next one. In this narrative moment, Wace holds the virtues of peace and war in poise. He celebrates the joys of soldiers’ return and family reunion, the increase of luxury and wealth, yet adds disputes arising from chess and dice-playing. He invents Gawain’s courtly praise of peace, yet by adding some more about love affairs to Geoffrey’s narrative prepares the ground for Cador’s soldierly complaints. Overall, Wace’s outlook is fundamentally appreciative of the advantages of conquest. He treats peace as a springtime for the growth of a new generation of warriors at home, and an off-season abroad in which stripped lands can recover their profitability. Wace’s Arthur has only ‘made peace and a treaty [in Brittany] because, apart from towers and castles, nothing was left to destroy, neither plants nor vines to be despoiled’. Now the Roman challenge arrives at the perfect time, just when war is necessary again.

La, amon, who generally follows Wace in his own way, diminishes the Caerleon feast and the later Arthurian episodes. He cuts the gambling, music...

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25 Wace, 10561-10588.
26 Wace, 10539-10542
28 Wace, trans. Weiss, 10125-10128.
29 Le Saux, pp. 30-32.
and story-telling from Arthur’s court, and his version of the council scene is quite different. In La, amon, when Cador attacks ‘idelnesse’ and ‘advocates war for the sake of war’—

For nauere ne lufede ich lange gri inne mine londe.
for flurh gri we beo ibunden and wel neh al aswunden

—Walwain’s reply says nothing about ‘love of women’, but takes up the praise of peace ‘in wider terms of ethical principle and national economy’:

‘Cador, flu aert a riche mon! fline redes ne beo noht idon,
for god is gri and god is fri fle freoliche fier halde wi—
and Godd sulf hit makede flurh his Goddcunde—
for gri make godne mon gode workes wurchen.
for alle monnen bi fla bet flat lond bi fla murgre.’

‘Cador, you are a mighty man! Your advice is not sound, for peace and quiet are good if one maintains them willingly—and God himself in his divinity created them—for peace allows a good man to do good deeds whereby all men are the better and the land the happier.’

La, amon, the ‘strong moralist’ who ‘pruned down’ Arthur’s Roman wars, refuses to dismiss peace as a mere occasion of sin. He allows it an effective value in its own right, as the creation of God, and the general precondition of good works and happiness amongst men. Peace is good, La, amon says, where it can be ‘freely’ (‘willingly’, ‘nobly’) kept. This is an unusually strong

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30 Le Saux, p. 37.
31 Le Saux, p. 70.
32 La, amon, 12449-12450. Barron and Weinburg translate: ‘For I have never favoured a prolonged peace in my land, for peace ties us down and makes us all but impotent.’
33 Le Saux, p. 39, shows how La, amon tends to cut such references. She notes instead, p. 65, the role of the woman in La, amon as ‘freofluwebbe, ‘the peaceweaver of Old English tradition’.
34 Le Saux, p. 39.
35 La, amon, 12454-12458. Barron and Weinburg, p. lxiii, call this ‘a different idealism [from Wace’s ‘amorous dalliance’] based on social good rather than personal happiness’. See Le Saux, p. 57, for La, amon’s ‘higher sense of the dignity of his subject matter’.
36 Le Saux, p. 13. See also, p.155ff.
37 Le Saux, p. 229.
statement in the Arthurian tradition. Under the circumstances, the Roman threat of force is doubtless understood to make a ‘free’ or ‘noble’ peace impossible; such a peace dictated by cowardice, forced on the country by military weakness, and necessitating homage against the customary rights of the land, would be shameful. But despite this context, and although he often gives Arthur’s wars a positive religious aspect, Laamon is unwilling to leave Cador’s sweeping statement unanswered. There is an idea, much more developed than in Wace, that peacetime benefits the whole land and people, however much it derogates from the military ‘wurfl-scipe’ of ‘riche’ (‘powerful’) men like Cador. Walwain’s reply in Laamon associates especially with Cador the value-nexus of conquest through war, increased honour and enrichment through spoils. Following Geoffrey’s lead, Cador (the proto-Obélix) has repeatedly thanked God for sending him these Romans. But to Laamon’s Walwain, Cador is self-interested, not a voice who can speak for all, much less divinely motivated, and against his partial interest the poet sets up an idea of peace itself as God-given and salutary. Laamon goes beyond the traditional praise of the strong king as good security for the land, fierce to his foes, generous to his friends, which the poem provides elsewhere, in the tradition of the Peterborough Chronicle’s approval of tough rulers like William I and Henry I. This is nevertheless an equally patriotic concept of peace, which fits the poet’s ‘pro-Briton bias’. Laamon’s idea of Britain’s happiness under Arthur is less the victorious return from France than the previous twelve years without war. Geoffrey had mainly treated this space as a time for military build-up, Wace as a time for chivalric adventures; Laamon thinks of the whole country:

