

**'BE THIS THE TASK OF ALFRED':
REPRESENTATIONS OF KING ALFRED THE GREAT,
1740-1801**

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ABSTRACT

The figure of King Alfred the Great had a fascinating and complicated history throughout the eighteenth century. Often considered in modern scholarship as precursors to the Victorian 'cult', eighteenth-century depictions of Alfred were in fact distinct instances of imaginative storytelling of considerable social and political significance. This thesis demonstrates that during moments of national crisis in the late eighteenth century, many British authors, playwrights and poets turned to King Alfred for answers. It will analyse how and why this Saxon king was mobilised to negotiate the nation's biggest challenges, and how his cultural and political relevance helped to influence Britons' responses to critical events, as well as having lasting impact upon the king's literary legacy itself. In doing so, this thesis seeks to establish King Alfred as a highly contested figure in this period, capable of divergent interpretations and proving a figurehead for often opposing points of view. By focusing upon a series of clusters of Alfred texts, published within a few years of each other and prompted by similar events, it presents the figure of Alfred as a lens through which scholars can witness the impactful events of the turbulent eighteenth century.

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as references.

INTRODUCTION

This thesis began with an observation and a question. In the thirty-seven years between 1740 and 1777, with only one exception, all texts published in Britain with 'Alfred' in the title were variations of the same play: *Alfred: a Masque*, first performed and published in 1740. Originally written by James Thomson and David Mallet for Frederick, Prince of Wales, with the music composed by Thomas Arne, this masque was restaged, rewritten, re-labelled (variously as an 'opera', an 'oratorio', a 'drama for music') and republished more than a dozen times during this period. It appears that, in regards to eponymic Alfred works at least, and not just on stage but across all literary genres, the masque had something of a monopoly on Alfred storytelling. Productions of the masque were diverse, but essentially told the same story. In 878, King Alfred of Wessex was driven into exile by Viking invaders¹ and forced to shelter on the Isle of Athelney. After months of leading a resistance effort, he was able to gather an army and defeat the Danes at the Battle of Edington, thereby preserving Anglo-Saxon rule in the British Isles and, to the people of the eighteenth century, saving England from destruction at the hands of Scandinavian heathens. This was the tale told by the masques and, thanks to their dominance mid-century, one of very few literary narratives involving Alfred available to eighteenth-century readers and audiences.

In 1777, however, Tory historian Alexander Bicknell published *The Life of Alfred the Great*, the first dedicated biography of Alfred since 1709. Within a year, three brand new Alfred texts were written: John Home's *Alfred. A Tragedy*, Robert Holmes's *Alfred. An Ode* and

¹ Frequently referred to in the eighteenth century as 'Danes.'

Bicknell's own play, *The Patriot King; or, Alfred and Elvida*.² In 1784 John Ryland wrote another biography, *The Life and Character of Alfred the Great*, and during 1788-9 three more Alfred texts were published: Ebenezer Rhodes's *Alfred, an Historical Tragedy*, Anne Fuller's novel *The Son of Ethelwolf* (i.e. Alfred) and Bicknell's *Patriot King*. John Penn published *The Battle of Eddington* in 1792, his title referring to Alfred's signature victory, but was unable to see it performed. In 1796, after a substantial rewrite, the revised play was performed and once again published, alongside, in the same year, John O'Keeffe's *The Magic Banner* (later to be renamed *Alfred*) and Richard Cumberland's *Days of Yore*, in which Alfred plays a leading role. Rather suggestively for Alfred's growing significance, the century came to an end with two nationalistic epic poems written just a year apart in 1800-1, by Joseph Cottle and Poet Laureate Henry James Pye, both entitled *Alfred: an Epic Poem*.

So while, for almost forty years, literary representations of King Alfred were restricted to a single play, the late 1770s, 80s and 90s witnessed a flurry of new stories and new imaginings. The question that this thesis sets out to answer is why this spark of enthusiastic literary innovation occurred to the figure of King Alfred at this point. In pursuing this question, the following pages aim to answer many others regarding the significance of the Saxon king to the cultural, political and social worlds of the eighteenth century.

