Aging and Immortal Kings: The Morality of Passing the Torch

by

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Introduction

Why do we kill our children? Through injustice, inaction, or wars fought by the young but managed by the old, we *do* kill our children. But our literature can help us see the rationalizations and anxieties we have surrounding the death and survival of the generation to come. In stories of kings concerned with their successors there exists an irreconcilable tension between the practice of expending the lives of the younger generation in order to secure the king's power, and the inevitable succession of those same young people.

"Stories of kings concerned with their successors" is a broad category, but I name age and immortality in the project title for a reason. The tension between sacrificing the next generation and the necessity of its survival comes to the surface most in the stories of aging kings who do not have a suitable heir and seek to secure one, and stories of kings who seek to subvert succession and death altogether. Every story that concerns such a king has a great deal to say implicitly and explicitly about the nature of generational conflict, sacrifice, and the morality of passing the torch.

All of the texts included in this project are from cultures that were or are monarchic and patriarchal, or depict a culture of that same kind. The principal term used throughout this project for these monarchs with varying mythic statuses is "king" for this reason. While patriarchy is the overarching reason for the gender disparity in these texts, one aspect of that patriarchy adds more context to the themes I am concerned with: in patriarchal societies women are precluded from sacrifice almost as much as they are precluded from rulership. In Peggy McCracken's essay "Engendering Sacrifice: Blood, Lineage, and Infanticide in Old French Literature," she writes

> "the gendering of sacrifice in medieval narratives would seem to be consistent with sacrificial practice in most of the world's cultures: in virtually every culture that practices

> ritual sacrifice, mothers (or women who could be mothers) do not perform sacrifices … [which] points to the symbolic definition of lineage as uniquely masculine”

(McCracken 57). It is this “uniquely masculine” idea of lineage which I claim often stands in tension with generational conflict; these male kings want sons to inherit their power, but find themselves sacrificing those sons in order to keep it. McCracken uses the story of Abraham and Isaac to demonstrate this masculine idea, calling it “the foundational myth of child sacrifice in medieval Europe” (58). She writes “the sacrifice of Isaac is the story of a father’s sacrifice. Isaac’s mother, Sarah, is absent from the biblical account … Abraham neither seeks her consent for the sacrifice nor considers her reaction to it” and in later dramatizations, Sarah is only obliquely referenced (60). I will return to Abraham and Isaac later, but for now it is important to know that patriarchy and patrilineality define the bounds of this project.

As the above example implies, “king” is a byword for this project’s purpose: while most of the examples are of male monarchs, their attitudes and themes apply just as much if they were instead a warlord, a general, or even a president. The word will only denote a patriarch of power in this context.

Likewise, “immortality”can refer to many states, but it will be used most often to describe a legacy or a deliberate prolonging of one’s life. Mostly I will use the word a catch-all to be defined by the texts that incorporate it, but I will anticipate its varied meanings here. The first example of immortality in this project will be an undying kind, where the subject is incapable of or resistant to dying of old age, yet they still age as normal, often descending into senility. Another formulation of immortality is a Romantic one, where “immortality” serves as a shorthand for access to an eternal spiritual realm. This might mean full or partial godhood, special access to divinity, or simply being remembered. In this case “immortality” can be a

shorthand for lasting cultural impact. I include this definition to incorporate texts like *Beowulf* and the Arthurian myth which are not primarily concerned with an undying or unaging king, but are nonetheless invaluable on the subjects of age, legacy, sacrifice, lineage, and succession.

King Aun's Example

The *Heimskringla,* also known as *The Saga of the Norse Kings*, contains a near-perfect example of the mechanism of kingship, sacrifice, and immortality at issue in this project. The saga "Of King Ane's Death," begins "Aun or Ane was the name of Jorund's son, who became king of the Swedes after his father. He was a wise man, who made great sacrifices to the gods; but, being no warrior, he lived quietly at home" (Laing 300). In the saga, King Aun is defeated by Halfdan, son of Frode Mikellate, and flees to West Gautland, staying in exile for twenty-five years while Halfdan rules as king (Laing 301). When Halfdan dies of old age, Aun, now sixty, returns to the seat of the throne. There he makes "a great sacrifice, and in it offered up his son to Odin. Aun got an answer from Odin, that he should live sixty years longer" (Laing 301). After his sacrifice, Aun rules another twenty-five years before he is defeated again. After twenty-five years of further exile he returns and rules as King once more. Then he makes a second sacrifice "again, for long life, in which he sacrificed his second son, and received the answer from Odin, that he should live as long as he gave him one of his sons every tenth year" (Laing 302). Aun goes on to sacrifice nine of his sons, until the Swedes do not allow him to sacrifice the last one, an infant (Laing 302). The Thiodolf poem which accompanies the prose account is not as ambivalent as the preceding text about the morality of these sacrifices:

"In Uppsala town the cruel king

Slaughtered his sons at Odin's shrine --

Slaughtered his sons with cruel knife,

To get from Odin length of life

He lived until he had to turn

His toothless mouth to the deer's horn;

> And he who shed his children's blood
>
> Sucked through the ox's horn his food,
>
> At length fell Death has tracked him down,
>
> Slowly, but sure, in Uppsala town."

As far as Thiodolf is concerned, it is "cruel," for a king to "slaughter" his sons. As the poem indicates, Aun receives undying immortality. As long as he continues sacrificing, Odin prevents Aun from dying, but he continues to age. The text gives stages of his decline for every son after the seventh:

> "but so that he could not walk, but was carried on a chair. Then he sacrificed his eighth son, and lived thereafter for ten years, lying in his bed. Now he sacrificed his ninth son, and lived ten years more; but so that he drank out of a horn like an infant" (Laing 302).

In the poem, this decay of Aun's body is implied to be a punishment: "He who shed his children's blood / Sucked through the ox's horn." Death comes to Aun peacefully (Snorri's text reports "Since that time it is called Aun's sickness when a man dies, without pain, of extreme old age") but the language is that death *finally* "tracked him down, / Slowly, but sure, in Uppsala town" (Laing 302). This "tracking down," is not a moralizing phrase in this translation: avoiding death is not depicted as immoral. The king's descent into an infantile state is assuredly unpleasant, but killing one's sons is the only part of Aun's saga that the narrators characterize as clearly immoral.

I recount the saga of King Aun because it is the story of an immortal king whose immortality is a direct consequence of generational conflict: Aun sacrifices his sons to prolong his life. The saga of King Aun is noted in James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough,* about which he comments:

> "When the king first succeeded in getting the life of another accepted as a sacrifice instead of his own, he would have to show that the death of that other would serve the purpose quite as well as his own would have done. Now it was as a god or demigod that the king had to die; therefore the substitute who died for him had to be invested, at least for the occasion, with the divine attributes of the king… But no one could so well represent the king in his divine character as his son, who might be supposed to share the divine afflatus of his father. No one, therefore, could so appropriately die for the king and, through him, for the whole people, as the king's son" (Frazer 289-290).

As Frazer's work summarizes, these stories are about the value of a king's blood in sacrifice, but in the story of Aun and others the ritual death of the king is delayed by the ritual death of his sons. In essence, Aun trades the future for the present. We should not discount the importance of the final sacrifice in this case: the people will not let Aun sacrifice an infant. The death of an infant is generally regarded as the ultimate tragedy; an infant can have done no wrong and they are by necessity innocent, but also they are beings with their whole future ahead of them; they are almost entirely potential. They represent the future and the next generation much more than a grown warrior-son, who's already lived a third or half of his life. The Swedes of Upsala can only tolerate the murder of the future so much, and Aun, an infant again after two-hundred-thirty-two years, is incapable of performing the sacrifice himself, considering he could not get out of bed for ten years, or feed himself (Laing 302).

Foundation Sacrifices in the House of Rule

Not all examples of generational conflict are as clear-cut as the one we find in the *Heimskringla,* but there is a motif that comes very close. When King Aun sacrifices his children to extend his life, he is not just decaying in a cave poor and alone; he is extending his life as a king, and thereby preserving the institution of his rule.

There are several keys to maintaining an institution of rule, especially the monarchies that this project concerns. There are military, monetary, informational, and political requirements for even the most basic of reigns, but preserving the life of the monarch is paramount. In her book *The Idea of the Castle in Medieval England,* Abigail Wheatley traces the meaning of the word "castle," and its precursors from a general idea into its connotation of a lord or king's house, meant to protect him. When discussing castle imagery on civic seals, she writes:

> "These seals often portray urban harmony, but idealized images of social cohesion cannot be read as a simple reflection of the civic reality. Rather, they are a projection of the effort to resolve the multiple conflicts of the medieval urban situation. With some seals, the depiction of a central castle in relation to its surrounding town wall expresses not a lack of conflict between the ruling aristocracy and the powerful civic interests, but its painstaking resolution" (Wheatley 46).

The book generally presents the modern idea of a castle as a problematic definition for modern historians. When we find what looks like a castle in a historical source, that source may not intend to bring with it the baggage we associate with castles now:

> "The urban castle is read as an instrument of oppression, thrust upon a community for the purposes of intimidation and administrative and legal control, and hostile to its attempts

> to gain economic rights. The primary castle, by contrast, is seen to provide employment and protection for the community, from which it in turn requires services and revenues" (Wheatley 46).

Whether the castle in any given king story was understood as hostile or harmonious to the people who surrounded it does not necessarily matter in this project, so long as we understand it as closely related to the institution of rule. Christopher Brooke's book *London, 800-1216: The Shaping of a City,* clarifies how the castle became synonymous with rule in England:

> "The Norman castles, and especially the Tower [of London], were built to ensure that the citizens recognized their master. It is a symbol in the broader sense of the relationship of love and hate which always existed between the king and the patriciate of London; in a special sense of the presence of the Norman conquerors in the city" (Brooke 14, Wheatley 57).

The Tower of London included "part of the King's wardrobe, an arsenal, a mint, and … became the main storage site for administrative records" as well as "a repository for the national treasure and a distribution depot for the national wine trade," which goes to show the massive role castles could play in the administration of a king or lord's reign (Wheatley 49).

Understanding the nature of the castle, we can see it as an instrument to protect, preserve, and wield the life and rule of the monarch. As such, the institution of their rule becomes a physical house that is constructed by and for them, that is filled with the necessary keys to administration such as military force and taxation. Putting aside some of the more literal generational costs of these houses (the time, work, lives of many young builders, masons, farmers, farriers, etc.) there is a folkloric motif that is, at its core, a sacrifice of the younger generation to prop up the house of rule.