38 See Barnie, pp. 2ff., for the concept of ‘shameful peace’.
39 Le Saux, p. 159.
41 See Barron and Weinburg in Laamon, p. 268, notes to p. 81, 10776-10800. They cite other praises of peace in Laamon: 10744-120799, which seems to echo the Peterborough Chronicle, years 1087, 1135; 1255-1257 (Gwendoleine); 9255-9258 (Uther).
42 Le Saux, pp. 40-41.
43 Laamon, 12073-12096.
No wonder the poet is unwilling to see peacetime traduced by Cador. A peace like this would not inevitably go on ‘too long’; it could be freely ‘held’. Laamon comes closest in the English Arthurian tradition to imagining a peace that opposes wars.

Later English versions of Geoffrey’s council scene tend strongly to affirm the cyclical, rather than the adversarial, model of war and peace, and in doing so they continue the traditional narrative subjection of peace to war. Mannyng’s Chronicle fills out the idea of peace as the restoration of the land by emphasising, following Wace, the recent joyful return from France of Arthur’s army. Mindful of home, the king has demobilised the veterans, keeping the young men with him.45 War is seen as natural to the young, in line with the views normally attributed to Gawain in this tradition. After nine years in France, all the Britons return. Families are re-united; spoils are reckoned; news is exchanged between old friends:

Ladies kist fier lordes suete,
modres on childir for ioy grete;
sones welcomed fier fadres home
& mad myrth at fier tocome.

....
fiel stode in ilk strete and stie,
in gashadles [crossroads] men passed bie
to spir at flam how fiel had faren,
& whi flam fiel so long waren,

Laamon, 11337-11344. ‘Here one may read of Arthur the king, how he afterwards dwelt here twelve years in peace and prosperity, in all splendour. No one fought against him, nor did he make war on anyone; no man could ever conceive of greater happiness in any country than there was in this; nor could any nation ever know such great joy as there was with Arthur and his people here.’

Robert Mannyng of Brunne; The Chronicle, ed Idelle Sullens (Binghampton, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 153, 1996), 10757-10759. (Cited as ‘Mannyng’ hereafter.)
& how fiei sped of fier conquest,
and whan fiei won so far est,
& how fiei ferd in alle fier wo.
‘We wille no more , e far vs fro.’46

For all the charm of Mannyng’s scene, this moment encapsulates the praise of victory rather than of peace per se, since it can properly apply only to the land and people of a conqueror. Despite his promise in the Prologue to tell ‘whilk did wrong, & whilk ryght, / and whilk mayntend pes & fyght’,47 Mannyng’s general debt to Wace effectively makes him a partisan for war because it restricts the view of war’s aftermath to the victorious side. Accordingly, when the Roman challenge is offered, the distinction Mannyng draws is in favour of war. The author of Handlyng Synne makes Cador give a weighty moral critique of how peace encourages sloth, lechery and vicious pastimes:

‘... florh idelnes of pes
er Bretons feble & hertles.
Idelnes norisces but euel;
& mykelle temptacoun of fle deuel;
idelnes mas man right slouh
& dos pruesse falle fulle louh;
idelnes norisches licherie
& dos vs tent to suilk folie;
idelnes & long reste,
, Ougfle in wast a way wille keste,
& dos men tent to foly fables,
tille ha , ardrie, to dee , and tables.’48

Peace is no more than an inglorious ‘sleep’ from which God has wakened them by sending the Romans:

‘Long pes lufed I neuer,
ne nouth salle, flof I lyf euer.’49

Wawan’s ‘curteise’ reply is here reduced to a brief defence of peace as ‘good after war’, like happiness after sorrow, and as a source of deeds of arms:

46 Mannyng, 10802-10814.
47 Mannyng, 19-20.
48 Mannyng, 11321-11332.
49 Mannyng, 11349-11350.
In pes ys don gret vassalage,  
for luf men dos many rage.  