Those with some knowledge of the reign of King Alfred may immediately point towards a correspondence between the dates of the texts mentioned above and a number of key moments from Alfred's reign. 1778, the year of Home's *Tragedy*, Holmes's *Ode* and the

² The latter was not performed and only published a decade later.

composition of Bicknell's *Patriot King*, for instance, marked the 900-year anniversary of the Battle of Edington. Perhaps it could be considered unremarkable, then, that both Bicknell and Home chose to dramatise this crucial moment of British history at that time. Similarly, 896 saw Alfred defeat an invasion attempt led by the Viking warlord Hasten and on the 900th anniversary, in 1796, O'Keeffe and Cumberland both make this conflict the central narrative of their plays. Finally, the precise year of Alfred's death was somewhat confused and uncertain in the eighteenth century, with many erroneously believing it to be 901. This may also go some way to explaining the two epic poems which appear at the turn of the century. But although commemoration may explain the existence of some clusters of Alfred texts, it does not do so for others. 888-90, for instance, were not key years in the life of the Saxon king, but 1788-90 witnessed the very first Alfred novel and two plays. Moreover, not one of the Alfred texts considered in this thesis makes any mention of it functioning as a historical landmark, whether in-text or in promotional literature. It is evident that attributing these texts to commemoration alone only takes us so far.

The point of departure for this thesis is that the figure of King Alfred played a crucial role in the cultural lives of educated Britons in the 1700s. For the century's middle decades, this role was in many ways defined by the parameters set forth in the masques. The king was regarded as exemplifying the superiority of English liberty over the arrangements of other nations, a global trading empire based on the king's Royal Navy and the system of constitutional monarchy. Victory in the Seven Years' War seemed to represent the culmination of this deeply-rooted sense of British exceptionalism and helped establish the environment in which the figure of Alfred could have a potent resonance. Additionally, the

consolidation of Britain's Anglo-Saxon heritage and Protestant future in the new Hanoverian monarchy, the patriotic rhetoric of Wilkite radicalism and the national soul-searching of the American crisis and subsequent Revolution all helped build a world which 'compelled many English people to debate and reflect upon the components of the national identity.'³ Telling the Alfred story was part of this process. A critical turning point, however, was the American Revolution, during which relative consensus around the figure of Alfred was undermined during the break-up of the English-speaking world.⁴ Alfred's previously complementary roles became suddenly opposed and mobilised on different sides of the conflict, leading to a period of intense contestation regarding not only Alfred's identity but also the meaning of his legacy to Britons of the eighteenth century. In the sudden expansion of Alfredian literary invention that this thesis considers, we are able to witness the effects of this cultural crisis.

³ Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England, 1715-1785* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 140. For a consideration of the patriotic and nationalist environment in which Alfred was working, see Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), and 'The Apotheosis of George III: Loyalty, Royalty and the British Nation 1760-1820,' *Past and Present* 102, 1984: 94-129. Also Dana Y. Rabin, *Britain and its internal others, 1750-1800* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017).

⁴ For recent discussions on what these events meant for relevant areas of British life, see P.J. Marshall, *The Making and Unmaking of Empires: Britain, India, and America c.1750-1783* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Eliga H. Gould and Peter S. Onuf, eds., *Empire and Nation: The American Revolution in the Atlantic World* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 2005); Eliga H. Gould, *The Persistence of Empire: British Political Culture in the Age of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2000). Dror Wahrman traces the foundations of modern identity to this period and his work on individuality and character provides an interesting perspective to consider alongside the transformation of the figure of Alfred. See *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004) and 'The English Problem of Identity in the American Revolution,' *The American Historical Review* 106, no.4 (2001): 1236-1262. For studies with a literary focus, see Robert W. Jones, *Literature, Gender and Politics in Britain during the War for America, 1770-1785* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011) and Daniel O'Quinn, *Entertaining Crisis in the Atlantic Imperium 1770-1790* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2011).

Scholarly Approaches to Alfred

The approach that this study takes is to conduct a literary analysis of key works of Alfred fiction appearing in clusters at critical moments throughout the later decades of the eighteenth century. The benefits of the cluster approach will be addressed shortly, but the literary analysis itself will focus upon the character of Alfred and the telling of the story of his reign. It will scrutinise how key elements of his figure are developed and presented in each of these texts, and how events of his life have been told, embellished, ignored or invented.

There are two dominating elements in this character analysis. The first is a consideration of how any particular Alfred fits into the legacy of Alfred storytelling. This will take in comparisons with the Alfred of the masques as the point at which popular literary Alfreds truly emerged. As the chapters of this thesis are chronologically organised, inheritances and innovations from previous Alfreds can be clearly considered. Acknowledging the co-dependence of literary Alfreds enables us to not only highlight innovative changes within new texts, but also recognise the background cultural phenomenon in which all new works were acting. The Alfreds in these texts are therefore considered as varied but connected manifestations of the same figure, rather than a 'new' interpretation each time round.