In an 1887 article for the short-lived *Murray's Magazine,* published by the then-powerful John Murray house, Sabine-Baring Gould wrote

> "Every great work was initiated with sacrifice. If a man started on a journey, he made first an offering. A warlike expedition was not undertaken until an oblation had been made, and the recollection of this lingered on in the altered form of superstition, that that side would win the day which was the first to shed blood … a ship could not be launched without a sacrifice, and the baptism of a vessel nowadays with a bottle of wine is a relic of the breaking of the neck of a human victim and the suffusion of the prow with blood, just the burial of a bottle of coins at the present day under a foundation stone is the faded reminiscence of the immuring of a human victim" (Baring-Gould 364-365)

I do not intend to evaluate all of Baring-Gould's claims in this quote. There can be no doubt that the hagiographer was well-read, but it is only necessary to demonstrate the belief and understanding of these "foundation sacrifices," in order to prove my claim about castles. The article goes on to describe that St. Columba of Iona was buried alive underneath the foundations of his abbey (365). Baring-Gould includes many more examples of this seemingly wide-spread ritual, citing a skeleton found in the embedded in the south-west wall of Holsworthy church, the body of a child found in the "bridge-gate at Hamburg," and stories concerning several castles, including Henningberg, the Castle of Liebenstien, and the Castle of Reichenfels in which parents sold their children for the purpose of being sacrificed to the foundation stones. The last castle named, Reichenfels, came with the "superstitious conviction of the neighborhood … that if the stones that enclose [the child were] removed, the castle would fall" (Baring-Gould 367). It is this superstition that is most relevant to this project; if a castle would fall without the sacrifice of a child, that is not occultly different from the sacrifice King Aun makes.

These stories of bodies being found below foundation stones are shockingly common. In an 1889 note for *The Archaeological Review,* G.L. Gomme writes that small burnt bones were found beneath a circle of stones in Creich parish (Gomme 72). In March of 1920 the Publicity Bureau of Madras, India felt it was necessary to to quell “foolish rumors … to the effect that a child was to be sacrificed at the site of the new bridge,” (*Folklore* 238), and in 1938 the Irish Folklore Commission sent out a survey to the twenty-six counties asking if “any traditions exist locally … about the burying of the heads of animals or other object in certain places (castles, houses, bridges, etc.)?” (Ó Súilleabháin 45). While the responses to the survey were few, more than half said yes, claiming that everything from “coins,” to “an old pot,” and “the jaw-bone of a whale,” were placed beneath foundation stones (Ó Súilleabháin 45, 46, 47). However, the most common response included the burial of “the skull of a horse.” These responses were collected for *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland,* and in summarizing them, Seán Ó Súilleabháin writes that “the custom of making foundation sacrifices is found all of the world … in China, India, Japan, Siam, Borneo, Africa, South America, New Zealand, and in many Islands of the Pacfic Ocean" and notably Medieval Europe (Ó Súilleabháin 50). He also writes that foundation sacrifice is thought to originate with a notion that “the earth and water gods needed placation … the spirit of the site had to be appeased” and the “associated legends of buildings or other structures which persistently fell until a victim had been buried under them” (Ó Súilleabháin 50).

If even further evidence is needed for the pervasion (if not practice) of the foundation sacrifice myth, Paul G. Brewester describes it as “So old … that its origin is lost in the haze of antiquity,” and cites many of the same stories as Baring-Gould did in *Murray's Magazine,* but includes the burial of Faustulus and Quincilius underneath a stone when Romulus founded

Rome, two skeletons found under the walls of a Brownsover church during its 1876 restoration, and finally the development of “wax, straw, clay, bronze, [and] silver,” substitutions for human victims, something corroborated by a china statue found in the walls of a New England house as late as 1899 (Brewster 72, 73, Hodges 291-292).

The near-universal idea of foundation sacrifice takes on a sinister potency when viewed through the lens of generational conflict. I described earlier how the castle is a symbol of the institution of monarchy, a house of rule that serves to protect the life of the monarch and their reign. If one builds a castle to protect the king, and buries a child beneath it to ensure it stands, then they are paying for life with the blood of the next generation. The only difference between this hypothetical castle-building king and King Aun is the kind of myth that surrounds them. This is to say nothing of the soldiers who must walk the walls of the castle, the armies which must ride out to die defending the king, and those within the walls who will starve in a siege when the politics of kings decides. These, too, are generational sacrifices of a sort: lives exchanged so that an institution will stay standing. The children beneath the walls are only the most terrifying example.

Geoffrey of Monmouth, writing *The History of the Kings of Britain,* understood foundation sacrifices to be a form of generational conflict. The story is not purely Geoffrey of Monmouth’s creation, as Baring-Gould summarizes:

> “In the life of Merlin, as given by Nennius and by Geoffrey of Monmouth, we are told that Vortigern tried to build a castle, but that the walls gave way as fast as he erected them. He consulted the wise men, and they told him that his foundations could only be made to stand if smeared them with the blood of a fatherless boy” (Baring-Gould 368-369)

In an 1842 translation, this castle is really "a very strong tower" which magicians told Vortigern (here spelled Vortegirn) to build "for his own safety, since he has lost all his other fortified places" (Giles 127). He begins building at Mount Erir, but when the builders place the foundation-stones, "whatever they did one day the earth swallowed up the next, so as to leave no appearance of their work" (Giles 127). Nature itself conspires against the king's efforts to prolong his life, and Vortigern again consults the magicians, who of course tell him to "find a youth that never had a father, and kill him, and then sprinkle the stones and cement with his blood; by those means, they said, he would have a firm foundation" (Giles 127).

Vortigern's men find Merlin, who fits the bill. But before any blood can be spilled Merlin performs a speech. He asks the men building the tower to lift up the foundation stones and dig until they find a pond. The builders do indeed find a pond, which makes for a poor foundation, but Merlin isn't done yet. He asks what's under the pond and the men bring out "hollow stones, and in them two dragons asleep" (Giles 128-130). The dragons wake up and battle each other, and when they are finished Merlin tells the assembly

> "Woe to the red dragon, for his banishment hasteneth on. His lurking holes shall be seized by the white dragon, which signifies the Saxons whom you invited over; but the red denotes the British nation, which shall be oppressed by the white" (Giles 132-133).

He goes on to make a long prophecy about how the country will fare in the coming years, including Vortigern's own death, which occurs shortly thereafter at the hands of Aurelius Ambrosius, the new king (Giles 147). The same story is told in *The Welsh Fairy-Book* under the title "Why the Red Dragon is the Emblem of Wales," only there Merlin (Called Myrrdin Emrys) makes a much shorter prophecy:

> "The red serpent is your dragon, but the white serpent is the dragon of the Saxons, who occupy several provinces and districts of Britain, even almost sea to sea. At length, however, our people shall rise and drive the Saxon race beyond the sea whence they have come; but do you depart from this place where you are not permitted to erect a citadel; you must seek another spot for laying your foundations" (Thomas 69).

Vortigern, upon hearing this, orders his magicians be put to death, and Merlin is spared.

Both versions of the story cited above take the foundation sacrifice and explicitly make it about generational conflict: it is the tale of a king who tries to build a structure that will sustain his life, but in order to succeed he must kill a child in ritual fashion. He is only thwarted when the child prophesizes about future generations, and tells the king the tower must not be built where a sacrifice is necessary. In one telling, Vortigern is killed very quickly after this event, and his plans for safety fall apart as the next king rises. In essence, the story says "don't kill the next generation. Instead, you have to die for them to live." To cap it off, in the *Welsh Fairy-Book* telling, the story closes with Merlin hiding his treasure in a cave: "intended to be the property of some special person in a future generation" (Thomas 69). This is the last beat in the story, showing us that Vortigern represents the past, and this tale is concerned with the future. As a final note, we the readers know that Merlin *must* survive in order to shepherd King Arthur, whom you have not heard the last of in this project.

The Aqedah and the Death of the Future

In the previous two sections, I examined how sacrifices of members of the forthcoming generation act to preserve the current institution of rule. There is a widely-known text that examines the paradox of those sacrifices in a similar but more simple and vital way than the example from Geoffrey of Monmoth. This text is the aqedah, the story of Isaac's near-sacrifice at the hands of his father Abraham in the book of Genesis.

There is a colossal volume of work on the Binding of Isaac, from midrashim and Catholic exegesis to hermeneutics and modern-day literary criticism. It is not my intention to subvert the aqedah's academic history, nor to even claim a complete grasp of it. Instead, I will view it in conversation with the attitudes towards human sacrifice and generational conflict in other texts. I agree with the general Christian notion that it is a story about morals, but I find that the text is so ambivalent, and the scholarship so varied, that it is difficult to establish anything beyond the facts. Because of that, my argument is simple: Abraham is a man who values the instruction to sacrifice Isaac as much as the idea that the future rests on Isaac's survival.

There is a similarly voluminous argument about the nature, relevance, and acceptance of child sacrifice by the Israelites, and it is difficult to interpret Abraham and Isaac's story without that knowledge. it is even possible that Moloch, considered

> "quite self-evidently as a bloodthirsty 'pagan' god" is no such thing at all, and its name (*mlk)* is "not the name of a deity but derives from the root jlk > wlk ('to go') as a causative nominal formation and is the name of a special offering. This would mean that *mlk* sacrifices were not offered to some gruesome foreign god, but (also) to YHWH" (Pesthy-Simon 28).

Pesthy-Simon is quick to say that this debate is not yet resolved, but the presence of child sacrifice in the text is undeniable and its frequency indicates that "human sacrifice was known and practiced more or less legally in ancient Israel at least during the 8th–7th century BCE and children were probably offered to YHWH as well" (Pesthy-Simon 28).

I quote the conclusion of the first chapter of Monika Pesthy-Simon's book *Isaac, Iphigeneia, Ignatius: Martyrdom and Human Sacrifice* because it is necessary to see the aqedah in-context as a product of its culture. The story is simply too short and bereft of emotion to be read as having any moral that is applicable to the modern day, especially the relatively new notion that it is a condemnation of human sacrifice (Pesthy-Simon 22). In T*he Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity*, Jon D. Levenson writes "Israel did not always abominate the sacrifice of the firstborn son, and some biblical passages are best taken as an endorsement of the practice. Without uncritical harmonization, there is no reason to exclude [the aqedah] from the roster of such passages," and notes that the idea that the aqedah is an anti-human-sacrifice story is almost laughable:

> "If the point of the aqedah is 'abolish human sacrifice, substitute animals instead,' then Abraham cannot be regarded as having passed the test to which Gen 22:1 tells us God is here subjecting him. For Abraham obeys the command to sacrifice Isaac without cavil and desists—knife in hand, Isaac bound on the altar over the firewood— only when the angel calls to him from heaven. And the burden of the angelic address is not that the slaughter of Isaac is offensive or that the ram is a preferable victim, but that it is Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son that verifies his fear of God" (Levenson 13).

As I wrote before, the aqedah is short and provides little insight into the states of mind of its characters, and this remains true despite the herculean effort some scholars have gone through to read emotion into the text. Jonathan Jacobs, writing for *Vetus Testamentum,* makes a spirited attempt to analyze the behavior of Abraham and read his actions as hesitating or deliberating, despite the "ample textual justification for the accepted view that the story of the Binding of Isaac presents Abraham as a decisive man who fulfills God's command unquestioningly, even though it comes at the expense of his own future, his happiness, and his life's work" (Jacobs 548). I am interested specifically in that expense and how it fits in the broader theme of generational conflict.

With introductions and disclaimers finished, here is how the aqedah fits into the conversation that the saga of King Aun and the foundation sacrifices show us. Yahweh tells Abraham "I shall make you a great nation," "to your descendents after you, I shall give the country where you are now immigrants, the entire land of Canaan, to own in perpetuity" (*New Jerusalem Bible,* Genesis 12:2, 17:8). Sarah even laughs at the idea of having a son, which she claims she is far too old to do (*New Jerusalem Bible,* Genesis 18:12). Isaac is a son given to Sarah and Abraham by Yahweh, on which the entire future is placed. And yet, Yahweh demands Isaac be returned to him. In this, Kierkegaard sees Abraham as a figure of perfect faith: Abraham knows Isaac's importance, so he believes that despite the command issued by Yahweh, despite his holding the knife to his throat, that Isaac will not die.