Even here, in a way which recalls the medieval church’s attitude to sex, Mannyng’s diction shows him troubled by the thought of taking up arms for love rather than to avoid sin. Despite serious reservations, he morally approves the shift to war because of the dangers of peace. His Cador is a voice to be respected, more restrained and circumspect than in previous versions. Cador’s counsel is long-meditated, and given at the king’s request, not in a premature outburst of anger. Mannyng’s Arthur, also, is unusually morally aware and cautious in counsel. He admits, for instance, that annexation by force confers no legal rights, that avarice motivates conquerors, and that the church’s teaching on restitution should apply to conquered lands. The previous British conquest of Rome confers no more ‘right’ on Arthur than Julius Caesar’s conquest of Britain does on the Romans. For all that, Cador’s low view of peace goes basically unchallenged, since Wawan’s answer is so lightweight. Disapproval of some aspects of war does not in itself generate much enthusiasm for peacetime life, because the poem does not conceptualise war and peace as alternative states of being, or as equally important in the lives of its hero and his associates. Mannyng has had plenty to say about the virtues of Arthur’s peacetime rule. But when it is ‘time’ for war, he has nothing to say for peace. Peace then becomes an empty time, with no worthwhile ‘deeds’ of its own—a worrying occasion of sin.

The fifteenth-century English Prose Merlin, in its version of the French Vulgate Merlin continuation, fairly closely resembles Wace in this scene. Cador understands the Roman demands as a salutary ‘challenge’ to the English: ‘longe haue we be idill and in slouthe in deduyt a-monge ladyes and damesels in Iolite and wast’. Gawain replies that

‘full good it is to haue pees af ter the warre, for the londe is the bettere and the more sure, and full good is the game and pley a-monge ladies and maydenes, ffor the druweries of ladies and

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50 Mannyng, 11355-11366. In the Lambeth MS of the Chronicle, the rhyme is ‘grete outrage’.
51 Mannyng, 11307ff.
52 Mannyng, 11417-11420.
53 Mannyng, 9610-9631; 10205-10228; 10329-10404; especially 10793-10826
damesels make knyghtes to vndirtake the hardynesse of armes that thei don."\textsuperscript{55}

The courtly interest purely serves the martial here. Gawain’s argument for peace circles back again into an appreciation of the benefits of victory. Success in war allows the stable (‘sure’) conditions that make noble recreation both possible and blameless, and the recreation makes better warriors. From the tradition of these Arthurian texts, with the exception of La amon, a clear relational model emerges: peace after war is youthful. leisured, plentiful, feminised, regenerative of the land, and a good preparation for more war; war after peace is mature, industrious, healthy hardship, masculine, regenerative of the person, and the foundation of more peace. The war/peace continuum acts like the cyclical episodic sequence in romance narrative: rising-out/accomplishment/return. To imply such an depersonalising pattern is effectively to avoid the issue of Arthur’s choice between peace and war, and to lessen any possibility that the sequence of war/peace/war might be broken off or arrested. War occurs without the necessity for individual motivation, merely according to the rhythm of earthly life, and for the good of the realm. The question to be answered in council is not ‘should Arthur make war?’, but ‘is he ready?’. The unmotivated nature of Arthurian war, which is always presented as reactive—overthrowing usurpers and tyrants; aiding allies; repelling invaders; responding to others’ belligerence; maintaining ancient rights—permits its real cause to be seen as providential: God wants times of war, to punish wrong and keep the Britons from vice. Seasons of war and peace on earth implicitly owe their origin to the unchanging and eternal.\textsuperscript{56}

The Alliterative \textit{Morte Arthure} (c. 1400), my main focus in this study, is demonstrably conscious of the traditional cyclical structure, but employs it in unusual ways. The \textit{Morte's recit} begins with the king and his men ‘resting’ for ‘solace’ after many previous conquests,\textsuperscript{57} but peace is given little chance in the narrative discours. The nominal peacetime setting is overshadowed by a plot