The second element that will be considered is the reception and legacy of characterisations. In many instances, a particular version of Alfred adds a new dimension to the character or method of storytelling that is subsequently adopted by later writers. Acknowledging this inheritance and interchange gives an indication as to which elements of the Alfred character

and story were considered particularly popular or meaningful and therefore worthy of retelling. Reception of Alfred storytelling is also considered through the reactions of both public audiences and the creators themselves. The recorded thoughts and feelings of writers provide insights into what it was like to engage creatively with Alfred at this time.

This thesis will also consider newspaper accounts of theatrical performances and give significant weight to both the opinions of the reviewers and their assessments of audience responses. Although I do not consider popularity an indication of a work's worthiness for analysis, I do consider critical and public reception as important indicators of what the Alfred character meant to audiences and readers. John Home, for instance, generated a significant critical backlash against the liberties he took with the Alfred storyline in *Alfred: A Tragedy* (1778) and, in particular, the motivations behind some of the king's actions.⁵

In all three of these areas of reception – literary legacy, writer responses, and public responses - this thesis is distinct from previous Alfred scholarship, which has not looked at these issues of reception in detail. It is the relatively stable and popular conception of Alfred as national hero in the nineteenth century, frequently termed 'the cult of Alfred', that has dominated scholarly considerations of his legacy. I have deliberately avoided naming this study as one considering the 'cult.' In the first instance, terming the Alfred phenomenon a 'cult' is a twentieth-century invention. Moreover, it is an inaccurate representation of how the Alfred myth developed in the eighteenth century. There was never any single social group that dedicated itself to the king's image or legacy, and none that can be described as

⁵ See chapter two.

having any kind of personal obsession with Alfred. More frequently, Alfred was the means to an end; a lens through which social, political and cultural points could be brought into sharper focus and explored through triumphant or experimental representation. The term 'cult' also necessarily ignores the unfashionable or unpopular ideas that fell by the wayside or, indeed, popular conceptions that nonetheless did not linger into the nineteenth century. 'In dealing with the figures of national myth,' Samuel has written, 'one is confronted not by the realities which became fictions, but rather by fictions which, by dint of their popularity, became realities in their own right.'⁶ In focusing upon the 'cult', previous scholarship has identified the most popular and long-lasting 'realities' of Alfred's legacy, but there are many less-defined elements that have been overlooked. This thesis recovers those divergent Alfreds and argues for their importance.

The most extensive study of the afterlives of King Alfred is indisputably Simon Keynes's wide-ranging essay 'The Cult of Alfred the Great.' In justifying his interest in Alfred's legacy, Keynes argues that:

A necessary stage in the assessment of any historical figure [...] is the identification of the legendary aspects of that figure's reputation, for only when we understand the circumstances in which received tradition developed can we begin to strip off and clear away the accumulation of preconceptions, assumptions and expectations which might otherwise affect how we formulate the questions that we ask of the available evidence.⁷

Keynes's research identifies many of the texts considered in this thesis and its thorough catalogue of Alfred material provides the fundamental framework upon which the current

⁶ Raphael Samuel, 'Introduction: The Figures of National Myth,' in *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity*, vol.3, ed. Raphael Samuel (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), xxvii.

⁷ Simon Keynes, 'The Cult of Alfred the Great,' *Anglo-Saxon England* 28, (1999): 227.

study rests. His work sought to enable scholars to better understand the core material of King Alfred's life and legacy by identifying the misleading or confusing legendary aspects that might otherwise prevent an accurate historical assessment of the man himself. But in 'strip[ping] off and clear[ing] away the accumulation of misconceptions, assumptions and expectations', Keynes's work has made these elements themselves available for critical consideration. This research project makes these layers of obfuscating fiction its primary focus. It considers fantasy and adaptation not just as interesting deviations from history, or as signifiers of the potential of received tradition, but as instances of imaginative storytelling that were themselves of considerable social and political significance.

Joanne Parker's *'England's Darling': The Victorian Cult of Alfred the Great* is an invaluable resource for understanding how the eighteenth century contributed to Alfred's nineteenth-century apotheosis. In her study, Parker identifies the main strands of development which brought the figure of Alfred from obscurity into the public eye. Where the present study differs from Parker's is that its focus is entirely upon the contemporary reception and likely function of the eighteenth-century texts themselves. The close reading contained in each chapter will primarily be concerned with the immediate influences of the texts in the eighteenth-century world. Too often works of the eighteenth century are judged by the standards of the fully-fledged 'cult' and assessed primarily by how they contribute to this apex of fame. Alfred's 'journey', although important, takes a back seat in my study to allow more specific questions of artistic choice and public reception to come to the foreground. Such an approach assumes that none of the authors, poets and playwrights considered in

this study were, when writing, concerned with how their productions would one day be sorted into a timeline demonstrating the development of a national icon.