> "He had faith by virtue of the absurd, for human calculation was out of the question, and it certainly was absurd that God, who required it of him, should in the next moment rescind the requirement. He climbed the mountain, and even in the moment when the knife gleamed he had faith—that God would not require Isaac" (Kierkegaard 36).

But, as Levenson points out, to read knowledge or belief of Isaac's survival into Abraham is to overreach:

> "The aqedah, in short, tests whether Abraham is prepared to surrender his son to the God who gave him. To say, with Kierkegaard and von Rad, that he is prepared to do so because through faith he expects to receive Isaac anew (as indeed happens) is to minimize the frightfulness of what Abraham is commanded to do" (Levenson 126).

I agree whole-heartedly with Levenson here: Yahweh's instruction to Abraham is frightful, and it is fruitful to understand it as such. Levenson goes on to illustrate this point, but there is not enough in the text to believe that perfect faith in Yahweh is the moral of the aqedah: nothing in the text supports Kierkegaard's idea that Abraham believed Isaac would survive (This is not a criticism, Kierkegaard is using the aqedah as a philosophical formulation) and here I agree with Pesthy-Simon:

> "The moral unanimously drawn from Gen 22 by Christian theologians and priests is that the believer, following the example of Abraham, must be ready to renounce what is most precious to him if the Lord wishes it. Here again, two completely different matters are confused: to accept the loss of a child is not identical with slaughtering him" (22)

Pesthy-Simon's argument in this quote is essential to the discussion of the Binding of Isaac in this project. If all Abraham had to do was accept that his son was going to be whisked away in a flash of light, there would be little relevance. The addition of sacrifice in this story complicates it, and turns into one explicitly concerning generational conflict. But the fact remains that Genesis 12-22 is a very different story than that of King Aun in the *Heimskringla* or that of Vortigern and his castle in *The History of the Kings of Britain,* where the sacrifice of the son is a

replacement for the death of the father, or more broadly, the sacrifice of the young is used to prop up the old.

An argument can be made that the favor of Yaweh is a kind of immortality, something that is both corroborated and confused by Yaweh claiming "because you have not refused me your own beloved son, I will shower blessing on you and make your descendents as numerous as the stars of heaven and the grains of sand on the seashore" (*New Jerusalem Bible,* Genesis 22:16-18). Yahweh has already sworn that through Isaac, Abraham's descendents will be prosperous, but he renews this promise once Abraham shows a willingness to sacrifice his son. In this way Yahweh's favor is colored as a way to immortality via lineage, but it is only guaranteed through a willingness to nip that lineage in the bud.

The paradox described above aligns the story more closely with that of King Aun's, but it is missing the crucial element that *The Golden Bough* identifies: the son's death is not a substitution for the father's (Frazer 289-290). That kind of sacrifice is rare in the Bible. I have been quoting Jon Levenson intently, and as Naomi Janowitz identifies in "Inventing the Scapegoat: Theories of Sacrifice and Ritual,"

> "[Levenson] wants to draw attention to the oft-overlooked Biblical traditions of son sacrifice by parents and makes almost no reference to the son being a substitute for the father. The earliest Biblical sacrifices, Levenson argues, presume that the first-born son belongs to Yahweh and is in some circumstances offered to the deity … the only place where Levenson raises the possibility that the son is a substitute for the father is in his brief discussion of child sacrifice as 'imitation of the God' (pp. 25-31)" (Janowitz 20)

Janowitz goes on to explain that even in the biblical example that most looks like a son being sacrificed as a substitute for the father, the purpose is actually much different. The event occurs

in 2 Kings 3:27, where the king of Moab faces an army of Israelites and kills his son which has the result of driving the army away. Janowitz says

> "This death does not ransom the father; ironically it is a form of more permanent death of the father by cutting off his offspring. The father gives up the primary greatness of a king, the promise that his seed will continue to rule the nation … the king does not attempt to sacrifice himself, but instead is willing to destroy that part of him which would live on after his death" (Janowitz 20).

These two quotes identify the central tension of stories like that of King Aun's, or those of foundation sacrifices. The deaths of those in the younger generation may buy time, but it cuts off a broader, deeper, and longer-lasting immortality through lineage. It is trading the future for the present in a way that is often hedonistic, short-sighted, and monstrous.

But that is not how Pesthy-Simon, Janowitz or Levenson fully characterize the son sacrifices of 2 Kings 3:27 or Genesis 12-22. Instead, when examining the text alone, we must conclude only what the text provides us: Isaac "is the child of promise. In him every saving thing that God has promised is invested and guaranteed" (von Rad 244, Levenson 125) and God has commanded him to be killed. That is the fact that the reader and Abraham must face, and the point on which my argument hinges. Pesthy-Simon ends her preliminary reading of the story by saying

> "the offering of Isaac, however, has no reason at all, at least from the human point of view (and this is the only one we are interested in). Abraham is willing to slaughter his son without wishing to obtain anything through his sacrifice, no escape from any danger, no remission of sins, no fertility, nothing at all. He offers his son 'just because" (23).

I agree with Pesthy-Simon to a point, and seek to maintain our "human point of view," by discounting the "test" framing of the aqedah (one of the only elements of the story which guides our reading) for the sake of engaging with the theme of this project. Abraham does not know it is a test, and he is not like King Aun: he does not believe or know he will gain anything from the sacrifice outside of obedience.

Let us take a Kierkegaardian view, without making the final jump: The same force which gives the son to the father, and clarifies the importance of the son, orders the son killed. As I claimed before, Abraham values these two things equally, since they both come from Yahweh. As a story of son sacrifice without the selfish reward that King Aun receives and "without receiving anything at all," the aqedah is a passive, judgement-free account of a father who kills his son. "As to the interpretation of Abraham's sacrifice, the happy ending of the story (namely that Isaac is not killed) is completely irrelevant" (Pesthy-Simon 20). It is an essential depiction of the mechanics of filicide. It makes the reader ask the question that pervades this project: what is it to know, with absolute certainty, that the next generation *must survive,* and to know with the same absolute certainty, regardless of the reason, that you are *going to kill it*.

The reader, and possibly Abraham himself, has to face the ethical trouble King Aun faces: What is it for a person to consume (to use a Freudian formulation) the next generation, to absorb their promise for your gain? Viewed through this simple question, it is no different to sit on a throne and spill your son's blood to Odin than it is to climb a mountain and set your son on a pyre, or than it is to stand in a nicely-furnished room in Washington and send countless sons to Afghanistan. They have different reasons, but they are all performing the same act.

Beowulf and the Ticking Clock

While the stories of King Aun and King Vortigern show how maiming the next generation is associated with prolonging one's life, the aqedah showed the tension inherent in all generational conflict and sacrifice. *Beowulf* explores that tension specifically in the context of the aging king narrative, and shows how the utter necessity of the next generation as "that part of [the king] which would live on after his death" (Janowitz 20).

The third section of the poem is principally about decay and the property of things to "fade and fall away" (Bloom 69). The Geatland of ages past is falling apart, its royal line faltering due to "an accidental killing, a failed raid, and unsettled feud," which leaves Beowulf on the throne (Biggs 56). A reluctant ruler, Beowulf is offered the throne after Hygelac dies:

"One of his cruellest
hand-to-hand encounters had happened
when Hygelac, king of the Geats, was killed
in Friesland: the people's friend and lord,
Hrethel's son, slaked a sword blade's
thirst for blood. But Beowulf's prodigious
gifts as a swimmer guaranteed his safety:
he arrived at the shore, shouldering thirty
battle-dresses, the booty he had won" (Heaney 2355-2362).

As the poem describes, Beowulf swims away from the disastrous attack with a horde of treasure. It is important to ask how culpable the text means to imply Beowulf is for Geatland's ills, and it

is potentially damning that he swims away from the Frisian raid (Biggs 57n13). Beowulf, being fictional, naturally cannot have been responsible for the real nonfictional Geatish decay and there is some indication the poet intended their audience to know and explore this dilemma (Biggs 56-57, n10). His dubious responsibility for the decay of Geatland is important to some of the themes of the third section, namely why Beowulf has to die, which I will explore. Regardless, Beowulf declines the offer to rule in favor of counselling Heardred, Hygelac's son:

> "There Hygd offered him throne and authority
> as lord of the ring-hoard: with Hygelac dead,
> she had no belief in her son's ability
> to defend their homeland against foreign invaders.
> Yet there was no way the weakened nation
> could get Beowulf to give in and agree
> to be elevated over Heardred as his lord
> or to undertake the office of kingship.
> But he did provide support for the prince,
> honoured and minded him until he matured
> as the ruler of Geatland" (Heaney 2369-2378)

Beowulf's firm refusal of the throne despite urging from Hygd and "the weakened nation" as a whole, indicates "the importance of true kingship and orderly succession," a theme present in the poem from the first image, the funeral of Scyld Scefing (Hill 44-45, Biggs 58, Heaney 26-52). This theme of succession comes to a head with the death of Hygelac, the death of this son Heardred, and finally the death of Beowulf, who himself has no heirs. For now, a spat with "the sea-kings in Sweden … marked the end / for Hygelac's son" and Beowulf is forced to take the

throne (Heaney 2384-2390). The poet has him end the feud and continue to defend the kingdom, “surviv[ing] every extreme, excelling himself in daring and in danger” (2396-2400), although in Wiglaf’s speech at the end of the poem he implies the threat still lingers, as it did in the nonfictional Geatland (Biggs 71). The son of Ecgetheow’s ascent to the throne might be the poet adding a fictional last link to the chain of succession in order to explore the decay of Geatland (Biggs 57, n11). This decay makes itself manifest in the dragon, who awakes and begins to prowl when a thief steals a single cup from the horde (Heaney 2211-2241). In an article published in *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen,* Paul Beekman Taylor argues that the theft itself isn’t a terrible thing:

> “the theft of the cup is the means by which something wrong in Geatland is brought to light, and it precipitates a cleansing process that culminates with the exchange of the hero’s life for the rehabilitation of a treasure for the common good … what the Geats do not seem to know, is that the treasure that Beowulf buys with his life had lain cursed in the ground for some three hundred years (2278-80a) … the Dragon’s age is a measure of a growing sore in the Geatish moral landscape” (Taylor 222-223).

Taylor has a developed idea of how and where this “growing sore” originated, but what matters for the purposes of this project is that the king throws himself at it to heal his kingdom. As the story goes, Beowulf confronts the dragon with “eleven comrades,” with the addition of the thief who stole the cup (Heaney 2401-2407). But when they face the dragon, the “hand-picked troop” flees, leaving only Beowulf and “Wiglaf, a son of Weohstan’s” (Heaney 2596-2602). They battle the dragon together but Beowulf is mortally wounded. When the dragon is dead and the treasure horde revealed, the king gives Wiglaf his “collar of gold,” a symbol of kingship, and tells Wiglaf to “look after [the people’s] needs” (2794-2812).