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{55} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{56} See Ecclesiastes 3, 1.8: ‘Tempus belli, et tempus pacis’. God’s hand in Arthurian history is quite explicit in \textit{Historia}, p. 494: ‘Quod diu ne potente stabat dispositione. cum & veteres eorum priscis temporibus auos istorum inuisini inquisitionibus infestarent. & iisti libertatem quam illi eisdem demere. tueri instarent’. Thorpe, p. 256: ‘All this was ordained by divine providence. Just as in times gone by the ancestors of the Romans had harassed the forefathers of the Britons with their unjust oppressions, so now did the Britons make every effort to protect their own freedom, which the Romans were trying to take away from them’.
\end{itemize}
forecast of Arthur’s future wars, down to the conquest of Rome, and a long summary of his wars so far. Normal motifs of peace are enlisted as part of Arthur’s hostile capacity. The description of the plenary court at Carlisle is rearranged so that the long feast section occurs after the Roman envoys’ challenge has been delivered and Arthur has foreshadowed calling his council; it therefore functions as part of Arthur’s stupefying response to the Romans, an overwhelming statement of his superiority, since the chief guests have all been overcome in his previous wars or else yielded by treaty. (Significantly, there is no corresponding later description of Emperor Lucius’ court.) Arthur’s spectacular hospitality to the Romans is basically another aspect of the ferocious anger expressed by his countenance. As with the political display of the feast, mention of the council allows Arthur to remind the Roman delegation just how many conquered kings, dukes and nobles are his men. (His safe-conduct for the Romans will similarly be made a sign of how much his subjects fear him.) Anger dominates the council, already manifested by Arthur’s countenance, rather than by his young knights’ words, as in earlier versions, although a newly invented seven-day interval avoids some appearances of over-hastiness and acting in anger: ‘To warp wordez in waste no wyrchipe it were / Ne wilfully in fīs wreteth to wreken my seluen’. The poet seems to have recognised in this, and in occasional mention of negotiation and truces, that anger is a dangerous motivation, and that war is not necessarily the only option, but we see practical alternatives laughed away. Though the author also uses Wace, La, amon and Mannyng in this passage, he chooses to follow Geoffrey in including no response by Gawain to Cador in praise of peace. Cador jokes that Arthur must be dragged off to Rome by the Emperor’s summons, unless he can ‘treat’ more successfully—’ow moste betrayled, I trowe, but , if e trett bettyre.’ (As in Geoffrey and Wace, though not in La, amon and Mannyng, Cador seems to have started talking before the proceedings are formally opened.): Arthur then teases Cador with

59 Morte Arthur, 503ff.
60 Morte Arthur, 116-119.
61 Morte Arthur, 475-78.
63 Hamel, pp. 258-59, n. 152-55.
64 Morte Arthur, 150-51.
65 See also 407: ‘Qwhen they tristily had tretyd’.
67 See Le Saux, p. 70.
'affectionate'\textsuperscript{68} criticism of his impetuousness—'For thow countez no caas, ne castes no furthire, / But hurles furthe appon heuede as thi herte thynkes'\textsuperscript{69}—and jokingly floats the idea that he might have to make a 'truce', either with the Romans, or with the warlike Cador himself, before they can proceed to council: '”I moste trette of a trew towchande fise nedes, / Talke of thies tythands flat teenes myn herte.”'\textsuperscript{70} Here and elsewhere Arthur links the idea of a possible truce with unthinkable cowardice—'I myght nogh te speke for spytte, so my herte trymblyde!'\textsuperscript{71} It is the first of several occasions in the poem when he and his men deal with pacific suggestions by military sarcasm: others include reference to making a ‘treaty’ and ‘truce’ with the giant of St Michael’s Mount, and sending two humiliated senators with the emperor’s corpse as ‘tribute’ and ‘tax’ to the Romans.\textsuperscript{72} Peace is made a joke because Arthur’s warlike intentions are really quite plain. His cousin Ewan’s ‘kyndly’ request to know his will\textsuperscript{73} seems nothing but a courtesy, since Arthur has already spoken immediately after Cador to approve his ‘noble’ counsel, and scotched any possibilities for diplomacy by a whole-hearted assertion of Roman tyranny and his ‘right’ to take tribute of Rome, his \textit{ius ad bellum}.\textsuperscript{74} Peace is not a factor in the council, even in the guise of military recuperation or prelude to war. To Cador, it has simply been a lazy time of ‘dessuse of dedez of armes’.\textsuperscript{75} The ethos of Arthur’s establishment is solely military. Just as the guests at a peacetime feast are there to represent his wartime success, he repeatedly tells his men that their prime function is to fight for him as he pleases: \begin{verbatim} ,e have knyghtly conqueryde flat to my coroun langes. Hym thare be ferde for no faees flat swylke a folke ledes, Bot euer fresche for to fyghte in felde when hym lykes.\textsuperscript{76} \end{verbatim} 

