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Arthur's (Scots) Scars: *The Last Legion*

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‘Constantyn, my cosyn, he sall the corown bere,
Alls becomys hym of kynde, ȝife Criste will hym thole; [...]
And sythen merke manly to Mordrede children,
That they bee sleyghely slayne and slongen in watyrs;
Latt no wykkyde wede waxe, no wrythe one this erthe.
I warne fore thy wirchipe, wirke alls I bydde.’
(*The Alliterative Morte Arthure*, ll. 4316–23)

‘My kinsman, Constantine, shall wear the crown,
In keeping with his kinship, if Christ will allow it. [...]
And then sternly mark that Mordred's children
Be secretly slain and slung into the seas:
Let no wicked weed in this world take root and thrive.
I warn you, by your worth, work as I bid.’¹

At the end of the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* the dying king calls for the murder of Mordred's offspring, a final patriarchal punishment to draw the curtain on the Old Age that ends with him. Thus, in a motif that first appears in Malory – and in a reputational parallel to the seemingly mortal wound he bears away from the shores of this world – the once and future king finishes his career problematically, if explicably, assimilated to the tyrant-murderer Herod, kinsman of other unhallowed mythical figures such as Saturn or Medea. The poem thereby seeks to close its history with the most sombre chord that might be teased out from the interweaving and often conflicting heteroglossia of sources that gives us ‘the most contested of all Britons’.² At least potentially

¹ Valerie Krishna (trans.), in *The Romance of Arthur: An Anthology of Medieval Texts in Translation*, ed. by James J. Wilhelm (New York: Garland, 1994).

² Michelle R. Warren, *History on the Edge: Excalibur and the Borders of Britain, 1100–1300*, *Medieval Cultures*, 22 (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. xi. On history and necessity in medieval Arthurian literary traditions, see especially M. Victoria Guerin, *The Fall of Kings and Princes: Structure and Destruction*

‘beyond the pale’ – an expression originally designating that other Hadrian’s Wall, the picket barrier separating English colonial territory in Ireland from a hostile ‘barbarian’ beyond – Arthur’s monstrous necessity leaves the king revealed as troublingly akin to the figures he has devoted his reign to destroying and excluding. Leaving the reader with a version of Trollope’s ‘can you forgive him?’, the moment seems designed to put a definitive end to any innocence of Arthurian legend and to underscore the ‘state of exception’ fundamental to kingship.³ In this respect, the alliterative text’s conclusion offers a neatly summative instance of the ‘boundary pressures’ Michelle Warren sees exemplified in medieval accounts of a king whose sword, Excalibur, is emblematically central to the often murderous work of division and definition elaborated in medieval accounts of early Britain.⁴ In this, accounts of the end of Arthur’s reign take their place alongside other traditions that look towards the end (or beginning) of the nation, Arthurian polity and its legacies appearing as a vision of a ‘coming community’ whose glory extends beyond the annihilation of mere mortal bodies. Here the compensatory structure of the messianic logic evident in Arthur’s promised future return appears in striking clarity: the darker the end, the more glorious the resurrection. This view extends from the physical to the moral dimension: Arthur here offers the spectacle of an ‘ethical suicide’, taking on himself responsibility for the apparently unthinkable deed that would otherwise be the

in *Arthurian Tragedy*, *Figurae: Reading Medieval Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

³ On the ambiguous character of the giant-killing king in medieval literature and thought, see notably Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters and the Middle Ages*, *Medieval Cultures*, 17 (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999). The long-standing tradition of the king’s ‘exception’ from the symbolic order is articulated in political tracts such as John of Salisbury’s *Policraticus* (on which, see Ernst Hartwig Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957)) has had considerable afterlife in anthropology and cultural theory, from René Girard (*Violence and the Sacred*, trans. by Patrick Gregory (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins, 1979)) to Žižek’s treatments.

⁴ Warren, pp. xi–xii.

unfinished business hanging over future generations.⁵ To mangle the old phrase, 'The king is [un]dead. Long live the king.'⁶

Where this tale ends reflects back to where other treatments, whether purportedly 'authentic' or revisionist, seek to begin. Doug Lefler's film *The Last Legion* (2007), based on the novel by Valerio Massimo Manfredi, offers a dramatic vision of the last days of the Roman Empire.⁷ On the eve of his coronation, Romulus Augustus (Thomas Sangster), last descendant of Julius Caesar, sees his parents murdered by the savage Goth warlord Wulfila (Kevin McKidd), vassal of the usurping Odoacer (Peter Mullan). Spared only to be exiled on Capri, Romulus is rescued by a crack team of legionaries, led by the virtuous general Aurelius (Colin Firth) and a mysterious 'agent' of the Byzantine court (Aishwarya Rai). During the rescue, the boy's tutor, Ambrosinus (Ben Kingsley), none other than Merlin in disguise, directs him to the secret location of a sword forged in Britain during the time of Caesar for the hand of 'he who is destined to rule', the weapon then brought to Rome and hidden. Eventually the boy emperor and his friends make their way to Britain where, after a climactic battle at one of the forts of Hadrian's Wall in which Wulfila is finally killed by Romulus, they settle in the land, Caesar's last scion going on to beget Uther Pendragon, whom we see in the closing scene conversing in the ruined ring of the fort's walls with Merlin about the subsequent deeds of Romulus and Aurelius. Implicitly, we know how the circle will be made complete, the threatened boy begetting the child-murdering man.

My particular focus here is how the film's pairing of weapon and potential victim sheds a distinctively Arthurian light on the cultural logics underpinning varieties of violence and their

⁵ Thus Arthur's act appears as the (apparently benign) double of moments such as Heinrich Himmler's 1943 justification of the murder of Jewish women and children, on which see Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on 11 September and Related Dates* (London and New York: Verso, 2002), pp. 30–32.

⁶ On the 'undead' dimension of the father and the king, see notably Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*, October (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1992), pp. 20–34.

⁷ *The Last Legion: A Novel*, trans. by Christine Feddersen-Manfredi (London: Pan Macmillan, 2003).

possible textual or visual translations and renderings. Not least among these is that of how the act of putting innocents to the sword – whether as crime or apparent historical necessity – marks the edges of cultures and histories. In this it slices – distinctively, if troublingly – through a Gordian knot of questions of masculinity and agency, of located subaltern grapplings with the legacy of Rome’s cult of *virtus* and its oppositional relations to contraries either wild or feminised, from northern barbarians to the will of Juno.⁸ Moreover, in formal parallel to the threats of violence against the innocence of children and communities that pervade both versions, the film likewise hacks energetically at the body of Manfredi’s novel. Even as Wulfila lays waste to nations, Lefler shortens Romulus’s imprisonment on Capri and excises entirely the novel’s account of the group’s crossing of Europe, for example. However, Lefler’s adaptation here appears as a mix of cut-and-paste butchery and a more carefully targeted surgery involving more complex and thoughtful re-organisations and resturings. In the midst of this, Lefler’s *Excalibur* appears as a brilliantly polished, multifaceted object standing out as against its narrative backdrop, focalising and reflecting themes running through the director’s visual translation of Manfredi’s novel. Through this plays various roles, not least that – in a neat gesture beyond the film’s certificate rating – the sword’s narrative association with the threat to the young Romulus points to the child-murder that is the film’s unthinkable fantasy underpinning.