The image is clear: Beowulf, poisoned and laying atop a horde of gold, gives kingship to the one warrior who was not a coward. He picks the one who he believes is the best choice to lead the people into greater prosperity, and dies glad that he has left his people treasure, but lamenting that "Fate … swept my whole high-born clan to their final doom" (2794-2818). In archetypal terms: the king sacrifices himself for the good of his people, and, lacking an heir, hand-picks his successor. This is certifiably *not* King Aun, and it is useful to contrast the two. Beowulf is a hero and has a hero's death. Imagine if, instead of bequeathing the gold collar to Wiglaf, and commanding the treasure horde be taken for the people, Beowulf stood up, murdered his comrade, and destroyed the gold. This is the near-unthinkable choice that King Aun makes, and the horrifying position that Abraham and Isaac are in. Using this counterfactual, we can see how Beowulf does not sacrifice the next generation for his own gain, and instead chooses to leave the wealth and a ruler behind.

To illustrate how *Beowulf* describes how a king should die for the sake of the future, we might easily imagine a different poem in which Wiglaf is a character from the beginning, who grows from cowardness into confidence and is finally rewarded as he stands by the king in a cathartic display of valor! The scene is decidedly not about Wiglaf, it is about the next generation, and who is best to lead it. *Beowulf* is about the proper rise of a king, and his proper death. The third section of the poem is forward-looking, and insistent on the vitality of the next generation.

The score of gold that Beowulf quests for is a legacy similar to an heir, and is indicative of his character as a good king: "This treasure is particular in being a token and force of death rather than a good of life. Treasures ritually buried … are consigned to reside in place for the perpetual well-being of the people for whom they are left as a legacy" (Taylor 229). In this way,

seizing the dragon's horde is an attempt to turn a selfish ruler's decision to keep wealth and power from the next generation (such as in the story of King Aun) into a gift for that generation: "The treasure is cursed ... because the last possessor of it would keep it from its intended use in the occupations of men ... Apparently distraught because he cannot consign it directly to surviving kin or clan, he returns it to the earth" (Taylor 230). Hoarding the treasure and keeping it from acting "for the perpetual well-being of the people," is like sacrificing a son. Taylor's hypothetical clan-leader who did not pass along the gold performs, in a less direct way, a violence against the next generation. Taylor goes on to explain that this is one of the reasons, in addition to the burning of the country, why Beowulf goes after the dragon. "It is an action against waste good," a good king simply can't let something that could help his people stay buried (Taylor 230). This is entirely in-line with the popular image of a dragon: hoarding piles of gold is wrong. However, Beowulf's dying words in Old English support a more complicated notion:

> "The clue to his reading of his quest for treasure … is manifest in the verb *gestrynan* he uses to designate 'win.' Literally, the verb means 'to make life.' Its noun is *gestreon,* 'treasure, something begotten, a blood *strain,'* and so the verb would seem particularly apt in accord with *frætwe* — riches — it's direct object. Taking these words at their face value as functional in this context, Beowulf is consoling himself with the notion that a treasure won is a benefit to a people comparable to, if not equal to, a son" (Taylor 230).

The text makes the comparison for us: Beowulf compares the "good" that wealth brings to his people to a rightful heir. If he cannot give them a son to lead them into the future, he will give them another form of life. As for immortality, "the treasure is, in effect, a *laf,* a life left behind him at his death." Wiglaf himself is a product of this life: Taylor claims that by hunting treasure

with Beowulf, the Old English *gestrynon* "fulfills its etymological potential in qualifying not only treasure, but a 'son" (237).

An argument against this point is that the gold isn't circulated for the good of the people, it is simply buried again. A purer example of a king sacrificing himself for the generational good of the people might have the gold actually reinvested among those ruled. I refute this argument only by noting that, in addition to being a valued cultural practice, the second burial is part of a complicated linguistic motif in the text: the words the poet uses indicate that the treasure no longer has a sickness attached to it. Put simply, when Geatland was made aware of the "waste good" of the horde, the country started burning. That will not happen again. Taylor's article focuses on the Old English vocabulary that makes this clear (230-237).

Beowulf's third act shows an aging king giving up the strength and fame of his body in order to right a wrong of the past and provide wealth and leadership to the next generation. Despite his dubious culpability, Beowulf "holds himself guilty of a complicity in spreading the evil infection threatening his kingdom," and seemingly attempts to redeem himself before his time runs out (Taylor 235). It is in this guilt that we find a "primordial" mechanic of kingship: The divine king holds both blame and absolution inside his body, and gives himself to "malefic magic" to purify it (Taylor 235). In *Totem and Taboo,* Freud describes kings and fathers being in part made of the prohibitions and allowances that come with their station, something he calls the father's "perfection of power" (Freud 246). He describes a practice observed by a tribe of Nuba people in East Africa, in which

> "they must die if they enter the house of the priest-king, but … they escape this danger if, on entering, they bare the left shoulder and induce the king to touch it with his hand. Thus we have the remarkable case of the king's touch becoming the healing and

> protective measure against the very dangers that arise from contact with the king" (Freud 71).

In the margin beside this passage a previous owner of my copy has written "inoculation," and it is a good observation. Kings are at once the savior and annihilator of their people. Their "two bodies," one of institutional power, and one of mortal, unpredictable will, makes them a potent taboo under Freud's definition: "sacred, consecrated: but on the other hand it means, uncanny, dangerous, forbidden, unclean" (Kantorowicz 7-9, Freud 30). I submit that Beowulf uses the "poison," of his kingship seen in that Nuba ritual as a vaccine, which purifies the treasure for future use, turning it into wealth and life, a *gestreon*, for the next generation. Taylor argues that Beowulf *knows* that this is what he is doing:

> "As king, Beowulf realizes that it is his fight alone, for the sacral function of kingship is to assure the prosperity of his people with his body. Furthermore, the king as ring-giver is the appropriate one to restore the currency of a national treasure. It is not his retainers' fight; their blood will not refurbish the treasure, though the shedding of blood in Beowulf's service would testify to the health of the bonds between lord and thane in Geatland. Beowulf seems to know that he will and *must* die. His death is necessary to reduce the larger debt incurred by the cursed treasure, manifest in the unsettled accounts between Geats and Swedes, and between Geats and Hugas, or Frankish Frisians" (Taylor 235).

Beowulf finalizes and confirms the healing power of his strength by giving his life for the treasure, and passing the golden torque to Wiglaf. The whole scene of his death, its language and mechanisms, serve to show the right and moral way for a king to pass the torch: he takes

ownership of the country's ills regardless of if they are his fault, finds new power and wealth for the future, and in dying moments he chooses the best person of the next generation to lead.

This interpretation is not without its complications. The poem ends on a dour note, with the decay of the Geatish line continuing: "You are the last of us," Beowulf tells Wiglaf. "The only one left of the Waegmundings," and in Wiglaf's speech to the retainers he says "So it is goodbye now to all you know and love … Every one of you with freeholds of land, our whole nation, will be dispossessed" (2813-2814, 2884-2888). Frederick M. Biggs argues that Wiglaf is not even the intended recipient of the kingship-bestowing torque:

> "In giving Wiglaf these gifts that included war-gear, Beowulf appears to be designating him as his successor. The significance of this gesture, however, must be considered in the light of Beowulf's earlier speech … in which he expresses his desire to leave his war-gear to his son (2729-2732a). By not turning to Wiglaf, who is present, at this point, Beowulf raises the possibility that he does not consider him a potential successor" (Biggs 72-73)

Biggs goes on to argue, however, that "in excluding Wiglaf from the throne because he is not Beowulf's son, the poet … is examining an idea in an extreme form to see more clearly its strengths and weaknesses" (74), ultimately concluding that if Wiglaf really were excluded, it would mean that "if a king does not have a son his people risk destruction" (75). I cite this argument extensively to show that in both the broad strokes and particulars, *Beowulf* demonstrates how vital the next generation is, and how keenly a king can feel the decay of his land and loss of the future. The lack of an heir cannot just be an issue at Beowulf's death, but must have been on his mind for the entirety of his fifty-year reign, something Biggs claims is shown in the mourning woman at Beowulf's funeral (70). The dragon's poison only accelerates

the ticking clock of age, and forces the king to come to terms with what he has left the next generation, and what he can do to help them before he is gone.

King Arthur: The Sword's Son and the Wrong Child

There is a scene similar to the one at the end of *Beowulf*, concerning another "good cyning," but who deliberately refuses to leave a piece of treasure to the immediate next generation, opting instead to consign it to a hypothetical future generation. At the end of the Arthurian tale. Arthur, dying from mortal wounds inflicted while vanquishing his son Mordred, bids that his sword Excalibur should be returned to the lady of the lake. This task falls to Girflet in the Vulgate Cycle (our focus being the last tale, *La Mort Artu*) and Bedivere in the English tradition after Sir Thomas Malory wrote *Le Morte d'Arthur* (Lacy 394n10). Nevertheless, Bedivere and Girflet refuse to cast off the magic sword twice, and the Vulgate Cycle gives his reasoning as

> "it seemed to him so good and so beautiful that he thought it would be a great pity to throw it into the lake as the king had commanded, for thus it would be lost,"

but the dying Arthur asks the knight what happened when he surrendered the sword, and he is not fooled by his knight's report, saying "the sword won't be lost without some marvelous occurrence" (Lacy 395). Knowing he can't deceive Arthur any longer, Girflet laments "Good and beautiful sword. It's such a pity you cannot be possessed by some valiant man," and tosses the sword in, where it is caught and drawn under by the hand of the lady of the lake.

Like in *Beowulf,* this is a scene where a dying king orders something to be done regarding his treasure. While Beowulf says he is thankful to "leave my people / so well endowed on the day I die" King Arthur explicitly has Excalibur removed from the world, and yet the text does not seem to consider this immoral. At first blush this may seem to be a break in the pattern of the texts I have analyzed so far, but the reality is more complicated.

In Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, Arthur calls Excalibur "my pride," that he "took [from the lake], and worn it, like a king" (Denny 149, line 201). If Excalibur does not bestow kingship, as the sword in the stone did for Arthur, it is at the very least, a gift from God and the land given to a king. Continuing in *Idylls of the King,* Arthur says "wheresoever I am sung or told / In aftertime, this also shall be known," referring to the legend of the sword (Denny 149, lines 202-203). Like Beowulf's torque, Excalibur is the artifact of a king, and having it is an honor that is comparable to kingship. The blade is suffused with legend.

In the Vulgate Cycle Arthur wants Excalibur returned to the lady of the lake so that nobody unworthy can wield it. He does not mean Mordred, who by this point is dead, but he still says "I want it to disappear from this kingdom, so that it won't fall into evil hands" (Lacy 395). He may mean Mordred's sons, who are still pillaging the land, but this makes it explicit: there are "evil hands" in every generation, but specifically wants his legendary treasure, the symbol of his power, to not go to the next generation.

This sentiment from Arthur is absent from Tennyson's version, but he includes something close to it. When Bedivere stands at the lake's edge the second time, he "cries aloud" that Excalibur could be kept as proof of Arthur's deeds:

> "What record, or what relic of my lord
>
> Should be to aftertime, but empty breath
>
> And rumors of a doubt? But were this kept,
>
> Stored in some treasure-house of mighty kings,
>
> Some one might show it at a joust of arms,
>
> Saying, 'King Arthur's sword, Excalibur,
>
> Wrought by the lonely maiden of the Lake.