\textsuperscript{68} Hamel, p. 264: ‘The resulting badinage is unprecedented’.
\textsuperscript{69} \textit{Morte Arthur}, 261-62.
\textsuperscript{70} \textit{Morte Arthur}, 247-64.
\textsuperscript{71} \textit{Morte Arthur}, 270.
\textsuperscript{72} \textit{Morte Arthur}, 877-879; 991.992; 2340-2351.
\textsuperscript{73} \textit{Morte Arthur}, 337 ff.
\textsuperscript{74} \textit{Morte Arthur}, 259ff.
\textsuperscript{75} \textit{Morte Arthur}, 256.
\textsuperscript{76} \textit{Morte Arthur}, 402-404.
All this seems to point to a thoroughly militarist conception of Arthurian history. Yet the scene is haunted by its pacific absences. The Alliterative Morte both suggests and erases the normal period of Arthurian ‘revel and rest’; it heightens consciousness of the need for prudent counsel, yet produces counsel only as a bellicose show of strength; it points to possible diplomatic solutions other than war to this crisis, only to cancel them with heavy sarcasm. In all, the poem somewhat denaturalises the traditional moment of change from peace to war. Going to war becomes less a part of a providential pattern, an unmotivated seasonal cycle, and more exposed as an Arthurian cultural obsession, an accountable decision on the part of the king. In deploying so many narrative strategies which deprive this peacetime of its traditional value as an interval between hostilities, the Alliterative Morte re-motivates the frequent and prolonged nature of Arthurian wars, implicating Arthur’s belligerent will as a factor. As in earlier versions, Arthur is probably seen to have no option but to fight the Romans, and so the possibility that peace might be ‘freely held’ is foreclosed. Yet the narrative of Arthur’s decision-making still shows him eagerly embracing the opportunity of war for reasons of self-interest, and its onset can be more readily understood in terms of his anger, pride, avarice and ambition. (At this stage, that accusation is made only by the Romans: “thow has redyn and raymede and rausound fie pople / And kylyde doun ... kyngys ennoynttyde.””77) The space between periods of Arthurian war-history now unoccupied by the courtly discourse of peace offers itself to a potential discourse of choice, and the first impression grows of a kingdom too much at war.

Malory’s ‘Tale of Arthur and Lucius’, drawing on the Alliterative Morte, is fairly similar in the issues it raises in this episode, but different in the more straightforward impression created. Malory jumps immediately to description of the Roman challenge, avoiding Arthur’s earlier lengthy continental wars, so that the sense of endless conquest is much diminished. In this shortened version, Arthur’s determination not to be ‘over-hasty’, his restraint of the young knights, and the seven-day cooling-off period stand out more, indicating a controlled anger, despite his furious show of countenance.78 The king does not speak his mind at once; Cador waits to be asked for his counsel. Their exchange is brief, unmoralistic and to the point:

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77 Morte Arthur, 100-101.
78 Malory, Vol 1, pp. 185-186.
‘Sir ... as for me, I am nat hevy of this message, for we have be
many dayes rested now. The lettyrs of Lucius the Emperoure lykis
me well, for now shall we have warre and worshyp.

‘Be Cryste, I leve welle,’ seyde the kyng, ‘sir Cador, this message
lykis the. But yet they may nat so be anwerde, for their spyteuous
speche grevyth so my herte.’\textsuperscript{79}

The interval of rest since the last war, though reckoned in ‘days’ not years, is at
least present. (The long previous story of Gawain, Yvain and Marhalt has in
effect provided a sizeable peacetime respite.) Nothing is said about peace.
Arthur realises he needs some better formal answer than Cador’s ‘warre and
worshyp’, but the remaining business of the council is really to see how much
armed support the king can muster in his undisputed ‘right’. Arthur seems
quietly in control, vengeance on Roman outrages is repeatedly justified, and
the idea of a treaty is not even raised. Malory seems to have adapted the
Alliterative Morte’s story in ways that make the onset of this war a much
simpler business.\textsuperscript{80}

The ideological value of Arthurian peace is further illuminated if we
look at another crisis point in the traditional narrative cycle, when war is
unexpectedly prolonged. This moment occurs at the end of Arthur’s wars
against the Romans, as the news of Mordred’s rebellion at home deprivés the
king of his anticipated victorious rest. In Geoffrey, the rebellion impinges just
as Arthur is ready to cross the Alps and head for Rome. The king rushes back
to defeat Mordred, but due to his departure for Avalon, and the Britons’
subsequent decline into prolonged civil war under his successors, no true
peace ensues. The fulfilment of the peace/war cycle signalled after the first
continental wars by the army’s ‘spring’ return, with Arthur ‘overjoyed by his
great success’,\textsuperscript{81} and extensive court ceremonial, is quite absent. The king has
to fight his way ashore in Britain, and knows no rest again in this world.\textsuperscript{82}
Geoffrey’s core idea of ‘peace’, as celebrated in Arthur’s Whitsuntide feast, can
not be realised, because such ‘peace’ is never simply the cessation of hostilities
but a gift in the hand of the prosperous conqueror. Not war itself, but lack of
victorious return, is the true opposite of Arthurian peace. So although
Geoffrey blames only Mordred and Guinevere for what has happened, he still