In that regard, we find ourselves faced with a fundamental question. From the early days of Christianity to the Anglo-Norman *Voyage of St Brendan* to Kazantzakis’s *The Last Temptation of Christ*, there have been innumerable engagements with the question of whether Judas remains forever beyond the pale, but what about Herod?⁹ In *The Children of Men*, directed by Alfonso

⁸ On which, see in particular Sarah Spence, *Rhetorics of Reason and Desire: Virgil, Augustine, and the Troubadours* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1988)

⁹ As Žižek comments on the film version of Kazantzakis’s novel, ‘the final rehabilitation of Judas as the real tragic hero of this story: he was the one whose love for Christ was the greatest, and it was for this reason that Christ considered him strong enough to fulfil the horrible mission of betraying him, thus assuring the accomplishment of Christ’s destiny

Cuarón (2007), the British government's rage to kill the last child born in the barren land marks the symbolic end of the nation, implicitly evoking a typological pairing of Herod and Arthur.¹⁰ Likewise, in the magical Britain of *Harry Potter* many things can be changed and counterbalanced – even Severus Snape's apparently treacherous killing of Albus Dumbledore by the worst of the 'unforgiveable' curses, *Aveda Kedavra* – but not Voldemort's project of child-murder. Here, as made clear in Harry's naming of his sons after his two teachers, Jesus and Judas are ultimately brothers. More thorny would be any suggestion of a parallel between Jesus and Herod, though some attempt to square the circle. In *Star Wars III: The Revenge of the Sith*, dir. Lucas (2005), the traumatic destruction of the Jedi seals the transformation of Anakin Skywalker into Darth Vader, an act culminating in his (off-stage) massacre of the infant trainees, known as 'younglings', the echo of the carol 'Lullaye Lullay' underscoring the typological connection. Of course, the *Zelig*-style insertion of the young Anakin-Vader (Hayden Christensen) in place of his older self (played by Sebastian Shaw) into the spectral Jedi pantheon at the end of the 2004 re-release of Lucas's *Star Wars VI: Return of the Jedi* serves as a sign not merely of his redemption but indeed the fulfilment of a messianic mission to 'bring balance to the Force'. This 'happy ending' parallels the 1997 insertion of joyful citizens toppling statues of the defeated evil emperor, a triumph of liberal galactic democracy echoing

(the Crucifixion). The tragedy of Judas was that in the name of his dedication to the Cause, he was prepared to risk not only his life but even his "second life", his posthumous good name: he knows very well that he will enter history as the one who betrayed our Saviour, and he is prepared to endure even that for the fulfilment of God's mission. Jesus used Judas as a means to attain his goal, knowing very well that his own suffering would be transformed into a model imitated by millions (*imitatio Christi*), while Judas' sacrifice is a pure loss without any narcissistic benefit. Perhaps he is a little like the faithful victims of the Stalinist monster trials who confessed their guilt, proclaimed themselves miserable scum, knowing that by so doing they were accomplishing the last and highest service to the Cause of the Revolution.' (*The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Phronesis (London and New York: Verso, 1989), p. 128, note 1).

¹⁰ On Cuarón, see notably Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, Big Ideas (London: Profile, 2008), pp. 20–30.

then-contemporary proclamations of the ‘End of History’.¹¹ In our geopolitically cynical times, is a director famously lambasted by his own actors for his inability to write screen dialogue someone audiences trust to point to the audacity of hope in the brutal workings of providence?¹² In any event, if the question goes begging here, it seems such interrogations of the limits of reconciliation with regard to past ‘duty’ have challenged more thoughtful directors: similarly ambiguous in this regard is *Gran Torino* (2008), Clint Eastwood’s elegiac reflection on the impasses facing contemporary white American masculinity. Here Eastwood touches briefly but uncomfortably on the origin of his central character’s alienation in the fact that he may have not merely obeyed questionable orders during the Korean War, but indeed committed unthinkable atrocities *voluntarily*. Yet, much to the astonishment and perplexity of the priest hearing his final confession – who, by this stage, is fully aware of this dimension – the old man makes no mention of any such acts, a silence that stands in exact parallel to Arthur’s order.¹³

As the contemporary fascination with war memorabilia, not least that associated with Nazi Germany, makes clear, objects associated with atrocity resonate with a singular and troubling aura. In recent film, visions of traumatically central objects are not merely key to narrative themes, but also to their cinematic art, the outline of the weapon intruding into fantasy space with a singular

¹¹ A debate principally centered, of course, around Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin, 1992) and Jacques Derrida, *Spectres de Marx: l’état de la dette, le travail du deuil et la nouvelle Internationale* (Paris: Galilée, 1993).

¹² As Harrison Ford allegedly commented to Lucas, ‘George, you can type this shit, but you can’t speak it.’

¹³ This reflection on what men can and will say, on the cultural trouble associated with ‘colourful vernacular’ is part of a wider exploration of ambivalence in Eastwood’s account. Thus the imprint of training, history and time produce the body of the old man as object of pity, uncertainty and derision. Yet, at the same time, his language offers an archaeology of former conflicts. Accordingly, the film’s narrative explores the problematic domestication of inter-communal tensions and affections, with his young Hmong neighbour, Thao, initiated into the baffling rituals, permissions and protocols of a receding world of a masculine sociability characterized by (apparently joking) racial slurs, a profane verbal ‘work of giants’ whose puzzling ruins lie about him.

acuity quite different from the inchoate forms of such classic instances of punitive superego irruption as the attack of the birds in Hitchcock's adaptation of the Daphne du Maurier story.¹⁴ In that respect, the sword carries with it an obscene and ancient precision apparent in Joss Whedon's *Serenity* (2005), the neutral, 'true believer' cruelty of whose nemesis figure (played by Chitwell Eijofor), a mixture of special agent and government *illuminatus*, cites either Roman concepts of 'honour' as his paralysed victims fall (in)voluntarily onto the blade he thoughtfully provides or *The Art of War* as he massacres children.¹⁵ Thus, if Hitchcock's birds bear testimony to a vision of superego manifesting in the frenzy of maternal incestuous rage, the operative's weapon stands for the cold precision of idea and conviction.

But of course, sharply delineated as swords and their edged kin might be, they also create irregularity and confusion not only in the ragged writing of the wounds and scars they inflict, but also by the contrastive cut they form in the visual fields that surround them, by their fascinating and troubling concentration of the aesthetics of line and faceted surface. In that regard, one might also compare Lefler's production with Peter Jackson's 2009 adaptation of Alice Sebold's novel, *The Lovely Bones*. Through its complex and disturbing intertextual dialogue with Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), Jackson's film reads in part as an allusive and disturbing history of cinema's charting of the limits of representation, locating an end of cultural and communal innocence in a radiantly colour-saturated 1970s.¹⁶ Central here to Jackson's portrait – as revealed in the victim's otherworld vision

¹⁴ On *The Birds* in this regard, see notably Žižek's comments in *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* dir. Sophie Fiennes (2006).

¹⁵ In that respect, Whedon's film appears as an instance of the perverse afterlife of Stoicism. As I have argued elsewhere (*Troubling Arthurian Histories*, pp. 365–73), perceptions of the reperformance of 'Roman' values as misreading can be seen in theological critiques such as those articulated by Augustine in *City of God* and underlying medieval romance.