Nine years she wrought it, sitting in the deeps

Upon the hidden bases of the hills.'

So might some old man speak in the aftertime

To all the people, winning reverence.

But now much honour and much fame were lost" (Denny 151-152, lines 266-277).

Bedivere wants to believe that he is refusing to return the sword because to lose it would be to lose Arthur's story: he begins by saying that without the sword the Arthurian legend would be "but empty breath / And rumors of a doubt" (lines 266-268). However, the images he invokes betrays his true reason. He imagines Excalibur being the treasure of a "mighty king," who he later revises to be "some old man" bringing the sword out at a joust to "win reverence." He does not imagine it in the hands of a legendary king uniting a broken kingdom, or maintaining peace; he imagines it in the hands of "someone," some guy, some nobody, who brags about it.

I write harshly of Bedivere's words here, but so does the poem: the narrator says "so spake he, clouded with his own conceit," and when he returns and is unable to report the sighting of the lady of the lake, the dying Arthur calls him "miserable and unkind, untrue / Unknightly, traitor-hearted!" (Denny 152 lines 278, 286-288). He says "thou wouldst betray me for the precious hilt / Either from lust of gold, or like a girl / Valuing the giddy pleasure of the eyes" and threatens to "arise and slay thee with my hands" (lines 294-296, 300). Arthur confirms that it is the beauty of the blade, "the giddy pleasure of the eyes," that causes Bedivere's conceit, not illusions of preserving a historical record.

Additionally, in the Vulgate Cycle, Girflet goes so far as to ask Arthur to give the sword *to him*, though the text does not go into so much detail about his motivations. Arthur responds with "you would not use it properly," and at the lake's edge Girflet speaks to the sword, saying

"it's such a pity that you cannot be possessed by some valiant man" (Lacy 395-396). That said, Arthur does seem to think Lancelot is worthy and valiant enough:

> "Where will you find any man who will use you as well as I have, unless you fall into the hands of Lancelot? Oh! Lancelot, most worthy man and best knight in the world, may it please Jesus Christ that you have this sword and that I know you have it! Then my soul would surely be at peace forever" (Lacy 395).

It is curious that Arthur seems to preclude Lancelot from ownership while saying he wants him to have the sword, because Lancelot is *still alive,* and capable of wielding it. Mordred's sons are still roving about and might be the "evil hands," that Arthur fears Excalibur will fall into. We can imagine a different story in which Lancelot inherits the sword and uses it to defeat the sons and finish the tale. Since he does not do this, it seems like Arthur is refusing to pass along the symbol of his power to the next generation. This is more in-line with the saga of King Aun, but the texts paint Arthur as clearly in the right: He is the heroic divine king, and even though he kills his child, writers have gone to great lengths to absolve him of that, and explore its tragedy:

> "In his depiction of Mordred Malory consciously manipulates his sources. In every case of borrowing, Malory chooses to vilify Mordred, shifting the perversion of incest from the father to the son. Malory thus protect Arthur from culpability for incest … In the *Morte Darthur*'s final pages, it is Mordred rather than Arthur who is burdened by unnatural acts" (Cherewatuk 110).

In a similar way, the Vulgate Cycle and *Idylls of the King* characterize the return of Excalibur to the lake not as robbing the next generation of power, but *skipping* the Mordred's corrupted generation.

Arthur dies correcting the problem that his only heir is evil, a problem that is at least partially his fault and informs his decision to return Excalibur to the lake. In her book *Marriage, Adultery and Inheritance in Malory's Morte Darthur* Karen Cherewatuk explains this:

> "Given the public failure of Arthur and Guenevere's marriage – that is, their inability to produce an heir and to ensure orderly succession – we might consider this simple question: why does Mordred have to usurp the throne; why can't he simply inherit it? The answer involves unmentionable private relations: not only was Mordred born out of wedlock, he was incestuously conceived" (109)

Cherewatuk is quick to point out, however, that it is not merely the manner of his birth that makes Malory's Mordred what he is. Instead, the blame is often placed on Arthur. In the stories of Geoffery of Monmoth, Robert Wace, and Layamon, Mordred isn't an incestuous bastard but a nephew, and in *Chronica Gentis Scotorum,* John of Fordun alters Monmoth's telling by making Mordred the rightful heir to the throne (Cherewatuk 117, 117n24). In the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* King Arthur even appoints Mordred to be his heir. While he is away battling Romans, Mordred steals the throne, directly implicating Arthur in this corruption of the next generation (Cherewatuk 118). This last example is similar to what happens in the stanzaic *Mort Arthur*, yet another text wherein Arthur entrusts rule to Mordred "at the beginning of his and Gawain's campaign in France" (119). Cherewatuk notes that the author's

> "Rapid narration of detail and matter-of-fact tone present Arthur as admirable rather than foolish for trusting Mordred. The effect differs in the [Vulgate] *Mort Artu* ... [where Arthur] has his subjects swear an oath of fealty to anything Mordred commands" (Cherewatuk 119).

Cherewatuk goes on to say that "Arthur is less obviously foolish in the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* than in the *Mort Artu,* but he is also less decisive than in Malory. In the stanzaic *Morte,* the knights, not the king, decide that Mordred should be 'steward" (Cherewatuk 119).

This is all to say that many authors of the Arthurian tales manipulate the circumstances of Mordred's antagonism to fit their own story, often with at least partial blame laid at the feet of Arthur himself. Mordred embodies the problem of direct succession by blood; If the king cannot be trusted to know who should lead the next generation it is understandable that he lets fate decide who should be the heir to his magic sword. The pattern as a whole reveals that Arthur no longer wishes to decide who is worthy to lead, either because he feels incapable or unwilling.

I propose that in addition to safeguarding the sword from Mordred's sons, Arthur is also preventing Bedivere's image of the sword's fate in Tennyson's version: it should not be left to gather dust or be bragged about to "win reverence." Arthur's command to return the sword implies that it should be *waiting* with the lady of the lake for someone worthy, who needs it. It is not up to Arthur to decide who gets the sword, it is up to God, the land, and the lady of the lake. Arthur's command to return it is, like Beowulf's campaign against the dragon, "an action against waste good" (Taylor 230). Like how the dragon's hoard goes from one pile to another and yet is cleansed and made good again, Excalibur's future goes from lying in "some treasure-house of mighty kings," to resting in the lake, where it might rise again to be used by someone worthy.

The sword is not the crown; if Lancelot were given Excalibur, he would not be king. But the knight who wields Excalibur is succeeding Arthur in legend, if not in kingship. Arthur has no sons left, instead of lamenting his lack of an heir, he laments that there is no good successor to the sword. In *Idylls of the King,* Tennyson has Arthur say "My house hath been my doom," "I perish by this people which I made,— / Tho' Merlin sware that I should come again / To rule

once more” (Denny 148, 149, lines 154, 190-192). King Arthur is immortal in that he is legendary, but he says he will come again, and by returning the sword he implies the same thing: another Arthur may pluck it from the lake, in another time. By sacrificing the sword, he signals that the world he inhabits is moving out of legend, and into something else, which we might call history. In the 1987 movie *Excalibur,* before going out to battle Mordred, Arthur finds Guenevere and asks her to forgive him, saying:

> “I was not born to live a man’s life, but to be the stuff of future memory. The fellowship was a brief beginning, a fair time that cannot be forgotten. And because it will not be forgotten, that fair time may come again. Now once more, I must ride with my knights to defend what was, and the dream of what could be” (Boorman, 1981)

This transition from legend to history is not the nostalgic decay present at the end of Beowulf with the near-extinction of the Waegmundings. At Beowulf’s death, he is sad that he has left his people leaderless, but Arthur has willingly put aside the idea of succession. We might understand this, since he inadvertently created an evil heir, and like Beowulf, Arthur dies in order to purify the land. This is how Arthur escapes the cruel characterization of King Aun: the corruption in the land is his own, which he accepts and dies for; returning Excalibur is not implied to be robbing the next generation, but setting the world right.

To close, I would like to write about two additional caveats to the popular imagining of King Arthur. The first is his heirless condition: succession is the driving force of the Arthurian myth. Mordred is worth fighting against because he is evil, yes, but he is a grave threat because the kingdom will pass to him on Arthur’s death since he and Guinevere do not have any children (Tichelaar 40). Despite Arthur's lack of an heir, modern writers have attempted to “[create] children for Arthur who have no basis in tradition” while the older Welsh stories often include

children who are unimportant, die before Arthur, or who are disinherited (Tichelaar 40). According to Tyler Tichelaar in an article for *Arthuriana,*

> "Other novelists have created significant roles for Arthur's children, some of whom even outlive Arthur. Such creations reflect an effort to stretch the legend beyond its tragic conclusion … with the creation of new children for Arthur, novelists are working against neat genealogical closure; instead, such novels open up the possibility that Arthur's death need not be so grim. If he has children other than Mordred, he and his ideals may live on in his successor to Britain's throne" (Tichelaar 40)

Such children include Ursulet in Vera Chapman's *King Arthur's Daughter,* Bran in Susan Cooper's *The Grey King* and the other books in the same series, Elizabeth C. Wein's *The Winter Prince,* and many others (Tichelaar 44-48). Many of these books follow up on the Arthurian legends by having these children defend Britain as their father did, with some even battling Mordred and Morgana's descendents themselves.

Grafting heirs onto Arthur's childless end complicates his decision at the end of the Vulgate Cycle and *Idylls of the King* to return Excalibur to the lake. An example of this complication is in *King Arthur's Daughter* where Ursulet meets the sleeping King Arthur, and he tells her that her responsibility is to "carry on the line of those who look for my returning," and "to be the mother of those that believe in me, Thousands of them— millions of them," and finally to pass on "the fire that is Britain. The spark in the flint, the light in the crystal, the sword in the stone. Yours, and your children's" (Tichelaar 45, Chapman 95). The poetic language here is exactly the legendary status that Excalibur confirms and yet in *King's Arthur's Daughter* (and many of the other books named) this legendary status is not located in the sword, nor the bearer

of the sword as the endings of the Vulgate Cycle and *Idylls of the King* imply, but in the genetic line of Arthur and its members, however distant they become.

In terms of the themes of this project, giving Arthur more children and implying that his legend is a blood right and not an aspect of the sword is a complicated literary move. I have established that the sacrifice of the king's child or the sacrifice of a young person by an aging king is generally depicted as a violence towards the next generation whose survival is understood as necessary. Filicide by a king is wrong not only because it is murder, but because it robbing the next generation of their potential power via a ruler. Arthur escapes this characterization by dividing his power from his blood and investing it in the sword, which he entrusts to some future hero. Because of this the Arthur texts almost read as an indictment of the idea of succession, with Mordred at its core. Especially in the Vulgate Cycle and *Idylls of the King*, Arthur cares more about who's going to get the sword than the kingdom.

In fact, Arthur's deathbed decision may be seen as a temporary dissolution of the monarchy. In the Vulgate Cycle, Lancelot kills Mordred's sons and the story ends with no new king named. *The History of the Kings of Britain* adds a Briton named Constantine who takes up the crown after Arthur is wounded (but not killed) (Giles 230). In both cases the indictment of direct monarchical succession stands; in both cases the problem of Mordred shows that situations arise in which the King cannot or should not decide who his successor is. To then say that it is truly Arthur's blood that makes one legendary is to contradict the king on his deathbed.