\textsuperscript{79} Malory, 187.18-188.3.
\textsuperscript{80} For Vinaver’s comments on Malory’s changes, see Malory, Vol. 3, 1366-71, and
subsequent notes.
\textsuperscript{81} Thorpe, 225-226.
\textsuperscript{82} Thorpe, p. 258.
gives the king’s last wars a sad sense of incompletion, one which would be retained or even increased in subsequent versions.

Wace, similarly, gives no blame to Arthur for his second continental adventures. Arthur thanks God, buries the slain with honour, and settles things down in Burgundy.\textsuperscript{83} Mordred’s sin, too great for any peace to be concluded with his father, is alone responsible for the civil war.\textsuperscript{84} In Geoffrey, Mordred is ‘the boldest of men’.\textsuperscript{85} In Wace, he is given a degenerate nature, associated with his having remained too long in peace at home, away from war:

\begin{verbatim}
Modred ot humes concultis,
En pais et en repos nurriz;
Ne se sorent pas si cuvrir
Ne si turner ne si ferir
Cume la gent Arthur saveit,
Ki en guerre nurrie esteit.
\end{verbatim}

Modret had assembled men brought up to peace and quiet; they did not know how to protect themselves, to wheel and to strike, as Arthur’s men did, who had been brought up to war.\textsuperscript{86}

And yet, after so much combat detail in his previous Arthurian narrative, and despite ample material in Geoffrey, Wace chooses to leave the last battle vague:

\begin{verbatim}
Par grant ire fud assemblee
E par grant ire fud justee;
Par grant ire fud l’ovre enprise
Grant fu la gent, grant fu l’ocise;
Ne sai dire ki mielz li fist
Ne qui perdi ne qui cunquist
Ne qui chaï ne qui estut
Ne qui ocist ne qui murut.
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{83} Wace, 12977-13012.
\textsuperscript{84} Wace, 13015-13030.
\textsuperscript{85} Historia, p. 499: ‘omnia audacissimus’; Thorpe, p. 260.
\textsuperscript{86} Wace, 13113-13118.
They gathered and joined battle in great anger; in great anger was the work begun, great were the numbers of men and great was the slaughter. I cannot say who did best, nor who lost nor who won, nor who fell or stood firm, nor who died and who lived.87

By withholding closure to combat in this way, Wace specifically prevents the suggestion of peacetime conditions after Camble. Instead, all is left ‘doubtful’, even whether Arthur has lived or died.88 The king’s campaign remains unfulfilled also, since Arthur will never return and conquer Rome as he has promised.89 He fights to the finish, but not to the conclusion. The departing of Arthur is all but the end of the British. Their hope of the king’s prophesied ‘return’ from Avalon, so strongly painted in Wace,90 points to the conventional cyclical importance of this theme, as in Arthur’s previous return from France, but it is now the illusion of a people pathetically ‘degenerated from the nobility, the honour, the customs and the life of their ancestors’.91

La amon also treats this war purely as a rightful punishment of treachery. Although he reduces the immediate survivors of the last battle to just two knights and Arthur,92 a distinctive respect for peace is maintained in his ending. Barron and Weinburg call it ‘devoid of military glory’.93 The departing Arthur passes on to Constantin his concern to maintain the good laws of the land. Arthur promises to return, and the ‘great joy’ he anticipates in dwelling with the Britons clearly refers to peacetime at home, rather than the prospect of conquest abroad: ‘And seo e ich cumen wulle to mine kineriche / and wunien mid Bruten mid muchelere wunne.’ 94 Robert Mannyng, by contrast, gives Arthur a death beyond all hopes of return—‘Bot the Bretons loude lie; / he was so wonded that him burd die’.95

These English narratives of the end of Arthur’s Roman wars and his battles against Mordred operate without condemnation of the king for his absence or his long campaign. Their sadness is that through treachery Arthur.