¹⁶ The parallel is made all the more explicit by the obvious differences between this fantasy space, clearly modeled on the motel bathroom in Hitchcock's film and the décor of the murderer's actual bathroom, which we see shortly after.

of the aftermath of her rape and murder – is the contrapuntal association of two pieces of evidence: the cut-throat razor and the gore and mud on the floor of the killer’s bathroom. Here, following on from Francis Ford Coppola’s vision of the toilet vomiting blood in *The Conversation* (1974), Jackson’s film positions itself as a colour outdoing of Hitchcock’s primal murder scene.¹⁷ The cold precision marked in the fateful razor’s pristinely reflective handle and blade both contrasts and is associated with the Jackson Pollock spoor of gore, mud and excrement that is the other obscene trace of the crime’s libidinal underpinning.¹⁸ However, as important a precursor as the black-and-white *Psycho* clearly is to cinematic treatments of trauma, I will suggest that, in the case of *The Last Legion*’s use of such objects, we might also

¹⁷ Perhaps the key reference here is Hitchcock’s own evocation of the absolute limits of (un)imaginable depravity and evil, in his appearance in the trailer for the film: ‘Oh, they’ve cleaned it up. You should have seen it... So much blood. Horrible!’. Of course, the dialogue Jackson thereby establishes with Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* also positions his film in relation to other interlocutors such as Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Conversation* (1974). For Žižek’s exploration of the relations between Coppola and Hitchcock here see *The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema*. However, another point of reference here could well be Gus van Sant’s 1998 shot-for-shot colour remake of Hitchcock’s original, critically derided as ‘redundant’ but which attests to a fascination with bringing Hitchcock’s visual language to the colour screen.

¹⁸ Unlike Sebold’s novel (*The Lovely Bones* (London: Picador, 2002)), in which the murder implement is a bread-knife, Jackson positions the razor both in the the victim’s visions of the aftermath of the crime and as a McGuffin object in the ‘real-world’ strand. Thus, Jackson’s imagining of Suzie Salmon’s otherworld vision of her murderer washing himself after the crime effects a range of neat shifts and transpositions, not least the inversion whereby it is the victim who surprises the killer, a reversal pointing to the story’s long game of Philomena-style revenge. Jackson’s white-tiled bathroom is covered in a mire of mud, blood and possibly other effluvia. Jackson thereby constructs a nightmarish scene of excremental obscenity that encodes Sebold’s evocation of the killer’s sadistic violation and polluting destruction of his victim: ‘I felt like a sea in which he stood and pissed and shat’ (p. 10). Indeed, the razor becomes a minimal metonymic cipher for the welter of blood. Its reflective metal handle and blade standing out from the filth, the razor is central to an engagement that travels to the boundaries of the representable and conceivable. The positioning of the implement intercut with close-ups of the languid gestures of the murderer as he washes himself in the bath forces viewers – both internal and external – into an uncomfortable insight into the details of the murder. Through this, Jackson hints that, instead of the iconic gesture of Norman Bates’s frenzied stabbing, the climax of this unthinkable scene – which it implies the perpetrator continues to savour in fantasy – was that the victim’s throat was cut in a gesture whose apparent neatness and understatement is precisely counterpointed by the explosion of mire and gore that is both evidence and a translation of the murderer’s anal-sadistic fantasy.

look to Hitchcock's slightly earlier colour masterpiece, *Vertigo* (1958) for another parable of how violence shapes the subjective field. Here, the mirror facets and cracks of the famous scene of Scotty spying on Madeleine-Judy in the florist's shop offer another perspective on Excalibur's role in Lefler's visual rendering of the scarred and mackled face of Arthurian history.

If this introduction seems somewhat pell-mell in its accumulation of references, I would, however, locate as source of licence not some act of curricular barbarism such as introducing modern cinema into medieval literature courses, but rather French Arthurian tradition. In the most bizarre of historical and cultural cut-and-pastes, the thirteenth-century prose romance, the *Roman de Perceforest*, turns history back-to-front and inside-out: the assassination of Julius Caesar is instigated by the Queen of Scotland, the knives used to kill the emperor forged from the Roman spear that killed her son.¹⁹ Surely, in circumstances where the romance afterlife of *virtus* reads viral rather than virile, no act of creative (or critical) barbarism should be denied. Cry havoc and let the games begin.

A Brief History of Romance Scars

'Romance' as the genre is referred to grows out of the work of rendering a cultural shift from Rome and the Mediterranean to the North, a shift paralleled by one from Latin into the vernacular.²⁰ The strains and conflicts that are narrated, their brutal physical mangling encoded in linguistic and generic forms. In Robert Wace's *Roman de Brut*, translated and adapted from Geoffrey, the ebb and flow of history has a dramatic effect on the populations,

¹⁹ In this connection, see especially Sylvia Huot, 'Cultural Conflict as Anamorphosis: Conceptual Spaces and Visual Fields in the *Roman de Perceforest*', *Romance Studies*, 22:3 (2004), 185–95.

²⁰ On which see notably Suzanne Conklin Akbari, 'From Due East to True North: Orientalism and Orientation', in *The Postcolonial Middle Ages*, ed. by Cohen, The New Middle Ages (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2000), pp. 19–34.

such as the Trojans find in the ruined and deserted kingdom of Leogice:

Home ne feme n'i troverent;
 Tut unt trové le païs guast
 Ke n'i aveit ki gaainast.
 Utlage l'orent tut guasté,
 Chacied la gent, l'aveir porté.
 Tute esteit la terre guastine. [...]
 Guaste unt trové une cité
 E un temple d'antiquité. (ll. 622–34)

They didn't find man or woman there, they found the whole country laid waste because there was no one to gain from it. Pirates had completely wasted it, chased away the people, carried off the goods. The land was completely wasted. [...] they found a wasted city and a temple of antiquity.²¹

As Warren comments, 'with four different forms of *guast*, this landscape bears the marks of conquest as a scar'.²² Yet, at the same time, the *Brut* emphasises the ambiguities of this process: *gaainer* in Wace's text signifies ambiguously both 'to conquer' and 'to cultivate'. The 'wounds' resulting from conflicts over land are still distinct from the depredations of mere pirates (l. 625), obscene doppelgangers of the noble, ethical conqueror. Accordingly, through conquest – as a historically mandated, 'objective' violence – the land is made fertile and inhabitable. The idea that there is some overarching if obscure sense to the progression of history, some concern with legitimate custodianship, is what rescues Wace's narrative from futile, brutal tragedy if not from ethical ambiguity.

Yet in the tradition associated with Geoffrey, the relation to forces on the other side of the wall seems consistently one of ambivalence. Tales of Arthur and his deeds, as Jeffrey Cohen has shown, present the race of giants as a primary embodiment of atavistically barbaric forces, creatures repeatedly punished,

²¹ For edition and translation, see Wace's *Roman de Brut*: *A History of the British (Text and Translation)*, ed. and trans. by Judith Weiss, Exeter Medieval Texts and Studies, rev. edn (Exeter: University of Exeter 2002).

²² Warren, p. 144.

rejected and occluded in castratory acts of decapitation, reflecting an ongoing work of energies acting on the flesh and fabric of the human life-world.²³ Like the land, British history is also marked by potentially disfiguring presences: for Warren, Wace's history is a warts-and-all account which 'justifies force and chronicles the laudable achievement of territorial expansion', seemingly happy to praise the problematic trait of *engin*, a tricky craftiness that borders on treachery in some presentations.²⁴ The historical stakes here are not inconsiderable: the quality is of course associated elsewhere with Ulyssean Greeks rather than the honorable Trojans whose lineal or spiritual 'descendants' are the main actors in the narrative of *translatio imperii*.²⁵

In terms of the narrative of political legitimacy of kingdoms following after Rome, the evocation of earlier wounds plays a key role. Thus, the assassination of Julius Caesar is emblematic of the fate of Rome itself, part of a long-standing debate about how reason and passions shaped or marred imperial designs and destiny. A crucial distinction is whether Caesar is seen to exhibit control of himself in his final moments.²⁶ Thus Suetonius has

²³ See reference above.

²⁴ Warren, pp. 146–47.