The study with the closest alignment to my approach is Oliver Cox's doctoral thesis.⁸ Although its scope is far larger than that of this study, Cox's methodology identifies key moments throughout the period and argues for their importance within the formation of a growing legend. 'The different components of Alfred's received historical personality,' Cox writes, 'warrior, scholar, legal and parliamentary reformer, charismatic monarch – are present throughout, but the precise arrangement of these individual components into major and minor keys, was determined by the individual contexts in which the image was deployed.'⁹ This study shares that interpretation, approaching depictions of King Alfred as multiple instances of a divergent phenomenon.

All these extant studies have been excellent at identifying what changes are made in artistic representations of the king's life. But in doing so, they largely leave questions of literary intention and impact unanswered. What effect does a particular change have upon the wider narrative, for instance? What characters surrounding the king have to shift and remould themselves around his changing form from one text to another? How do changes in representation alter the tone, setting and overarching moral message of any particular work? And how do creative writers introduce, explain, justify, advocate and sometimes even attempt to disguise their changes with rhetoric, imagery, scenery, metatextual interventions

⁸ Oliver Cox, 'Rule Britannia! King Alfred the Great and the Creation of a National Hero in England and America, 1640-1800,' (PhD dissertation, University of Oxford, 2014).

⁹ Ibid. 4.

or public statements of intent? This thesis will not just answer questions about authors tinkering with historical 'fact', but questions of artistic representation and world-building.

My prioritising of literary texts in this fashion adds a distinctive contribution to the historiography of the figure of King Alfred. Firstly, this is the only study to analyse a number of these texts for their literary qualities. Keynes dismisses the works of the later eighteenth century as productions of 'those who operated at slightly less exalted levels of society',¹⁰ missing the impact these texts had on readers and audiences and overlooking entirely details of their production and reception. Mine is the first study to take seriously these 'less exalted' texts. For instance, chapter two argues that John Home's *Alfred: A Tragedy* (1778) demonstrates a tense negotiation between masculine ideals at a time of national crisis, which is able to provide us with critical insights into representations of conflict and the personal suffering of combatants during the American Revolution. Keynes's essay considers this play only as 'a defence of the dramatist's right to take liberties with historical truth in the interests of a romantic tale.'¹¹ Nothing more about the play is said. Taking works such as Home's seriously, as worthwhile markers in the development of Alfred's historical and literary image, is a first for Alfred scholarship.

Additionally, this thesis is interested in something no other Alfred study has considered in any real depth: essentially, how did creative writers in the eighteenth century *play* with the figure of King Alfred? I consider the imaginative worlds that were built up around this

¹⁰ Keynes, 'Alfred,' 284.

¹¹ Ibid. 285.

historical puppet and how these created spaces made their authors and audiences feel about both their past and their present. Prior to this thesis, scholars might have known what any educated eighteenth-century individual was likely to know (or think they know) about the figure of the Saxon king. My work, however, begins to tell us how these individuals connected with him on a personal level - not because they read Hume's or Smollett's or Spelman's historical accounts of his reign - but because they were inspired to create an imaginative literary work of their own, or had been absorbed in such a creation as an audience member or reader. In the hands of the writers I talk about here, the Alfred myth is raw material to be shaped largely for the purposes of entertainment. I build upon the work of Keynes, Cox, Parker and others to explore the various ways in which the Alfred story was told in the late eighteenth century.

The contribution which this thesis makes to our understanding of eighteenth-century culture outside of Alfred historiography is best illustrated by means of a comparison with critical works which consider the same texts, but without the focus on Alfred. A useful case study will be provided by looking at an essay by Ruth Wehlau.¹² Firstly, the serious scholarly attention I give to overlooked texts is as unique amongst eighteenth-century scholarship as it is amongst Alfred scholarship. Wehlau's essay is one of very few that gives significant attention to Alfred texts as sources of information about the eighteenth century itself. Her primary focus is nationalism in the 1790s, as Britain faced the growing ideological and military threats of Revolutionary France, and specifically the role of the Irish in the British state. Her work is concerned with the way in which 'the Alfred story is transformed from a

¹² Ruth Wehlau, 'Alfred and Ireland: Irony and Irish Identity in John O'Keeffe's *Alfred*,' *European Romantic Review* 22, no.6 (2011): 801-817.

fable of fortitude into a commentary on the patriarchal state' and draws the conclusion that '[O'Keeffe's] *Alfred* [1796] is a carefully constructed response to the position of Ireland in the late eighteenth century and to the political debates surrounding that position.'¹³ This is a hypothesis that my thesis shares, but our studies differ in the focus they give to the figure of Alfred and the way in which his story and character are adapted from earlier works. I am able to consider O'Keeffe's play within the wider context of Alfred storytelling in the latter part of the eighteenth century.