87 Wace, 13255-13262.
88 Wace, 13286.
89 Wace, 13047-13050.
90 Wace, 13275ff.
91 Wace, 14851-14854: ‘Tuit sunt mué et tuit changié, / Tuit sunt divers et forslignié / De noblesce, d’onur, de murs / E de la vie as anciesurs.’
92 La amon’s addition. See Le Saux, pp. 148-89.
93 La amon, p. xlviii.
94 La amon, 14281-14282.
95 Mannyng, 13723-13724.
fails to conclude his greatest military victory, and so never returns to Britain and another glorious peacetime as he should have. The Alliterative Morte continues within this tradition, but, as I have tried to show, is unusual in its heavy concentration on war, even more so than in the source material. It does not make La,amon’s ‘attempt to achieve variety in a work so largely concerned with warfare, both in the alternation of war and peace, action and ceremonial’. The Morte mounts some open critique of Arthur’s wars as wrong; but it often treats them as a kind of Crusade, by introducing so many prayers for victory, and so many pagan and outlandish enemies. More generally, the poem renders the impression of excessive war, I believe, by maintaining a strong consciousness of the broken expectation of peace after war, through the relentless representation of a campaign that takes Arthur away so far and so long, with very brief interludes of ‘revel and rest’. The king’s departure to fight the Romans is overshadowed by premonitions that he will not return to what he left. Arthur farewells not just Britain but the whole nexus of activities—courtly life, hunting, government, law and good works—which make up his peacetime existence. Mordred begs not to be left at home, apparently foreseeing his degeneracy (as in Wace) if kept so long from war: ‘’”When ofer of werre wysse are wyrchipide hereaftyre, / Than may I for sothe be sette bot at lyttill.”’ Gaynour blames the man who began this war, and forecasts a permanent separation from Arthur—’”All my lykynge of lyfe owte of lande wendez, / And I in langour am lefte, leue , e, for euere.”’ Arthur, comforting what he sees as a woman’s irrational grief, foreshadows a happy return: ‘”Grefe fie noghte, Gaynour, for Goddes lufe of hewen, / Ne gruche noghte my ganggynge; it sall to gude turne.”’. But the moment is accompanied by a reminder that she will in fact never see him again: ‘cho sees hym no more’. Mordred and Gaynour are, in one sense, to be ruined by Arthur’s long absence. Gawain, too, was made the subject of dramatic irony, for any who knew the famous story. His praise of peace, absent in the council scene of this poem, is poignantly displaced to a speech motivating his knights with hopes of a traditional courtly aftermath to the wars:

‘We sall in this viage victoures be holden,

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96 Barron and Weinburg in La,amon, pp. xlvi-xlvii.
97 See Hamel in Morte Arthure, p. 351, n. 3038-43.
98 Morte Arthure, 648-678.
100 Morte Arthure, 720.
And avaunte with voycez of valyant biernez,
Praysede with pryncez in presence of lorde
And luffede with ladies in dyuerse londes.\textsuperscript{101}

More and more as the poem goes on and a complete peacetime continually eludes Arthur, the anticipation of peace is replaced as motivation by the grieving impulse to take revenge for slain comrades—Cador for Berille, Gawain for Chastelayne (like Mordred, a ‘child’ of Arthur’s chamber), and especially Arthur for Gawain, slain by Mordred. The poem continues to represent full ‘peace’ as an arrangement ensuing from conquest, but the onset of more war continually puts it off, leaving only minor instances: Arthur negotiates to capture a city by \textit{appointement} with a charter of ‘peace’,\textsuperscript{102} is sued for ‘peace’ and ‘treats of a truce’ with a cardinal from the Pope’s court. And in its new and prolonged extension of Arthur’s wars into Italy, the \textit{Morte Arthure}, carries war beyond the narrative expectations of the Arthurian tradition, and, as it had at the poem’s start, brings news of more trouble just when glorious peace is most anticipated—’’Now may we reuell and riste, for Rome es oure awen!’’\textsuperscript{103} The words of Fortune to Arthur in his dream underline the contradiction in his expectation of a peace consequent on war: he is urged into acquisitive war—’’fyrthe noghte fle fruyte’’ (’’do not leave the fruit [Rome] in peace’’)—yet motivated by the hope of ‘ryotte’ and ‘riste’, key terms in the poem’s discourse of peacetime.\textsuperscript{104} (A homonym—’roo’—is used for both ‘rest’ and Fortune’s restless ‘wheel’.) The poem’s emphasis on Arthur’s fortune, which changes ‘be ane aftyre mydnyghte’,\textsuperscript{105} replaces the omnitemporal seasonal cycle of war and peace with the limited time span of human life and death. Only after his previous war history has been discredited as a providential and unmotivated pattern is Arthur’s personal responsibility made clearer, and he is then subjected to severe criticism from his own ‘philosopher’ for having caused so much bloodshed.\textsuperscript{106} An important ideological shift has occurred.