²⁵ First articulated at the court of Charlemagne and given dynamic afterlife in twelfth-century adaptations and continuations of Virgil's *Aeneid*, the notions of *translatio imperii* and *translatio studii* – the transfers of power and intellectual prestige from the ancient Mediterranean to a Northern European 'modernity' – constitute one of the most influential medieval visions of historical and cultural change.

²⁶ On which, see G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, trans. by H. B. Nisbet, Cambridge Studies in the History and Theory of Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), particularly p. 89 (on Caesar). An interesting account of the place of Hegel's arguments in nineteenth-century historiography and medieval studies can be found in Perry Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism*, rev. edn (London: Verso, 1997). See also especially Peter Haidu, *The Subject of Violence: the Song of Roland and the Birth of the State* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993). On the cunning of reason, see especially G. H. R. Parkinson, 'Hegel, Marx and the Cunning of Reason', *Philosophy*, 64 (1989), 287–302. Needless to say, Slavoj Žižek returns frequently to Hegel's concept, most notably for my purposes here in *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*, *Radical Thinkers*, 36, rev. edn (New York and London: Verso, 2008), especially pp. 69–71 and pp. 167–71, although see also the reading elaborated in *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*, *Short Circuits* (Cambridge MA and London: MIT, 2003), pp. 13–30. Looking later still, Žižek devotes interesting comment in this regard to Bertolt Brecht's play, *The Affairs of Mr Julius*

Caesar adjusting his clothing so as to fall more decorously, while in Plutarch he lies ‘twitching from multiple wounds’, reduced to a bloody, mindless lump seemingly driven by a life persisting beyond the death of reason. These vignettes encapsulate diametrically opposed lessons on Caesar’s life and will, the debate about his reputation and motivation continuing through the Middle Ages.²⁷ As Geoffrey has it, the demand sent to Arthur by the ‘procurator of the Republic’, Lucius Hiberius, calls in the name of the Senate for the renewal of tribute to Rome, a practice inaugurated by Caesar himself.²⁸ Interestingly the Legate’s justification of his authority hybridises Republican and Imperial rhetorics, a Frankenstein political logic that smacks of specious opportunism. Arthur’s response disputes the legitimacy of such claims: ‘Nothing that is acquired by force and violence can ever be held legally by anyone.’²⁹ Conveniently, although Arthur’s assertion appears questionable in light of his own record, he still appears as less of a monster than Rome.

In this context, questions of language and translation are central to ideas about historical change and identity, with barbarian inflections marking the mangling of and debts to past cultures. The wider context is how those scars act as the tokens of engagements with and fantasy investments in forces ‘from the other side of the wall’ and how that opposition is mobilised in treatments of historical agency. However, those scars also obtrude ‘this side of the wall’, that is to say in civilised milieux such as the court, the very place that seems to exclude the sort of physical and rhetorical

Caesar (see *For They Know Not What They Do*, pp. 102–03), with Caesar cast, seemingly barbarously reduced to a creature of Brecht’s times, engaged in stock-market speculation and agitating the *Lumpenproletariat*.

²⁷ On the problem of universality in Hegel in this regard, see Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do*, pp. 32–34.

²⁸ For translation see *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. by Lewis Thorpe (London: Penguin, 1966), here at pp. 230–31. For edition see *Historia Regum Britannie: Bern, Burgerbibliothek, Ms. 568*, ed. by Neil Wright, *The Historia Regum Britannie of Geoffrey of Monmouth*, 1 (Woodbridge: Brewer, 1985).

²⁹ *History of the Kings of Britain*, p. 232.

mangling deplored in Quintilian's comparison of a flawed prologue to a scarred face.³⁰

Interestingly, such antique images take on a heightened significance in the literary traditions, a key witness here being the first surviving Arthurian romance, Chrétien de Troyes's *Erec et Enide*, generally dated to the 1170's and which I have discussed extensively elsewhere.³¹ Affecting a suavity and integrity of conception lacking in those disfigured versions hawked by the lowly *jongleurs* derided in the poem's prologue (ll. 20–22), *Erec* also foregrounds the edgy manglings of classical and post-classical sources, Latin and vernacular. Yet, though it opens with a celebration of the wealth and aura of Arthurian court life, of the charismatic power of the fair face it presents to the aristocratic world, Chrétien's tale cuts swiftly to a scene of mutilation and humiliation:

Erec boute le nain ensus.
 Li nains fu fel, nuns nou fu plus
 De la corgiee grant colee
 Li a parmi le col donee.
 Le col et la face a vergie
 Erec dou coup de la corgie
 De chief en chief perent les roies
 Que li ont fait les corroies.
 Il sot bien que dou nain ferir
 Ne poroit il mie joïr,

³⁰ 'There is no place in speech where confusion of memory or loss of fluency is more shaming: a faulty proemium is like a badly scarred face, and it is a bad pilot indeed who runs his ship aground while leaving harbour.' (Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, book 4, chapter 1, 61). For edition and translation see Quintilian, *The Orator's Education*, ed. and trans. by Donald A. Russell, 5 vols, Loeb Classical Library, 124–27 and 494 (Cambridge MA and London: Heinemann, 2001).

³¹ For edition, see Jean-Marie Fritz (ed. and trans.), *Chrétien de Troyes, 'Erec et Enide': édition critique d'après le manuscrit B. N. fr. 1376*, Lettres Gothiques (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1992) reprinted in *Chrétien de Troyes: Romans*, La Pochothèque (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1994). Translations are after William W. Kibler and Carleton W. Carroll (trans.), *Chrétien de Troyes, Arthurian Romances* (London: Penguin, 1991). I would particularly like to thank Caroline McAvoy and Gary McCaw for their rendering of ll. 217–30. My arguments here draw on – but hopefully amplify – aspects of my recent study, *Troubling Arthurian Histories: Court Culture, Performance and Scandal in Chrétien de Troyes's 'Erec et Enide'*, *Medieval and Early Modern French Studies*, 5 (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007).

Car le chevalier vit armé
 Mout felon et demesuré
 Et crient qu'assez tost l'ocirroit
 Se devant li son nain feroit. (*Erec et Enide*, ll. 217–30)

'Erec gave the dwarf a shove. The dwarf was as evil as could be. With the whip he struck Erec a great blow on the neck, Erec's face and neck were striped by the blow; the welts raised by the strands of the whip appeared from one end to the other. Erec knew full well that he could not have the satisfaction of striking the dwarf; for he saw the armoured knight was ruthless and arrogant, and he feared that he would very quickly kill him if he struck the dwarf in his presence.'
 (trans. by Carroll)

Here, embarrassingly, only some 200 lines after his stage entrance, the central feature of the beauty for which he is so much praised initially is ruined. Erec laments his marred beauty, a prominent feature of Chrétien's initial description of him (ll. 81–104) and embodiment of the seeming distinction of his early years at court. As Erec himself comments, the dwarf's attack leaves his face ruined, left 'in pieces' ('Tot m'a le vis *depecié*', l. 236) – much as in the same way that Arthur's body is to be shattered in the later prose text, *La Mort le roi Artu*:

'Of all the circle you can see you have been the most powerful king there ever was. But such is earthly pride that no one is seated so high that he can avoid having to fall from power in the world.' Then she took him and pushed him to the ground so roughly that King Arthur felt that he had broken all his bones in the fall and had lost the use of his body and limbs.³²

Yet, once inflicted, Erec's injury and any resulting scars are curiously effaced, never to be explicitly mentioned again. The mixture of registers so constitutive of romance is then written into his face, seemingly as an originary point of view which is both the model for future manglings and the point of view from which they observed. Like Arthur's destroyed body in the dream vision, the mangling of his face looks at the world from outside history.

³² *La Mort le roi Artu*, trans. by Cable § 176.