Wehlau dedicates attention to wider plot points and character analysis beyond the figure of the king, in particular the newly-added role of Irish soldiers. In contrast, my chapter four specifically considers how the king's story is impacted by this innovation, and what it is about the figure and story of King Alfred that enables this reflection on current affairs to take place. I offer explanations as to why the Alfred figure is considered appropriate to convey this message of solidarity to the Irish. My attention to the king specifically – who is often overshadowed in this text by the wider narrative of civilians and soldiers – reveals Alfred's role in enabling the plays' social commentaries. I highlight how the king's reputation for nation-building and personal benevolence facilitated messages of social and national solidarity during the troubled 1790s. Alfred himself provides a case study for British and Irish attitudes towards monarchy, individualism and political unification. Moreover, by tracing changes in Alfred's character from work to work, I am also able to highlight the effects of contemporary events on O'Keeffe himself, as he moulded Alfred's character to respond to relevant issues and demands for certain kinds of story.

¹³ Ibid., 802-3.

When talking about Richard Cumberland's *Days of Yore*, Wehlau recognises the importance of telling Alfred's story: 'Setting the play in this period allows Cumberland to focus on the relations between the conquered Danes who are still living within the Saxon nation; the threat to the nation is thus not invasion, but rebellion.'¹⁴ Her analysis shows how the Alfred story is used to imitate contemporary fears of dissention in light of the revolution across the English Channel. My study, by contrast, looks at how Alfred's presentation as a socially accessible monarch is a critical part of addressing these fears and suggests that this kind of direct commentary is only possible because of what the Alfred figure had become. The personality of the king is a vital element in countering dissenting subjects and threats from abroad. Moreover, by paying attention to depictions of kingship in this work, we are able to learn much about the way theatres favourably represented monarchs to their audiences at a time when the role of the sovereign was increasingly fraught. In short, I argue that it is not just the themes and events of Saxon history that had relevance to eighteenth-century audiences; the character of King Alfred himself played a critical and overlooked role.

There is also the matter of the historiography of other historical figures to address. There have been a number of recent studies looking at a diverse range of figures, mostly based in the nineteenth century but with some relevance to the eighteenth.¹⁵ Of most interest to this

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 807.

¹⁵ Stephanie Barczewski, *Myth and national identity in nineteenth-century Britain: the legends of King Arthur and Robin Hood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Stephen Knight, *Robin Hood: a mythic biography* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003); Rosemary Mitchell, 'The red queen and the white queen: the exemplification of medieval queens in nineteenth-century Britain,' in *Heroic reputations and exemplary lives*, eds. Geoffrey Cubitt and Allen Warren (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 157-77; Julia Walker, *The Elizabeth Icon 1603-2003* (New York: Palgrave

study is Barbara Gribling's study of Edward the Black Prince. A brief comparison is revealing not only for the two historical figures, but also the uniqueness of the approach that my study adopts.

Similar to this thesis, Gribling's book reveals an eighteenth-century historiography of Britain's ancient past 'distinct from that of the Victorians.'¹⁶ Indeed, both monarchs share similar foundations to their popularity in this period, in the sense that their critical military victories offered them both acclaim in a century in which military imperialism played an increasing role in Britons' sense of national self. Edward had the battlefields of Crecy and Poitiers whilst Alfred had Edington. All were seen as triumphs against the odds, brought about by the royals' own virtues and skills as leaders. Both figures also emerged into the eighteenth-century literary world with mid-century plays: Alfred with the masques and Edward with William Shirley's *Edward the Black Prince* in 1750. Like Alfred's writers, Shirley is concerned with presenting to his audience a typically English hero, distinct from the ancient Classical world: 'Of native, genuine English Feats he sings.'¹⁷ Another parallel is that David Garrick would play the Black Prince in Shirley's drama just a year before performing as Alfred. Clearly, both figures held a similar historical pedigree and had comparable appeal to eighteenth-century playwrights, audiences and performers.

Macmillan, 2004); Jayne Lewis, *Mary Queen of Scots: romance and nation* (London: Routledge, 1998).