In effect, as we see, Mordred’s war puts Arthur’s peace on hold indefinitely. Arthur has returned ‘home’, but the death of Gawain demands

\textsuperscript{101} \textit{Morte Arthure}, 2863-2866.
\textsuperscript{103} \textit{Morte Arthure}, 3207.
\textsuperscript{104} \textit{Morte Arthure}, 3370-3375.
\textsuperscript{105} \textit{Morte Arthure}, 3222.
\textsuperscript{106} \textit{Morte Arthure}, 3396-3399. For commentary, see pp. 57-58.
revenge before he can hunt or hold court again, and it would be a court without his wife and two dearest supporters. The poem’s ending is divided between a sense of fulfilment and disappointment. Arthur consoles himself at the last for the triumph he has missed with the thought of rest and peace in Glastonbury (if not at Caerleon)—”There we may ryste vs with roo and raunsake oure wondys”—and thanks God for at least letting him ‘dye in oure awen’. He sets up his successor, and is given a spectacular burial. But these weakened motifs of peace cannot fully efface the impression of excessive and uncompleted war, to which they now provide a haunting contrast. The naturalised cycle of war/peace/war, an ideological model concealing the self-interest of the conqueror, is strongly challenged. The Wheel of Fortune allegory, substituting its unpredictable changes for the orderly seasonal sequence of war and peace, displays the private motivation of the conquerors clinging to the wheel, Worthies though they may be. As ruled by Fortune, the king’s change from peace to war, his prolongation of war, have become implicitly unstable, a culpable pride, even a fall.

Evidence that one medieval reader was troubled by the image of endless war in the Alliterative Morte is provided by Malory’s re-working of the text in Le Morte Darthur. Malory necessarily cut and changed his ‘Arthur and Lucius’ to make a happy ending, and to leave space for long books of knight errantry and the Lancelot plot. Interestingly, his newly fashioned end is rich in details that re-establish the traditional onset of peace after war: Arthur is crowned in Rome; he comes to terms with the conquered cities; he ‘stabelysshe[s]’ lands; the knights and lords request permission to return to their wives; they bring home with them ‘all maner of rychesse ... at the full’, and Guenevere and other queens and ladies meet them on the shore. Now that he has all he wanted—for in Malory he has finally got all the way to Rome—Arthur consciously avoids ‘too much’ war: ‘for inowghe is as good as a feste, for to atteinte God overmuche I holde hit not wysedom’. Then, in the next book, even the peace-time adventures only begin after Launcelot has

107 Morte Arthure, 3997-4006.
108 Morte Arthure, 4304.
111 Malory, pp. 244-247;
112 Malory, p. 246.11-13.
‘rested hym longe with play and game’. Malory, it appears, found in the Alliterative Morte Arthure a sense of Arthur’s Roman wars as ‘overmuche’, and moved to disarm it.

In summary, Arthurian texts in England generally come across as traditional and militarist in what they say (and do not say) on the issue of peace, largely uninfluenced by the growth of a separate peace discourse in the moral poets, the new ‘desire for peace as a temporal condition’ which has been so often noted by Scattergood, Barnie, Göller, Hamel, Yeager, Lowe and others. These Arthurian texts belong to a tradition which makes peace and war part of the same discourse. La, amon contains the exception, an isolated view of peace as ‘good’ in itself, blessedly free from war. Yet within the cyclical model of peace and war always remained the potential understanding that war might go on too long. In Malory, it becomes proverbial; his characters say casually in support of a truce: ‘bettir is pees than evermore warre’; ‘better ys pees than allwayes warre’. Of the texts I have examined which inherited this traditional ideology, the Alliterative Morte Arthure subjects it to most pressure. It does not simply display a distaste for war, or an acceptance of peace as the highest good, which we see in some English contemporaries like Chaucer, Gower and Hoccleve, or later in Lydgate. But it is still able to represent war as an accountable and potentially culpable policy, rather than as the natural and necessary successor to peace.

Works Cited

113 Malory, p. 253. 20.
114 Lowe, p. 5.
115 Statements by Guenevere and Lancelot respectively, in Malory pp. 1128 and 1212.