A kindred mangling characterises the Anglo-Italian production *The Last Legion*, which reads both as a product of opportunistic demographic tailoring and, at the same time, perhaps something more, a question about the warp and weft, the cut and paste of national histories. What Lefler's film demonstrates is that Arthurian romance's constellations of form and trauma reimprint themselves in later chapters of the tradition, translating and rewriting old conflicts in new tongues and guises, often positioning nations as internally divided between 'Roman' and 'barbarian' re-performance. In this regard, the classicised cast of vernacular romance reflections on the traumatic obscenity of historical process appears highlighted in the seemingly gratuitous excess of the barbarian atrocities in Manfredi's novel. Their obscene 'ultra-violence' seems designed to reiterate that the Goths are no mere domesticated or castrated puppets whose worst crime otherwise is to speak 'rough, guttural Latin'.³³ Key here is the sack of Orestes' residence:

Even the musicians who had been delighting the guests with their melodies were dead now and lay with their eyes wide open still holding their instruments. The women had been raped repeatedly as their fathers and husbands were forced to look on, before their own throats were slit like lambs at the slaughter.³⁴

The musical instruments and the dead musicians are the key here, aftermath and afterimage echoing in the most grotesquely orchestrated counterpoint of calculated cruelty and bestial obscenity. This scene not merely writes its script onto bodies, but even overwrites in gratuitously repeated actions, in the logically redundant but symbolically eloquent torment of onlookers about to die. In Manfredi's tale, barbarian cruelty runs wild in borrowed Roman finery, mocking Rome's attempt to harness and domesticate such forces. However, such violence also appears as an allegory of history itself, of the obscene gentrification inherent in any evocation of necessity in the idea that some innocent – even

³³ Manfredi, p. 6.

³⁴ Hegel, p. 17.

a child – be *fae the malky*, to use a Scots expression possibly derived from the rhyming substitution razor-‘Malcolm Frazer’.

Stitch that: Wulfila’s Scar in Translation

Erec shoved the dwarf. The wee man wiz a pure bawbag, by the way. Wi’his whip he wannered him in the coupon, scoring his neb an’neck wi’ stripes. The chibmarks stood out wan fae another. Erec kent he widnae get any jollies banjoin’ the wee shite cos’ o’ the big wide-o in the heavy gear who wiz well tooled-up and looked like a total rocket an’aw. Erec wiz feart he wiz fae the malky if he skelped the wee man’s jaw in front of him. (trans. by McAvoy and McCaw)

In such a context, it is interesting to reflect on the ways in which translators and adaptors might decide to ‘get medieval’ on the surface, structure and language of Arthurian tales. Of any in Chrétien’s romance, the passage cited earlier and re-rendered above is perhaps the one most ripe for (modern) vernacular disfiguration, as it is precisely here that the fair order of Arthurian court business is disrupted by the arrival of Yder and his party – among them the walking grotesque that is the dwarf. The failure or refusal of these outsiders to recognise the decorum and order of a palace that is not theirs leads to Erec’s humiliation. From the emphasis on collective regard and beauty that had underpinned earlier scenes, the carefully woven univocity, however unstable, of Arthurian court life is thus replaced by the snarl and sting of humiliations that shape the rest of the text. Erec is beaten by an inferior in front of what might be a prospective partner (Guinevere’s maiden), seemingly the only other unattached royal scion at court. Witnesses look on at the scene seemingly either in horrified impotence (the Queen) or callous indifference (Yder). However, the scene’s viciousness is also tinged with humour: adding insult to injury, the beating itself is preceded by an ‘oh no you won’t’ / ‘oh yes I will’ dialogue between Erec and the dwarf (ll. 210–16), as the former tries to push past the latter to remonstrate with the knight. In that respect, although seemingly ludic or parodic, the rendering into Glaswegian gang-speak also

articulates a parallax view inherent in the process of translation and indeed *translatio*: folding one age and one set of discourses into others, it is both travesty and faithful rendering, both joke and serious.³⁵

In a similar way, the injury Wulfila – unwitting barbarian double and descendant of the courtly Erec – bears is central to Lefler and Manfredi's accounts of fate and history, the mark itself an object of textual mangling and resuturing. In the novel, it is the mark of a sword-cut from Aurelius during an early attempt to rescue Romulus.³⁶ In the film, by contrast, the wound is inflicted rather later: during the rescue of Romulus from Capri, Aurelius intervenes to block Wulfila's pursuit of Romulus and his party through the palace complex. In what reads literally as a moment of combative staircase wit, Aurelius mashes the Goth's face onto his own axe, caught embedded in the banister rail, McKidd's character 'face-butting' his own weapon in a comic variation on the move known as a *Glasgow kiss*. Differences here between film and book may perhaps speak of something more than the practical problem of persuading some unfortunate stuntman to take a blow to the face with a sword. The mix of no-holds-barred *chibbing* and comic pratfall raises questions about the gravity and centrality of both moment and character. Quite unlike Manfredi's account, Wulfila's vulgar scarring here echoes other scenes of humiliation, notably an earlier mutilation inflicted by Odoacer, who cuts off his finger for daring to question his decision to spare Romulus (in deference to Ambrosinus's deftly duplicitous warning against making a martyr of the boy). This insult-to-injury compounding seeds the suggestion that the barbarian's destiny is to play second fiddle in a world less willing to take his doom-laden tread seriously than in Manfredi's novel.³⁷

³⁵ Much as this essay in a way can also read in part as both homage to (and, in some regards, parody of) Eric Auerbach's reflections on Ulysses's scar in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. by Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), pp. 3–23.

³⁶ *The Last Legion*, p. 29.

³⁷ In that sense, Lefler's Wulfila finds an unexpected wolfen cousin under the skin in the form of the eponymous anti-hero / buffoon of the medieval Latin mock-epic, *Ysengrimus*

Such variations are woven into a more general pattern of contrasts and reversals in which novel and film explore differing and complementary possibilities. In Lefler's adaptation, Wulfila's subsequent arrival at Vortgyn's court (as opposed to Vortigern in the novel) clearly troubles the pretender's sense of himself as not merely rightful claimant but, indeed, subject of prophecies regarding the future kingship of Britain. However, where in the film the pair recognise their common cause and unite, Manfredi's Wulfila not only kills Vortigern, but, taking his scalp as a disguise, supplants and impersonates him, from which follow rumours that the aged tyrant has made a pact with the devil and returned to lay waste to the nation.³⁸ Such textures and choices speak of the differences between the effects of noble, Roman sword and vulgar, barbarian axe, between the distinctive languages in which different weapons carve their writing into the flesh and fabric of history. The contestatory accounts of Wulfila and his scar thus not only emblematised differences between novel and film, but also highlight the uncertainty and difficulty inherent in the domesticating translation of subjective barbaric violence into the objective forces of history.

(for edition, see Jill Mann (ed. and trans.), *'Ysengrimus': Text with Translation, Commentary, and Introduction*, *Mittellateinische Studien und Texte* 12 (Leiden: Brill, 1997)). Ysengrimus's progress through the narrative is one of frustration (he never succeeds in defeating or outwitting his would-be prey of any species), mutilation (he loses skin, feet and ears in the process) and eventual destruction as he is torn to pieces and devoured by the sow Salaura and her litter, a demise accompanied by extravagant mock laments from various characters. As one of the sow's horde comments, 'my mind is numbed by a fearful tragedy, which the poet Vergil himself could hardly master' (book VII, ll. 489–90). The comparison is not gratuitous: the *Ysengrimus's* grandiloquence is explicitly the comic flip-side of medieval reuse of the rhetoric and models of Latin historiography – especially scenes of lament or portent – prominent in more serious tone in the work of authors such as Geoffrey, and fundamental to medieval conceptions of Arthurian narrative as a 'tragedy of fate'.