The second characteristic in the popular imagination I want to write about is Arthur's immortality. The earliest mention of the historical Arthur is a combination of the writers Gildas and Nennius, with the former mentioning a hero in the battle of Badon Hill in *Concerning the Destruction and Conquest of Britain,* and the latter nearly four-hundred years later giving the

hero the name “Arthur” (Peyton 55). By the twelfth century the myth of the still-living Arthur and his “messianic return” was well and widespread among the Bretons, (55-56). In Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain* the author suggests “His end shall be doubtful,” not much later Henry of Huntington, reading Geoffrey of Monmouth, comments “Britons deny his death, and regularly expect his coming,” and the aforementioned Wace, writing the *Story of Britain,* “is the first literary statement that after the healing of Arthur’s wounds in Avalon, he would return and live again. Wace wrote that, just as Merlin said, men would always doubt whether Arthur was alive or dead” about twenty years later (Peyton 56, 56n7, 56n10, 56n12). Similar claims exist in Malory’s *Le Morte d'Arthur*, and while the king’s burial is plenty strange, no claims of immortality are made in the Vulgate Cycle (Peyton 58, 57).

Needless to say, tales of Arthur’s immortality are as old as tales of his exploits, and while the examples don’t stop there, it is enough to establish some form of immortality of the “legendary” variety described at the beginning of this paper. I highly recommend Henry H. Peyton III’s article “The Myth of King Arthur’s Immortality,” heavily cited above, for more information.

Thus we have an legendary immortal king whose stories are rife with problems of succession, who on his deathbed decides he can no longer pick who holds the throne, and/or the power of legend innate in Excalibur. To smooth over the differences between these two things, we may say that after experiencing first-hand the issues that direct succession produces, Arthur resolves he will no longer decide who holds *power* as he once did. He bucks the tradition of succession, and leaves fate to decide who will rule the next generation, rather than impose someone on them (whether it be Lancelot, Bedivere/Girflet, Mordred, etc) who may be the wrong choice.

***King Lear:* The Divine Scapegoat and the Next Generation**

If the saga "Of King Ane's Death," in the *Heimskringla* was the perfect example of the themes at issue in this project, then Shakespeare's *King Lear* is a full extrapolation of those themes. The play has attitudes on all the conclusions I have come to so far, and an examination of those attitudes will help clarify and consolidate my research.

To begin simply, *King Lear* is the tale of an aging king with no sons who attempts to split his kingdom so he can cruise towards death with no responsibilities: "tis our fast intent / To shake all cares and business from our age, / Conferring them on younger strengths while we / Unburthen'd crawl toward death" (I. i. 39-42). These lines in the first scene lay out Lear's motivation and hint at the play's understanding of generational conflict: he cites his "age," as a reason to pass on power to "younger strengths," and says he is going to die soon.

Lear's action is a deathbed bequeathment similar to those I have explored already, but the key difference is that Lear is not dying yet. He has a sense that keeping the power of kingship after age has made him unwilling or unable to wield it well is immoral, and he does not want to hold on to it, though his reasons are selfish. However, senility has already gripped Lear, and the way he goes about remedying the situation causes an international war and the deaths of all of his children. Like King Arthur, Lear's lack of a true heir (and his own foolishness) corrupts the land.

An argument could be made that the tragic events of *King Lear* occur because the king lives longer than he should. In *The Golden Bough,* Frazer describes a series of cultural practices in which

> “the divine king or priest is suffered by his people to retain office until some outward defect, some visible symptom of failing health or advancing age, warns them that he is no longer equal to the discharge of his divine duties; but not until such symptoms have made their appearance is he put to death” (Frazer 274).

This “killing of the divine king” is informed by the later sections which seek place the Christ myth in a shared history of religion and anthropology:

> “[the dying god] was killed not originally to take away sin, but to save the divine life from the degeneracy of old age; but since he had to be killed at any rate … they might as well seize the opportunity to lay upon him the burden of their sufferings and sins, in order that he might bear it away with him to the unknown world beyond the grave” (Frazer 576-577)

This should remind you of the section on *Beowulf,* where I sought to support Paul Beekman Taylor’s claim that when Geatish king dies he uses the “sacral function of kingship is to assure the prosperity of his people with his body” by using his “blood [to] refurbish the treasure” (Taylor 235). As I demonstrated, many of the Arthurian texts also imply Arthur sets the land to right at his death. If the *Beowulf* poet’s claim as described by Taylor is true, and a king’s final and most pressing obligation is to ensure the success of the next generation, and accept responsibility for the country’s ills regardless of his culpability, then it would be difficult to find an example of a ruler who rebukes that obligation more than the ruinous Lear.

To give some on-the-nose evidence of this, the dragon in *Beowulf* is the tyrannical symbol of the “growing sore in the Geatish moral landscape” (Taylor 223). While in the process of corrupting his kingdom and setting up the tragedy to come, King Lear says “Come not between the dragon and his wrath” to Kent, the only courtier brave enough to convince Lear his

actions are unjust (I.i.136). While Lear's crime is a complicated mix of giving up his power but not his title and poor parenting, calling himself a dragon is a clear red flag, showing the audience that he is creating a "sore in the … moral landscape" (Taylor 223).

Lear's goal in giving up his power is not to remedy his old age, but to "unburthen" himself and relax before his death. The implication is that he is "burthen'd" (burdened) by his responsibilities as king, and so shunts them off, only keeping "The name, and all th' additions to a King" (I. i. 142). He becomes a king without a kingdom, and as such is unable to purify the land with his death. When Cordelia displeases Lear in the process of splitting his kingdom amongst his daughters, he disclaims her, and swears a dramatic oath by "the sacred radiance of the sun, / The mysteries of Hecate and the night; / By all the operation of the orbs" (I. i. 113-115, 117). Kent, seeing the injustice, begs Lear to reconsider, to which Lear says "thou hast sought to make us break our vow / Which we durst never yet-" (I. i. 180-181). The irony is that Lear has just broken two vows. He breaks the implicit vow of succession, robbing his child of a share of his power, and, perhaps more importantly, he has abandoned his feudal and sacral responsibilities as king.

To support this, we may look at the "house of rule" metaphor from earlier in this project. Lear empties his house of rule, removing all military, monetary, informational, and political support of his kingship and giving them to his daughters as dowries and keeping only the title of king and a hundred knights. He makes a grand ritual of the investiture, saying

"I do invest you jointly in my power,

Preeminence, and all the large effects

That troop with majesty. Ourself, by monthly course,

With reservation of an hundred knights,

By you to be sustain'd, shall our abode

Make with you by due turns. Only we still retain

The name, and all th' additions to a king. The sway,

Revenue, execution of the rest,

Beloved sons, be yours; which to confirm,

This coronet part betwixt you" (I.i.135-144).

The breaking of the coronet in the last line is a potent image, and a portent of the tragedy to come. By splitting up his kingdom and unburdening himself of the responsibilities of king, he robs his people of the scapegoat figure that partially comprises the king, and further divides the "two bodies" of monarchy. Lear destroys what Ernst Kantorowicz identifies as the "immortal part of kingship," the "immortal body politic" and leaves only his "material and mortal body natural" (Kantorowicz 13, 20-21), which of course cannot solve any of the ruin that Lear caused.

Kantorowicz's *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* is a necessary bedrock for this project, but I dare not invoke it too liberally as it is a primarily an examination of English law, and a side effect of Lear's decisions in this first scene is the dissolution of the monarchy for the whole of the play, something which limits the "two bodies" concept. I report that I cannot dexterously wield Kantorowicz's arguments in regards to *King Lear*. That said, Kantorowicz writes "it would have been very strange if Shakespeare, who mastered the lingo of almost every human trade, had been ignorant of the constitutional and judicial talk which went around him and which the jurists of his days applied so lavishly in court" and says "The legal concept of the King's Two Bodies cannot, for other reasons, be seperated from Shakespeare … *The Tragedy of King Richard II* is the tragedy of the King's Two Bodies" (Kantorowicz 25, 26). With this in mind, I should hope we can agree that Lear's

emptying of his house of rule is comparable to dividing the Two Bodies, or doing away with the concept altogether.

Lear is a king who abandons his responsibility to shepherd the next generation, ensure an heir, and to die as king so that the troubles of the kingdom can be laid at his feet. It should be no surprise that Lear's family and country come to ruin after such a disastrous dereliction of duty, but Lear does seem to learn from this mistake eventually. In fact, in an article for *Literature and Theology,* Nathan Lefler argues that Lear eventually fulfills his "divine king as scapegoat" responsibility that both Frazer and Taylor describe. The article, titled "The Tragedy of King Lear: Redeeming Christ," crafts a fairly persuasive argument that Lear and Cordelia both serve as Christ figures, with Lear "persistently, if sometimes parodically," gaining Christ-like attributes as the play goes on (Lefler 218). It serves as a tidy story, and fulfills Frazer's ideas, that the chaos and tragedy of the play ceases when Lear finally dies, exhausted by age and turmoil.

Lear is mad, senile, and growing worse every moment. He knows he should not be king, but he is so far gone that even his attempts to acknowledge that are flawed. But we may not need to look to comparative religion or English legal fiction to understand Lear's crimes. The sacral function of kingship and the killing of the divine king are present in *King Lear,* but much more prominent is this simple theme: what do we owe our elders, and do we owe our youngers?

I mentioned that Lear has broken a vow by disinheriting Cordelia. The injustice of this moment is the inciting incident of the play, but the text focuses less on Cordelia being robbed of a right and more on Lear's unconscionable demands and poor parenting. In other words, Lear's crime against Cordelia is not that he has upset the tradition of succession, but that he has unjustly robbed a dutiful, loving, honest daughter of his love and generosity. This is evidenced by the premise of the scene; Lear asks his three daughters how much they love him. Regan and Goneril

try to one-up each other with rhetoric, tripping over themselves to verbalize their love, which is later shown to be false. Goneril says “I love you more than words can wield the matter; / Dearer than eyesight, space, and liberty; / Beyond what can be valued,” and Regan says Goneril “comes to short, that I profess / Myself an enemy to all other joys … I am alone felicitate / in your dear Highness’ love” (I.i.55-57, 73-75). But poor Cordelia will not proselytize as her sisters do, saying “my love’s / more richer than my tongue” and only when pressed does she say that she loves Lear only as much as she should be expected to (I.i.79-80, 98-107). This disparity is why he disinherits her.

To say that Lear’s passing of his power is unorthodox is an understatement. I have already mentioned that he is dismantling the monarchy; he literally has the crown broken and divided between his daughters’ husbands. That said, *King Lear* is much more about generational conflict and family dynamics than it is succession or primogeniture. Throughout this project I have explored what an aging ruler, parent, or generation owes their children, but so far I have neglected to explore what a child or younger generation owes their parent or the older. Fortunately, the play contains an almost bullet-pointed list of actions and attitudes from a young person that are shown to shock and anger the aging generation.