¹⁶ Barbara Gribling, *The Image of Edward the Black Prince in Georgian and Victorian England: Negotiating the Late Medieval Past* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2017), 3.

¹⁷ William Shirley *Edward the Black Prince; or, the Battle of Poitiers: An Historical Tragedy*. (London: J. And R. Tonson and S. Draper, 1750), x.

However, the two figures diverge significantly in the kind of stories their literary champions decided to tell about them. Edward's militarism is far more strongly developed in Shirley as opposed to Alfred's half-hearted (but gradually strengthening) heroism in the masques. The scenes in which the Black Prince features are intended to serve as confident demonstrations of his princely virtues and leadership abilities, as he effectively makes difficult strategic decisions, rewards loyalty and forgives betrayal. Shirley's play pitches the war as a struggle between both a defined France and a defined England, whereas Alfred's victory over himself and his reclaiming of his own resolve to fight is what dominates the masques. The Saxon tale therefore holds greater potential for flexibility regarding the monarch's character and greater scope for literary invention. When Shirley's play was repeated, it lacked the dynamism of Alfred storytelling.

There were two further theatrical performances which feature Edward in the eighteenth century, both of which have resonance with Alfred texts: David Garrick's *The Institution of the Garter* (1771), and William Pearce's *Windsor Castle* (1795). The former is a patriotic spectacular similar in purpose to Garrick's revival of the Alfred masque in 1773: 'Liberties of less Consequence are necessarily taken for the Sake of rendering the whole more Theatrical.'¹⁸ Pearce's later opera, meanwhile, was dedicated to Prince George and Princess Caroline, as a semi-didactic performance of domestic and sexual virtue. This has parallels with a number of texts discussed in my third chapter.

¹⁸ David Garrick, *The Songs, Choruses, and Serious Dialogue of the Masque called The Institution of the Garter; or Arthur's Round Table Restor'd*, (London: T. Becket and P.A. De Hondt, 1771), vii. See chapter one for Garrick's *Alfred*.

Both royals, then, had similar cultural appeal that was manifested in literary works. What distinguishes Alfred from Edward, and every other historical figure in this period, however, is the explosion of literary inventiveness witnessed in the thirty years between 1770 and 1800. Although Edward is demonstrably undertaking cultural work in retellings of his story, he does not produce clusters of texts centred around critical moments in the way Alfred does. Not only does this clustering set Alfred apart, but the approach of this thesis to make those clusters central to its analytical parameters sets it apart from other historiographies of other historical figures. A study of this kind could not be undertaken in regards to Edward: no such clusters of new literary works exist. Tellingly, both monarchs can claim to have Alexander Bicknell as a biographer, but only Alfred inspired Bicknell to go on to write a play of his own about the king he studied.

Unlike Edward, then, around a dozen eighteenth-century writers in the final decades of the century all chose to write fiction about King Alfred. In light of my innovative emphasis on their storytelling, the historiography of Alfred will now include an understanding of the monarch as not merely the century's most important historical figure, but also its most dynamic literary hero.

Alfred Clusters

The clusters of texts around which this thesis is structured first emerged as answers to the primary question: why was there a burst of Alfredian literary innovation in the late eighteenth century? A timeline of published literary texts reveals that these new works appeared in a number of small clusters. Particularly prominent clusters were 1771-73

(involving a revived version of the Alfred masque and a political tract), 1777-78 (a biography and two plays), 1788-90 (a novel, two plays and a political treatise) and 1796 (three plays). The chapters of my thesis are formed around these clusters. By taking this approach, it becomes clear that Alfredian invention in the late eighteenth century was a product of a series of stimuli to which each cluster of texts was responding. Thus, the parameters of this study were formed - identifying clusters, analysing commonalities between the texts they contained and formulating hypotheses around these emergent issues. Diversity of genre was a natural result of this process, and has led to an interdisciplinary approach towards literary Alfreds. For instance, the texts in my third chapter (novel, political treatise, two plays) are all explicitly written to provide Alfred as a personal role model; the former two for the same individual: the Prince of Wales. Therefore I consider both political treatise and novel as operating under the same forces of production. A genre-based focus, looking at just one form of literary expression such as theatre, would miss the interconnectedness of these texts and therefore risk overlooking the stimuli to which the figure of Alfred was responding. Each of the clusters, and therefore each of my chapters, contains their own emergent connections and dominant concerns. The fluidity of the character of Alfred across genres, as well as the diversity of the stimuli to which his character is responding, requires such an approach.