³⁸ Manfredi, p. 389–94.

(Re)Casting Cultural Memory

Klaus the goldfish: Finally, a new body. Ooh, I want to be six-two, blond, blue eyes... And scars... I want my face to tell a story.³⁹

If weapons have their own particular associations, much the same can be said about casting's capacity to create its own genealogies and ranges of association. Here memory operates rather differently as a trope between text and film. In this, Firth's Aurelius appears as a man both with and without a history, promoted (and reduced) to a generically war-weary and cynical veteran general. To achieve this, Lefler's screenplay eliminates the traumatically repressed 'back story' Manfredi gives Aurelius as the legionary who in his youth unwittingly betrayed the city of Aquileia to Wulfila's barbarian horde. (This change also abolishes the connection Manfredi creates between Aurelius and Livia Prisca, the novel's Roman-Amazon female lead, who makes her first appearance at that point, rescuing and caring for the wounded soldier she is improbably fated to meet again.⁴⁰) Thus, in Manfredi's account, Wulfila's physical scar is the externalised double of Aurelius's psychological one: the Goth claims to remember the Roman; the Roman cannot bear to remember the Goth.⁴¹ The novel thus appeals to a private world of the imagination, where it is perhaps better placed to explore the complex relations between trauma and memory, mapping how violence writes in the mind as well as on the body.

³⁹ *American Dad*, season 1, episode 19 ('Finances with Wolves'), dir. Albert Calleros (2006).

⁴⁰ In addition, Lefler also eliminates the opening last stand of the *Nova Invicta* Legion, mentioned only in passing in the film as Aurelius's previous posting. In so doing, Lefler eliminates the double dose of 'survivor guilt' Manfredi loads onto Aurelius.

⁴¹ In compensation, Lefler's adaptation supplies the antagonistic link between Vortgyn (as opposed to Vortigern in the novel) and Ambrosinus. In that sense, the repressions underpinning the vendetta between Aurelius and Wulfila in Manfredi's novel are replaced in the film by the back-story of pre-existing conflict between Ambrosinus and Vortgyn emblematised in the injuries they had inflicted on each other during an earlier struggle on holy ground for the possession of a sacred amulet. Instead of having Wulfila murder and supplant the tyrant, Lefler leaves the tyrant to Ambrosinus in recognition of the uncanny bond they share in the unfolding narrative.

If Manfredi's novel hinges on repression and recognition, the visual logic of Lefler's film has its characters carry associations written on their faces in a manner more intertextual than Wulfila's scar. In this, though Lefler's adaptation results in an entirely different back-story from his source, his reworking here is also a continuation of Manfredi's own double naming that begins with the narratorial explanation that his hero is known both as Aurelius and, more formally, Aurelianus.⁴² Thus, though pasts are eliminated, Lefler's characters also remain freighted with overlaid and multiple histories, chief here being Ben Kingsley's Ambrosinus-Merlin, supported by the cast of thousands that is the lost 'last Legion' of the title, revealed as having settled in the north of Britain and taken Celtic names.

Though derived from Manfredi's text, Lefler's doubling and mangling of names also has a distinctively cinematic dimension, with casting and visual allusion mobilising type and cliché to act as a noisily 'silent partner' in the film's nods and homages. Thus, while Kingsley appears as a druidic echo of Gandalf from Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001–2003), his fateful burn mark also explicitly recalls the first Indiana Jones film, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981). Likewise, the pairing of Sangster and Firth – previously cast alongside one another in two earlier films, *Love Actually*, dir. Richard Curtis (2003) and *Nanny McPhee*, dir. Kirk Jones (2006) – constitutes a twin-pronged demographic attack that parallels their screen relationship as older and younger brothers in arms. At the same time, Firth also reprises his role as iconic romantic lead playing against Mira, whose Indian version of *ninjitsu* training nods as much to *Mission Impossible* or James Bond as it does to medieval motifs of the Saracen princess. Meanwhile, Romulus / Uther appears as a sort of Harry Potter of the fading Roman empire, his wide-eyed innocence central to the film's revisioning of Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* (2000), bringing a disarming and arguably disingenuous candour to its post-Empire,

⁴² See Manfredi, p. 47.

multiculturalist exploration of history and responsibility.⁴³ For their part, McKidd and Mullan are cast effectively – if perhaps rather unimaginatively – as Wulfila and Odoacer in roles that draw on their previous histories. Thus, although perhaps better known from Danny Doyle's *Trainspotting*, McKidd also played gang-leader Malky Johnson in Gillies Mackinnon's *Small Faces* (1996). Similarly, Mullan appeared in Ken Loach's *My Name is Joe* (1998). In their own ways, both of these films explore the mix of brutality and touchily ordered hierarchy that characterise the 'court mentality' coding of gang culture. Through this, Lefler colours Manfredi's picture of Rome's attempts to domesticate the barbarian hordes through compromise and acculturation with stereotypically edgy, if possibly pantomime accents and echoes of local feud. However, the strange attraction between Scottish identity and Scots language or accent as cipher for the 'barbarian North' and the Eternal City can then be seen in McKidd's casting in the BBC series, *Rome* (2006–2007).

These confluences of different family trees supplement, counterpoint and cut across the explicit cross-cultural associations of Lefler's production in which the producer, Dino de Laurentiis – regally described in the title of his own biopic as *The Last Movie Mogul* (dir. Adrian Sibley (2001)) – plays an interesting cultural role. In that sense, one of the film's underlying questions is that of how national and genre cinemas fit together in a broader tradition of romance appropriation: who owns 'sword and sandal'? In such ultimately ludic, B-movie circumstances, the most tempting answer perhaps comes from Scott's *Kingdom of Heaven* (2007) with Orlando Bloom's Harfleur-with-a-bad-conscience speech from the walls of Jerusalem: 'All have claim! None have claim!'

⁴³ A key cipher here is the African Juba (Djimon Hounsou), Maximus's companion-in-arms and sole survivor of the gladiatorial band of brothers at the end of Scott's film. Scott's strategies are varied in this regard: in *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005), the central character's father's exotic companions, a German and a Saracen, are both killed in the same engagement in which he himself is mortally wounded. In this regard as in many others, these films form a triangle with his *Robin Hood* (2010), which has no equivalent to Morgan Freeman's role as Robin's companion in *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* (dir. Kevin Reynolds (1991)). By contrast, Lefler follows Manfredi in 'sacrificing' the black legionary, Batiatus (Nonzo Anozie).

This gives a potential context to Firth's own rallying call from the battlements, a speech perhaps puzzlingly presented in context as somewhat forced, as a self-consciously theatrical cliché.

Scots and... Scotty: Roman(cing) *Vertigo*

From a crack in the door, Romulus could see the tragedy unfolding. [...] he saw his father challenging that beastly giant with the courage of his despair: Orestes was wounded and fell to his knees, yet he rose again, and fought bravely until his energies abandoned him and he finally dropped, run through.⁴⁴

Odoacer (reflecting Romulus's face back at him in the polished surface of his dagger): 'Is it for you that so many people have died? Such an innocent face...' (*The Last Legion*)

If Firth's Aurelius seems slightly embarrassed in his rallying of the troops, then part of the narrative logic here is that he deputising for Romulus and that the speech is itself an echo of earlier seemingly fruitless attempts to persuade the Roman settlers to support them. However, another aspect is that the speech has no apparent object: hopelessly outnumbered, the band's last stand against Wulfila's barbarian hordes is clearly a joke. To use a phrase, this is for nobody and for nothing. Of course, what redeems the moment is that the absent addressees, the eponymous 'Last Legion', are about to march into view over the hill. The question of the former Mr Darcy's attempt to (rhetorically) seduce an audience not there brings us to a related question: was there ever a screen presence less barbaric than James Stewart? Yet, this charmingly phlegmatic actor is not only witness to parallel histories in Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) but also peers from what Žižek presents as the fantasy netherworld that is the florist's back corridor in Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (fig. 1 above). Here Stewart appears caught in a Sartrean moment of voyeurism foreshadowing the embarrassment of his later mumbled confession in response to

⁴⁴ Manfredi, p. 16.