Freud’s central argument on taboo in *Totem and Taboo* is likewise his most famous aphorism: “every prohibition must conceal a desire” (118). When thinking about generational conflict in *King Lear,* this is enormously relevant. Edmund is a bastard who plans to steal his half-brother Edgar’s inheritance and “top th’ legitimate” (I.ii.22). In his excellent soliloquy, Edmund questions why Edgar should inherit Glouscester’s wealth, and not him. “Wherefore should I / Stand in the plague of custom, and permit / the curiosity of nations to deprive me … When my dimensions are as well compact / my mind as generous, and my shape as true”

(I.ii.2-8)? His plan is centered around a letter, written by Edmund as though it were from Edgar, which clearly expresses these prohibited desires:

> "This policy and reverence of age makes the world bitter to the best of our times, keeps our fortunes from us till our oldness cannot relish them. I begin to find an idle and fond bondage in the oppression of aged tyranny, who sways, not as it hath power, but as it is suffered" (I.ii.49-57)

Gloucester is incensed by his son's seeming lack of filial piety and since the letter was written for exactly that purpose it provides us an view into what the text puts forth the proper relationship between generations should be.

Edmund (as Edgar) writes that "reverence of age makes the world bitter," so we know that loving one's elders and respecting their wisdom is supposed to make the world sweeter. Edmund writes not only does this reverence make the world bitter, but it "keeps our fortunes from us till our oldness cannot relish them," and this is particularly interesting. I established early on in this project that a king or ruler extending their life is often moralized as robbing the next generation. Edmund takes this a step further, saying that we should seize the wealth and power of those entrenched, older rulers (even those who have not schemed to prolong their life), since they can't really appreciate them, and young people can. This sentence also hints at a cycle: in the first scene, Lear says that he is "burthen'd" and wishes to relax before he dies, but he might only feel that way because the king before him grew old as well, and Lear was no longer young when he became king, and as such was unable to enjoy his wealth and power.

Edmund's letter says "aged tyranny" "sways not as it hath power but as it is suffered" (I.ii.49-57). This is the most violent rhetoric in the letter until the actual threat of murder in the next line. I call it violent rhetoric because it says something radical: not only does the older

generation keep our fortunes from us until we cannot properly enjoy them, not only is this respect of our elders like slavery (“bondage,”), but they *don’t really have power*, they only “sway” things because we tolerate it, and we have the power to take control. This is what the older generation fears in *King Lear*, as proven by Gloucester’s fervent chase for Edgar, egged on by Edmund. In both Lear and Gloucester’s cases, the fear comes to pass. Regan and Goneril are young enough to be unmarried, so once Lear’s once his power is theirs, they revel in it and have no use for the old man. Additionally, Edmund acts accordingly with what he wrote in the letter, manipulating Gloucester into making him his heir, which results in Gloucester being blinded, going mad, and dying.

It’s worth noting just how effective Edmund’s letter is. Once Gloucester is thoroughly convinced that Edgar wrote the letter, he says:

> “O villain, villain! His very opinion in the
> letter. Abhorred villain! Unnatural, detested, brutish
> villain! Worse than brutish!—Go, sirrah, seek
> him. I’ll apprehend him.—Abominable villain!—
> Where is he” (I.ii.79-83)?

Gloucester calls his son a “villain” five times in four lines. This is understandable, since the letter threatens his life: “If our father would sleep till I waked / him, you should enjoy half his revenue forever” (I.ii.55-56). But Gloucester does not deliver this venomous dialogue when he reads the threat, he delivers it when Edmund tells him “I have heard him oft / maintain it to be fit that, sons at perfect age and / fathers declined, the father should be as ward to the / son, and the son manage his revenue” (I.ii.75-78). This is very interesting, because it is basically what Lear aims to do: he recognizes he is too “declined” to effectively be king and tries to make his daughters

and their husbands "manage his revenue" and essentially to act as *his* parents, and he, their ward. As I have covered, the way he tries to accomplish this is beyond destructive, but it frames Gloucester in an interesting light. He is now an old man trying to stop his son from gaining his power; he is elongating his life (by trying to stop his murder) so that the next generation will not prematurely take his wealth and power.

This life-prolonging, wealth-keeping action aligns Gloucester more closely with figures like King Aun but there is no doubt that the manipulated, eventually maimed Gloucester is meant to elicit sympathy from the audience. He is an old man who firmly believes in filial piety, who is shocked to learn what kids these days are like. In response to Kent saying Lear's wits have begun to "unsettle," Gloucester says "Canst thou blame him? / His daughters seek his death," he feels a kinship with Lear over this, but he accuses the wrong son (III.iv.171-172).

Gloucester is only ever characterized as foolish, not evil. It may not be the wisest action to hunt one's son across the country but it is clear the text means to show us that a lack of "reverence of age" in the case of Edmund, Goneril, and Regen makes the world less sweet. Gloucester is a flawed old man who can't see what's right in front of him, until he can't see at all. Finally, he realizes the trick that has been played on him, and is so thankful to see his true son Edgar alive that it kills him.

" But his flawed heart

(Alack, too weak the conflict to support)

'Twixt the two extremes of passion, joy and grief,

Burst smilingly" (V.iii.232-235)

Edmund's frustration at the culture and law of succession is also a frustration at primogeniture. In his speech about his "baseness" he asks why he should "Stand in the plague of

custom, and permit / The curiosity of nations to deprive me / For that I am some twelve or fourteen moonshines / Lag of a brother" (I.ii.2-6). He goes on to talk about why he is branded a bastard, "twelve or fourteen moonshine / Lag" is specifically a phrase about time. Not only is Edmund a bastard he is also the younger son, and Gloucester's wealth and power wouldn't go to him if Gloucester died. That is why his plan has to involve murdering Edgar, not just exiling him.

It can be argued that *King Lear* as a whole is a criticism of the practice of primogeniture and succession. After all, if Lear's daughters were sons instead (to fit the patriarchal rules of succession) Cordelia would have received very little upon Lear's death since she is his youngest child (I.i.50, 171), but it turns out she is the truest one whose love endured the most. However, it is hard to fully support the idea *King Lear* is a whole-hearted criticism and not just an exploration of the practice. In an essay entitled "Kent and Primogeniture in *King Lear*," Ronald Cooley writes:

> "both Cordelia and Edmund can be understood as variations on the "younger son" stereotype set out by Thomas Wilson and Earle … Disowned and disinherited, Cordelia is treated with an exaggerated version of the cruelty younger sons resented, and she responds generously. Elevated to the status of an heir, Edmund is treated with an exaggerated version of the generosity younger sons craved, and he responds with cruelty, betraying his father to Cornwall and Regan. Neither behaves in a way that might inspire a wavering parent, or a wavering culture, to abandon the common-law rule and the customary practice of primogeniture" (339).

I highly recommend Cooley's article for more information about *King Lear*'s attitudes on primogeniture, Kent's namesake, and the relevance of inheritance law in Shakespeare's own life.

To continue with the theme of what we owe other generations, we must look at the main plot of the play and why it occurs. The implication is that King Lear divides his kingdom because, like Beowulf, he has no sons. Similar to how Beowulf chooses a successor to lead the next generation, Lear tries to set up a balance of power between his daughter so “that future strife / May be prevented now” (I.i.47-48). Lear is probably talking about infighting between his daughters, but it is also possible that he sees the lack of a male heir is an opportunity to do something more radical, ensuring that the monarchy ends with him until there is another claimant to the throne at his true death. Perhaps he believes his daughters and their husbands will not war to reunite the kingdom, or that they will at least be peaceful for the rest of the King’s natural life. Of this plan, Cooley writes: “Lear does not appear to be following any customs of royal succession: his plan is to treat the crown as if it were real property, dividing it among his daughters” (Cooley 339). This act has the unintended effect of demoting Goneril from the status of firstborn daughter, which she may not take lightly (339).

The succession crisis that Lear attempts to intercept is not without historical context. In “The King’s Two Genders,” Cynthia Herrup attempts to fill in some gaps left by Ernst Kantorowicz’s *The King’s Two Bodies*:

> “Most important, although Kantorowicz never explored it, gender is, in fact, central to his study. It is no accident that the two-body fiction which he put such weight became prominent in an unprecedented half-century when the most likely heirs to the English throne were all female. The concept’s value came partly from its utility as a response to the challenges of having ‘disabled’—that is, other than adult male— monarchs: first the juvenile Edward VI; then the regnant wedded queen, Mary I; and finally, the regnant, young, and unmarried queen, Elizabeth I” (Herrup 495)

Shakespeare frequently appeals to the the politics of the day in his work, especially in an attempt to appease or deride the monarch (Calhoun, Williams), so if the inclusion of this lack-of-heirs problem is ripped from the headlines, how are we to understand Lear's decision, and what happens to him? It is not simply the tragic tale of what happens when a king has no sons, since Lear's decision is an entirely unorthodox one that lawyers contemporary to the play argued Lear absolutely could not have made since his realm was not "real property"(Axton 31, Shupack 83). Patrilineality is actually the secondary cause of the play's strife: if Goneril could inherit, she would, and Lear could simply pass the crown to her and relax the rest of his days (though I suspect his senility would still trouble his decisions and cause some form of strife).

So, we have a king who gives his power and wealth to his oldest children so that he can relax in old age, but who is shocked to find that they despise him once the act is done. Regan and Goneril do not "suffer" the "sway" of their father, to use Edmund's words. They only suffer the power of the institution, until that institution is theirs. William B. Bache speculates some of the implicit motivations of the Lear family, and the interpersonal reasons why this might happen:

> "As vain king, Lear would have no real interest in his first two children: he would feel the overwhelming need for a male heir. My guess would be that when Cordelia was born, Lear's wife, the queen, died. Or at least, after the birth of Cordelia, Lear accepted the fact that he would have no son, no legitimate male heir. To the older sisters, Lear was king rather than father; to Cordelia, Lear was more father than king. In other words, the jealousy of Goneril and Regan has a sound basis: they naturally detest the favorite child and their now-doting father. Although we cannot applaud their cruelty, we can understand their loveless feeling" (Bache 1-2)

I call this speculation, because it is hard to identify much of Bache's claim in the text. The play mostly seems to say that the older generation (Lear, Gloucester) expect an amount of filial piety, while the younger generation is more concerned with the material conditions produced by succession, patrilineality, and primogeniture. Some of them (Regan, Goneril, and Edmund) resent the conditions and seek to change them, or hold on to the power they gained almost by chance, while others (Cordelia, Edgar) simply try to right the injustices done to them *while caring for the older generation.* All of these characters know quite keenly, however, that the young push the old into their graves, and one cannot truly thrive until the other is gone.

Having thoroughly explored the foul resentment that generational conflict produces, it is no wonder that *King Lear* closes with a scene that is almost the exact opposite from those of Arthur and Beowulf's deathbeds (V.iii.369). Beowulf is saddened, resigned, wishing for an heir to take up the torque and lead the "the last of us" (Heaney 2813-2814). Arthur destroys his heir, and has to force his knights to return Excalibur, the symbol of his rule, to the lake despite those who might claim it (Denny 152 lines 278, 286-288). But at Lear's death, our remaining characters are too burdened with tragedy and too disillusioned with power to want the throne.

Albany, ready to be rid of his part of the power, offers the throne to the mourning Lear: "We will resign / During the life of this old majesty / To him our absolute power" (V.iii.362-364). Wracked with anguish and madness, Lear laments that the chaos at the end of his reign has destroyed his family, and he dies weeping over Cordelia. Albany then urges Kent and Edgar to rule the land jointly, saying "Friends of my soul, you twain / Rule this realm, and the gored state sustain" (V.iii.387-389), but Kent refuses, saying "I have a journey, sir, shortly to go / My master calls me. I must not say no" (V.iii.390-391). it is fairly clear that Kent means he is going to die in short order, whether "my master" refers to God or Lear, to whom he was unendingly loyal. Edgar

neither refuses nor assents, and says "We that are young / Shall never see so much, nor live so long" as the play ends (V.iii.395).