This methodology is unique amongst Alfred scholarship. Parker is only able to dedicate one chapter to the entire 1700s, Keynes covers the whole history of Alfred's legacy in his essay and even Cox's thesis covers an expansive 160 years. My far shorter window of thirty years and my primary focus on literary Alfreds permits the time and space required to understand

the complexity behind these texts. The scholars mentioned above, although pausing occasionally to address some of the works I consider, are nonetheless primarily concerned with charting the journey of Alfred's legacy. My clustered approach is akin to stopping at a number of major jolts in that journey and questioning why the path did not remain smooth. This adds a depth of analysis not yet present in Alfred historiography. My intention to establish why these jolts occurred is much more than an attempt to chronicle differences from one work to the next. I am interested in highlighting instances of creative interaction between the figure of the Saxon king and the eighteenth-century world. Previous studies have dismissed these highly contextualised Alfreds as anomalies. Here, I argue for their importance.

My identification of an explosion of Alfredian literary interest in the late eighteenth century is similarly unique. This newfound creativity reveals a profound development in literary interest in the Alfred story at this time and constitutes a currently unexplained eagerness on the part of a diverse group of writers to make Alfred relevant to their lives. The king's political role, his representation in historical texts, even his pictorial representations, have all been considered previously by Keynes, Cox and Parker, but fictional storytelling in literary texts has gone unnoticed. This is despite a huge number of eighteenth-century individuals encountering the figure of the Saxon king not merely as a name in historical textbooks, but increasingly as a character on the stage, in novels and epic poetry. His life would be acted out, presented, witnessed; his thoughts imagined and recorded; his motivations questioned and argued over; his struggles compared with those of contemporary Britons; his personality and behaviours used as models. This thesis argues that these results of literary

representation are just as much a part of King Alfred's legacy as historical and political accounts.

The prevalence of plays in this thesis was an inadvertent consequence of the cluster approach, rather than a direct methodological choice.¹⁹ What is clear, however, is the clear correlation between Alfred storytelling in the theatre and Alfred storytelling responding to contemporary events. It is worth spending some time exploring why this may be the case.

In the first instance, why are plays seemingly so conducive to Alfred storytelling? Essentially, the theatre offered an all-inclusive environment for public storytelling; there was no requirement for audience members to be literate to attend plays, and all segments of society could be in attendance. Nowhere could an Alfred text address the complete range of British demographics than it could in the theatre, which served as a nation in microcosm: 'a Grand Central Station of eighteenth-century cultural and social networks, a place of meeting for individuals, but also of ranks, circles and genders.'²⁰ This is particularly important for the development of the Alfred story during this period, which begins in an elite sector of society and explodes into the popular realm. The importance of popular means of entertainment can be seen, for instance, in the change from the masque form of Thomson and Mallet for their royal patron Frederick in 1740, to the low Haymarket comedy of John O'Keeffe's *Alfred*

¹⁹ The same can be said regarding the gender of authors, all of whom, except one, happened to be male. Alfred literature was evidently dominated by men, with Anne Fuller providing a noteworthy exception – doubly so as her text is also the only novel. Her text, considered in chapter three, demonstrates the expanding demographics and diversifying genres of Alfred literature as the end of the century approaches.

²⁰ Gillian Russell, 'Theatrical Culture', in *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature 1740–1830*, eds. Thomas Keymer and John Mee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 110.

of 1796. By simply charting the direction which these plays took in tone, genre, audience and performative arena, it is possible to see the changing dynamics and popularity of Alfred storytelling. This change also facilitates many of the reformulations of Alfred's character. First Mallet and then Garrick transformed the lead character of the masque into an appealing, popular, heroic figure, with stronger ideological convictions and military strength in order to please a public audience. By the time of O'Keeffe's comedy, the Saxon king had mass appeal and mass recognition, allowing the comic writer to derive humour from this well-established story.

Drama was also a critical forum for literary reinvention in this period thanks to the development of the theatrical and reading public. These groups came to have extraordinary critical and hence financial power over the production and reception of theatrical works: 'the public determined 'the fate' of plays; its judgment offered the final word, proving or disproving a play's worth. The playwright was obliged to yield to its authority.'²¹ In the case of this study, not only is the opinion of this public useful for determining 'the fate' of Alfred plays, its voice can also help us determine the popularity of any given characterisation of the king himself. Critical reviews and contributions in the theatrical sections of the newspapers frequently reflected on how true to history (as audiences understood it) the Alfreds on stage were, and whether the representation they witnessed was a fitting tribute to the great king.