Judy's appalled commentary on a relationship where she only serves as dressed-up substitute for another woman. It is of course at this point that Hitchcock – de-lighting elsewhere in visual euphemism to the point of parody, notably in the comically extended 'fireworks' scene in *To Catch a Thief* (1955) – perhaps stops short of a more shocking conclusion. After all, the romantic hallowing of the consummation arguably serves as not merely a disguise for, but indeed a subjectively disingenuous disavowal of the clearly perverse, masturbatory dimension of Stewart's fascination. Strange as this may seem, here one might highlight the curious kinship between this and other scenes of embarrassing persistence, notably his confused and dogged defence of collective and communal values in both Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* and *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), where Stewart can no more explain the nature of mortgages or filibuster true democracy into being than in *Vertigo* he can articulate the conflicted basis of his own desire.

Although ostensibly less adult a tale, in *The Last Legion*, where the unspoken fantasy dimension is child murder, the simple things are perhaps complicated in their own way. Physical scarrings are doubled by other fractures in the film's visual field, key among these Excalibur itself. Written into its surface as a mark of the object's resonance and wonder, its singular aura, the sword's overpolished finish appears a more deliberate disruption in light of Lefler's play with mirrorings and *chiaroscuro* effects elsewhere, such as in Wulfila's portentous arrival at Vortgyn's court (fig. 2 above). In that regard, an unexpected similarity emerges between the shot in which Wulfila picks up Excalibur in the final battle at Hadrian's Wall (fig. 3 above) and the moment in Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* in which Scotty spies on Madeleine in the florist's.⁴⁵ The pieces are falling into place: here is the weapon, there is the boy. Scotty's look emerges from a point collusively dissimulated by the contestatory presence of other linearities and perspectives, a multiplicity emphasised by the detailing in both

⁴⁵ This scene is notably the object of comment in various works by Žižek, a notable recent instance being his extended reading in *Organs Without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 151–68.

wooden panelling and mirrors. While Wulfila's contemplation of Excalibur lacks the quasi-lyric saturation manifest in Hitchcock's tale of perverse fascination, this is perhaps a difference of degree rather than of kind. Lefler aligns elements that, though endowed with their own fateful gravity, are not the entire puzzle. Like Hitchcock's Scotty, McKidd's Goth appears as the puppet of forces in which his efforts to assert his own centrality receives a confusing, almost mocking response from history's hall of broken mirrors. In their own complementary ways, both texts read as romances.⁴⁶

A 'McGuffin' object in both novel and film, the resplendent Excalibur – along with other weapons such as Odoacer's dagger – reflect the divided historical frames and perspectives, the marks of their agency written in the solid matter of flesh that surrounds them. Their role in visual organisation makes them reduced but noble cousins of the brown panelling that forms the 'off-stage' / back-room area of *Vertigo's* florist's shop. Indeed, its own visual aspect multiplies its cutting edges through the relief into which the blade's highly polished finish throws its profiling. In this manner, *The Last Legion* enacts a suggestive visual vocabulary in which events acquire significance from both their completion of patterns dictated by the past and the future. The sword's edge gives us history cut and pulling apart at the seams or collapsing and folding together. The sword does not merely cause wounds, rather it is itself a wound in history, a cut in its fabric, positioned by its very form at the centre of a 'parallax view', functioning as a (grail-like) sublime object to 'signify border struggles'.⁴⁷

In that sense, all of human history seems to be here: whereas in the novel, the sword is the instrument of conventionally noble Wagnerian fatality through its relation to Wulfila's scar, in the film the pristine lines of the sword become paired with the more lumpenly ragged axe and its wound, an idiotic relation made all

⁴⁶ In that regard, however, the closer parallel with *Vertigo* would either be one of the comedy Gauvain romances, such as *Le Chevalier à l'épée* or *L'Atre périlleux*, both of which offer derisive visions of Gauvain's attempts to live up to the model of romance hero for which he is the prototype.

⁴⁷ Warren, p. 176.

the more paradoxical in that, as we have seen, it is not so much the axe that creates the wound, but rather the contrary. Such an inversion of agency could be read, did space allow, as a neat summation of long-standing debates running from antiquity about the place of Rome and Romans in reflections about historical process. Emblematic here is the attempt to unravel whether Caesar was master of himself and his actions or simply acting in accordance with his legendarily shameful appetites, a discussion continued in Hegel's praise of him as 'man of practice' as agent of necessity and beyond.⁴⁸ In that regard, the central question is that of the nature of historical agency, the identity of Caesar as either quintessential Roman or 'barbarian within', drawing on the representations of the tribes beyond the Empire's boundaries to be found in both Caesar's own writings and those of Tacitus.

As part of this, one perhaps illuminating mirroring of Lefler's vision is expressed in another casting of McKidd, this time as the honest soldier and politician, Lucius Vorenus, in the BBC series, *Rome*. Here Lucius' implication in increasingly complex intrigues and conflicts of loyalty characteristic of this *Mr Smith Goes to Rome* vision of the eternal city as Islington positions him as simultaneously the bewildered subject and duped puppet of historical forces. Likewise, his dogged *honestas* increasingly manifests itself in violence, one key effect of this will be to see his beloved (wife) fall to her death, Judy-Madeleine and Niobe emerging in retrospect as sisters under the skin. Just as Hitchcock's detective takes his place in a reflection on the role of Scots and the Scottish diaspora in the multicultural weave of American postwar modernity, so McKidd appears as a figure of that which remains foreign and undomesticatable at the heart of

⁴⁸ In addition to the references above, see also Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth Century France*, rev. edn (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), where she argues that Hegel's view of history can be read in more comic than tragic mode: 'There is little time for grief in the *Phenomenology* because renewal is always so close at hand. What seems like tragic blindness turns out to be more the comic myopia of Mr Magoo whose automobile careening through the neighbour's chicken coop always seems to land on four wheels. Like such miraculously resilient characters of the Saturday morning cartoon, Hegel's protagonists always reassemble themselves, prepare a new scene, enter the stage armed with a new set of ontological insights – and fail again' (p. 21).

‘British’ identity, the role of Scotland as England’s bad conscience that resumes classical traditions of civic opposition and externality (played out in moments such as Caesar recrossing the Rubicon or Antigone in her opposition to Creon) as the distinctive texture of an ethical dis-ease at the heart of the nation. At the same time, McKidd’s Wulfila, Lucius’s barbarian doppelganger, ultimately finds himself caught in a world which mirrors, mocks and uses him in its own way.

Conclusions

Swords are beautiful, with an austere perfection of line and proportion – surely the very essence of beauty.⁴⁹

New Orleans is among the cities most heavily marked by the internal wall within the US that separates the affluent from the ghettoised blacks. And it is about the other side of the wall that we fantasise: more and more they live in another world, in a blank zone that offers itself as a screen for the projection of our fears, anxieties and secret desires. *The ‘subject supposed to loot and rape’ is on the other side of the wall.*⁵⁰

What can a boy or a sword embody? In a sense, both have an ‘innocence’ of form, although that of the weapon lies in its sinister ‘austere perfection’, as Ewart Oakshott puts it.⁵¹ Although a scar may be the imprint of such a weapon, its ragged edge often traces a less clean account of the nature of violence. From the interstitial spaces of its cuts, Lefler’s film interrogates the divide between different kinds of violence. The Goth invasion of Rome appears as a response to that foundational to Roman identity, ambition and political structures.