The core of this project is asking how texts moralize the idea of passing the torch to the younger generation, but *King Lear* is so rich and dense that it is difficult to pin down what it is moralizing in any one instance. It is not quite saying that lacking an heir is a bad thing, as *Beowulf* hints, since Lear makes a terrible decision regardless. It is not quite saying that primogeniture is harmful, because Edmund is a liar and a murderer rationalizing his ambition, and Gloucester seems fairly loving to him. It is not quite criticizing the institution of monarchy, since breaking that monarchy is what leads to chaos. It is not quite saying that Lear and the old generation should simply abdicate their power or die, because Lear is turned into a more understanding and loving father by end, and we have to feel for the crimes done to Gloucester. it is not quite saying that the young generation secretly wants to usurp the older, as again, Cordelia and Edgar are paragons of virtue and loyalty. Like any Shakespeare play, *King Lear* seems to say and contain everything at once, so what are we left with?

It is generally accepted that Edgar becomes king, but play barely implies it. The ending of *King Lear* is Albany begging every character left alive to take the crown, but they cannot do it after what they have experienced. Even Beowulf couldn't dream of Wiglaf refusing the torque, and Arthur would never think that nobody wants Excalibur. Even in the most optimistic of interpretations,

> "Edgar's accession to the throne seems only a partial restoration of order … Kent's prescience that he will soon die and the haziness of England's future under Edgar confirm that although Edmund, Regan, and Goneril lie dead they have succeeded in … tearing down the old order they so much despised" (Delany 436).

Lear's deathbed is not only the complete opposite of the two other deathbed scenes I have included in this project because the land is not purified at the King's death. But it is also a denial of generational conflict. Only the young Albany and Edgar will remain for very long, and neither particularly wants what the older generation is meant to give them at its death. What can we do but shrug, and say we understand? The old and young have ruined it all, together, leaving only a "gored state" and broken coronet, and we are unsure of what the future brings (I.i.144, V.iii.389).

Generational Conflict, Climate Grief, and the End of the World

I hope I have not been so heavy-handed that this conclusion seems obvious. It is a struggle not to telegraph the parallels between the archetypes of these texts and the archetypes in our own lives. Here we have a king killing his children to prolong his life, there we have a struggle between an ancient king's castle and the future to come. Here is a wealth-hoarding dragon felled by a warlord searching for someone to lead the young, and there is the legendary Arthur, content to let the generation to come decide their own fate.

What is striking is that while these stories contain similar themes, they all end them in the same manner: the people overthrow the cruel king Aun when he tries to kill an infant; Vortigern relents and lets Merlin live; Abraham does not kill Isaac, and the prophecy of a fertile land and wealth comes to pass for a time; Beowulf finds an heir of a sort, and though the loss lingers, gold has been gained for the children to come; Arthur's knight returns Excalibur, eventually. Even Lear ends with the country united in bloodshed and grief, and while the future is uncertain, some of the young remain to trudge ahead. The tension I identify in the opening of this project between expending young lives to prop up old ones and the necessity of those young lives for future prosperity is resolved in every one of these texts. They all land on the fact that the next generation is necessary, crucial, and needs to be guided and provided for.

But reality tends to be different, and there is cruelty before there is relief. Rhetoric of generational conflict has always been present; whether it is *Time* magazine in 1990 saying Generation X has "the attention span … as short as one zap of a TV dial," or a letter in a a 1925 issue of *Hull Daily Mail* which laments "[the] attitude on the part of young folk … is described as grossly thoughtless, rude, and utterly selfish," or a 1771 issue of *Town and Country* saying "a race of effeminate, self-admiring, emaciated fribbles can never have descended in a direct line

from the heroes of Potiers and Agincourt," or even in 350 B.C. when Artistotle wrote "young men … think they know everything, and are always quite sure about it" (Alvarez 120).

While this kind of generation poking and prodding is an ancient phenomenon, one's generational identity has become particularly relevant right now. In an article titled "Generational Cycles in American Politics" for *Society,* Patrick Fisher examines the data collected by the American National Election Studies from 1956 to 2016 and writes

> "For the second half of the twentieth century there was remarkably modest political disparity between generational cohorts. This lack of an age divide in American politics lead the field of political science to generally focus on other demographic gaps in American politics other than generational differences. Once the Millennial Generation first entered the electorate in the early 2000s, however, there has emerged a considerable generational gap in American politics" (Fisher 22).

He writes that while there is a popular conception that the younger generation is always more liberal and left-leaning than the older, it is generally not true. In fact, the Millennial generation has shown "distinct political leanings that are significantly to the left of older generations," in a disparity unprecedented in the dataset used.

All this in mind, we should not be surprised at the poking and prodding of this left-leaning generation. Or, as Maximillian Alvarez characterizes it: the "incessant, mucky stream of Millennial-baiting propaganda," part of "the endless headlines heralding generation blame and bloodshed from either end of the great divide" (118). This is all recounted in Alvarez's article titled "The People Who Stole the World: The Lure of the Generational Blame Game" for *The Baffler.* In it, Alvarez tries to help his readers understand why younger generations have turned their ire against the Baby Boomers, in much the way that old generations

have always mocked the young. Alvarez describes the typical animosity towards the Baby Boomers by describing them as

> "complacent, narcissistic beneficiaries of the New Deal welfare state - who lavishly benefited from one of the greatest surges in public investment in infrastructure, higher education, and social-welfare spending - would pull up the ladder behind them, leaving for their kids a legacy of punitive government austerity, crumbling infrastructure, a higher-ed system that replaced public funds with endlessly rising tuition rates and student loans, and feckless giveaways to corporations and plutocrats" (Alvarez 122).

The rage is something anyone with a heart can empathize with, age aside. After all, no one person is ever wholly responsible for this many problems, though we may be tempted to lay a large amount of them at certain unnamed presidential feet.

Alvarez identifies something strange in the popular imagination of younger generations, though: "the fault lies not with an elite class of career politicians or a cabal of corporations and conniving capitalists, but an entire generation" (121). Framing the situation we find ourselves in as one of generational conflict is so seductive because it has a grain of truth to it: "to grossly simplify the problem, the challenge is that future, unborn generations will enjoy the benefits of climate policy, whereas the current generation, in particular those reaping substantial returns from a status quo that fails to address climate change, will bear the costs" (Aldy 158). This makes sense as a partial explanation. After all, how could young people see this easy-to-intuit problem and not feel the rage that the citizens of Uppsala feel at King Aun?

While Climate change is not the only reason Millenials have been turning to the left, it is hard to ignore, and it is perhaps the best example of how our modern problems mirror the aging king narratives. As *King Lear* implies, it is not just "the policy and reverence of age" that "makes

the world bitter" but the monarchy, the power of the institution (I.ii.49-57). We cannot forget that it is not just old men who are killing children in these stories; they are kings and gods. Similarly, it is not just that people were lied to or voted for austerity and capriciousness that landed us here, since "old-age pensions, freeway construction, and local air and water quality are distinctly domestic challenges, but climate change is a global problem that will require multilateral coordination" (Aldy 167).

While there is some indication that not all fossil fuel industries will act against against climate policy (natural gas emits less carbon than coal, so natural gas industries may desire some policy to devalue their competitors, etc), there is no doubt that the system of capital in place is what is holding us back, and acting as the kings and gods in these stories: "incumbent firms may actively oppose policy proposals … because, they say, such policies would reduce the return on their capital" (Aldy 160).

This is not a hypothetical. In 2019 it was found that every year "the world's five largest publicly owned oil and gas companies spend approximately $200 million on lobbying designed to control, delay or block binding climate-motivated policy" (McCarthy). These companies do this while climate change causes droughts in more than half of the land area of the U.S, causes the earth to lose 1-2% of its insects every year, and is projected to make 19% of the planet unlivable by 2070. ("Climate Change Indicators," "Scientists Warn," Xu.) They do this because they must offer a better "return on their [shareholder's] capital" than other companies (Aldy 160). This is the motif I have been exploring; this is trading the future for the present, and it would be incredibly reductive to say that it is the fault of grey-bearded old men in armchairs who think dyed hair and tattoos still preclude you from employment.

The United States is responsible for more of the atmosphere's excess CO2 than any other country, has caused the deaths of more than 244,000 civilians in its wars and Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, and American police murder 1,000 people a year, most of them young (Loria, Hussain, Tate). On the specifically economic side, the American project of hoarding wealth among very few people has taken $50 trillion from Americans who earn below the 90th percentile in annual income since 1975, and it is not stopping there (Hanauer). $2.5 trillion dollars is gathered up in the wallets of very wealthy people every year (Hanauer). This amount of inequality is horrific, and what *Time* magazine calls "an exceptionally American affliction" (Hanauer). We allow these dragon-like people to hoard wealth while 25.7 million Americans and 14 million households with children reporting that they "sometimes or often do not have enough to eat" (Leonhardt). But of course, for every damning statistic there is still a slew of reporters from a "free-market perspective" who belittle these issues because of these households, "three-quarters own a car, and almost all have color television," as though a car isn't a often a prerequisite for acquiring food, and poor people are just supposed to stare at a wall when they're not working (Gregory). Is it any wonder, I ask you full of bitter rage, that Allen Ginsberg called his country "Moloch," that bloodthirsty god of passing children through the fire (Ginsberg 21, Pesthy-Simon 16)?

But we must not let the grief and anguish consume us. We cannot continue pretending, as Maximillian Alvarez writes, that "the real battle isn't over securing the health of social life in the coming years; [but] over which generation history will blame for setting fire to America's future" (121). Just as it is difficult, but tempting, to assign blame in *King Lear,* it is tempting to "play the generational blame game," when that really what we must do is unite. Too often I have spoken to people older than myself who have said "well, it's up to your generation to fix it," blind to the

fact that if less people had that attitude, "it" might get fixed pretty swiftly. I understand the impulse to say things like that. What is the other option but to fall on the floor "doubled up in pain at our capacity for industrial scale genocide" (Confino)? We have a great ability to deny, ignore, and suppress our grief in the favor of comfort, especially when that grief comes from something we feel powerless to stop: our destructive economic system (Confino). While younger people are more likely to advocate for climate policy, the political influence of young people is constrained by lobbying, the composition of congress, and the construction of congressional districts, so I think it is fair to say that we need some help (Aldy 173).

This is why these texts are important: we have been telling this story for generations. The entrenched and powerful set the future on fire, so that they may stay warm a little while. These texts tell us it is immoral, but it is a lesson we learn continually. In America's case, we need the help of both young and old to resolve it. Wouldn't we rather be able to say, at the end of all things

> "The weight of this sad time we must obey,
> Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.
> The oldest hath borne most; we that are young
> Shall never see so much nor live so long" (V.iii.392-395)

and praise those who came before us, or be too overwhelmed with grief in a drought-ridden American wasteland, not a penny to our names, with only enough life left in us to say: "So it is goodbye now to all you know and love…" (Heaney 193, l. 2884).

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