⁴⁹ Ewart Oakshott, *The Sword in the Age of Chivalry*, rev. edn (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1994), p. 12.

⁵⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, Big Ideas (London: Profile, 2008), pp. 87–88, original emphasis.

⁵¹ I am grateful to Lucy Whiteley for this point.

What Lefler's film illuminates in its blend of vernacular adaptative practices that includes both Arthurian romance and modern cinema history, is the manner in which scarring speaks histories, in which faces tell stories of glory or shame. As *The Last Legion* reminds us, more often than not, such trauma manifests itself through invisibility and silence, echoing Kristin Ross's examination of French postwar consumerism, the central paradox here being that the smooth forms of modernity read as scar tissues produced by amnesiac silencings and erasures.⁵² Yet scars also speak in the language of exclusions. Thus, in Žižek's comments on the conflicts and inequalities highlighted by the flooding of New Orleans in 2006, the scar is both the invisible yet apparent 'dividing wall' of unspoken prejudices underpinning white America's fantasies of its black population as barbaric looters and rapists, a fear-filled ambivalence of sufficient power to generate a *Crucible*-style outpouring of hysterical delusion, characterised by wildfire reporting of incidents later revealed as devoid of any factual basis whatsoever.⁵³

Lefler's ending continues this play with the themes and preoccupations of Arthurian tradition. If, as Warren highlights, the *Roman de Brut* emphasises the damage done by depopulation and loss of settled cultivation, then the setting for Ambrosinus-Merlin's final tale of Arthur's father is not without significance. Although still intact (unlike the elegiac evocation of the 'work of giants' ('enta geweorc') in the Old English fragment known as *Ruin*), here the Hadrian's Wall fortifications appear a bleached skeleton in a curiously empty landscape. Is the king's isolation here reflective of the temporal break that divides him from the visions of community dominating the main body of the film? Or are we looking at something rather more akin to Arthur's

⁵² 'Modernisation promises a perfect reconciliation of past and future in an endless present, a world where all sedimentation of social experience has been levelled or smoothed away, [...] the stains of contradiction washed out in a superhuman hygienic effort, by new levels of abundance and equitable distribution.' (Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonisation and the Reordering of French Culture*, October (Cambridge MA and London: MIT Press, 1996), p. 11).

⁵³ Žižek, *Violence*, pp. 83–85.

allegorical dream vision of his own future fall, a space beyond mortal ken that is the location of a moment of cinematic ‘ruinous thinking’? By means of the (editorial) cut both film and novel make in history, their narrative is able to bring together two individuals who never met: the boy Uther-Romulus (the future father-adulterer) and the boy Arthur, whose unmarred face seemingly announces a more innocent vision of Arthurian polity than Erec’s. The boy is thus far removed from Malory’s vision of Arthur as a Herodian child murderer, and yet at the same time tied to it through the motif of reversal associated with forces such as Fortune’s wheel, prominently associated with Arthur in *La Mort le roi Artu*: the trauma with which he was threatened is one that he will ultimately act out.

Thus, just as Arthurian history writes the silently objective violence of historical forces in figures such as Erec’s scarred face, Lefler’s film also passes over – whether for sake of brevity or certificate rating – another dimension also of interest. Crucially, what it elides or mangles is what Geoffrey of Monmouth tells us of the common fate of Uther and his ‘brother in arms’, Aurelius Ambrosius, last surviving son of the emperor Constantine and king of England before Uther: both are poisoned by traitors.⁵⁴ By contrast, in a happy ending, Manfredi’s Aurelius leaves Britain with Livia and returns to Italy (p. 421), carried to the ‘island’ that will be Venice as Arthur will be taken to that of Avalon.⁵⁵ Thus Manfredi abridges to save his characters from another, potentially even more insidious narrative of individuals of good will as martyrs to the pervasive toxicity of unseen workings.

This brings me back to the extract from Chrétien’s text and its two translations given at points above. Does the age of romance read either idiomatically ‘Roman’ in its performative translation (*translatio*) of ancient values, or alienly barbaric in the violence done through what seems its subjective, provincial manglings of

⁵⁴ See *History of the Kings of Britain*, pp. 200–01 and p. 211.

⁵⁵ Manfredi’s postface makes it plain that his Aurelius is to be identified with Geoffrey’s character (see p. 424). His decision here appears as a mangling of its own, albeit with a suggestion of a happy ending as Aurelius is granted the gift of being taken away to the ‘island’, not that of Avalon in this instance, but Venice.

both language and history?⁵⁶ Or is its modernity always at some level silently and allusively dependent on a barbarian violence passed over in a silence that somehow finds a way to call attention to itself? What the Glaswegian slang rendering of Erec's mangling captures – this perhaps more readily than some ostensibly more 'faithful' translation – is partly something of the 'cultural cringe' of literate clerical audiences at medieval courts and partly something of romance's idiomatically expressive stitching of the permanent problem of translating between an 'objective' violence of history and the fundamental barbarism of 'subjective' action. Yet what these Arthurian bookends also remind us is that views of history also find themselves caught between the obscenities of the serious and the tragic on the one hand and the seeming indecencies of comedy on the other. Between past and future, too: Uther-Romulus's renunciation of both weapon and ambition to reclaim the lost empire, marks a shift of literary genre that can be expressed in terms of the Virgilian wheel (*rota / cursus Virgilii*).⁵⁷ In effect, through its staging of a transformatory embrace of the land in Britain as a break with the centrality of Rome, the film positions Uther's gesture of renunciation as a (temporary) turn towards a pastoral mode akin to that of the *Eclogues*.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ On which, in addition to Chakrabarty, see among others Kathleen Biddick, *The Shock of Medievalism* (Durham NC and London: Duke University Press, 1998), pp. 81–101; Marcus Bull, *Thinking Medieval: An Introduction to the Study of the Middle Ages* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005).

⁵⁷ 'The generic and discursive divisions and oppositions associated with the idea of the "Virgilian Wheel" (*rota / cursus Virgilii*), [...] was encapsulated in an short prologue added in Renaissance editions of the *Aeneid*. [...] Virgil starts off writing the pastoral poem and ends with the epic. He begins his career with "shepherd's slender pipe (the pastoral *Eclogues*), proceeds to the "farmlands" (the didactic *Georgics*), and finally arrives at the "sterner stuff of Mars" (the epic *Aeneid*).' ('Virgil', in *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, ed. by A. C. Hamilton (Toronto: University of Toronto Press and London: Routledge, 1990), p. 717).

⁵⁸ This film then takes its place with another more recent vision of Britain's medieval past in the form of Ridley Scott's *Robin Hood* (2010). Scott presents us with a vision of a renewal of England through a communitarian remobilisation of the North in reaction to the tyrannically absolutist John. Here the faithless king's refusal to honour the bargain struck with him in order to save the kingdom and his decision to outlaw and thereby repress Robin as the major agent in the saving of the realm is what forces Robin out into the green wood, where he, Marion and the merry men are envisioned as living as medieval Kibbutzim.

Accordingly, multiply divided in its vision of the late Roman and medieval pasts, Lefler's exploration the unexpected cinematic descendants of the continuingly pertinent *rex quondam et futurus*.