This powerful public is key to the development of the Alfred figure in the late eighteenth century. Experimentation with character and story received rapid feedback to which

²¹ Julie Stone Peters, *Theatre of the Book 1480-1880: Print, Text, and Performance in Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 247.

playwrights and managers were able to respond. There was an intensity of judgment and public interaction which simply did not exist in other forms of writing, making theatre the ideal method for negotiations with public conceptions of the past. John Home in particular, considered in chapter two, had a volatile encounter with the public response to his *Alfred*. This is yet another reason for paying attention to less successful texts: whether building blocks of 'the cult' or otherwise, every single *Alfred* play in this period generated some form of shared response and negotiation in newspapers that is worthy of attention. The public contestation surrounding different versions of the *Alfred* story is of critical importance to discerning the true dynamism of the *Alfred* phenomenon.

The approach this study takes to the public reception of plays is to consider newspaper reviews to be of critical importance. Not only do they provide the clearest evidence possible of mass forms of reception, they are also involved in a key relationship with the means of production in the theatres. O'Quinn argues for the importance of newspaper sources as consciously public forms of interaction with literary texts. 'Theatrical representation and the representational tactics of the newspapers,' he writes, 'are both mutually constitutive and central to the stylisation of social relations in this era.'²² In this case, an awareness of *Alfred*'s legacy is negotiated publicly in newspaper accounts because of the shared, public nature of myths. Newspaper reviews are unique methods of analysing reception because they negotiate representation on behalf of their publics and on behalf of the nation. 'The readers of eighteenth-century papers and the audiences for eighteenth-century plays were accustomed, indeed were required, to think metacritically because both media had built-in mechanisms either for interrupting simple consumption or for representing the way

²² O'Quinn, *Entertaining Crisis*, 4.

external forces impinged on their production.’²³ And since each new Alfred text and performance had to undertake some form of negotiation with the pre-existing public conception of his character, this friction is often witnessed in newspapers: ‘Mr. Lewis’s Alfred originally gave no impression of our great lawgiver and hero; and in his hands it still came out a fainter copy.’²⁴ Newspaper reviews are actually assessing representations of Alfred on behalf of the conglomerated citizenry of the nation and their collective expectations (‘our great lawgiver and hero’). Consequently, accounts of theatrical performances in newspapers, particularly when addressing changes in Alfred’s character, are given significant weight as indicators of public response and the impact of innovation.

In fact, without the published written responses of newspaper critics, our knowledge and understanding of what happened in some of these plays would be incomplete. The full extent of the patriotic display at Garrick’s reworked masque of 1773, for instance, cannot be known from the published play text, which offers only a simple statement of: ‘Here is seen the ocean in prospect, and ships sailing along. Two boats land their crews.’²⁵ For a detailed account of how this naval display worked, including the performance of ‘Rule Britannia’, descriptions of de Louthembourg’s first painting for the British stage, accounts of the intricate models of ships that were used, and so on, we have to turn to the critical reviews published in the newspapers, as has been done in my first chapter.

²³ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁴ *London Chronicle*, January 20-22, 1778.

²⁵ David Garrick, *Alfred: A Masque* (London: T. Cadell, T. Becket and J. Wilkie, 1773), 63.

Another vital element of theatrical works that set them apart from other literary forms in this period was the practice of publishing plays to be read at home. Closet dramas allowed people to engage with plays they had seen, or ones they hadn't, in more personal settings.

According to Peters:

Theatrical and play-reading publics were more or less made up of the same individuals, and play-going and play-buying were in a symbiotic relationship; playwrights sold themselves to the book-reading public on the basis of the enthusiasms of the theatre-going public; performances and texts were regularly advertised together.²⁶

As Peters' study shows, many playwrights paid attention to this play-reading arena and took steps to succeed within it, even if the plays' actual performances received a mediocre reception. John Home saw the published version of his play as a second chance to win over the public and an opportunity to explicitly fight back in the confrontation brought on by his literary innovation. 'The Author of the Tragedy of Alfred,' he writes, 'would have submitted his performance, to the final judgment of the Reader, without preface or apology, if he had not been advised, and indeed urged, to make a reply to some hostile criticisms.'²⁷ In the *Monthly Review*, 'C.' draws attention to Home's plea, reporting that 'the poet expects more candour from the gentle reader, than he met with from the spectator. He appeals, therefore, from the representatives of the people, collected in the theatre, to the people at

²⁶ Peters, *Theatre of the Book*, 242-4. See also Catherine Burroughs, 'The Stages of Closet Drama,' *The Oxford Handbook of the Georgian Theatre, 1737-1832*, eds. Julia Swindells and David Francis Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 442-56; and Robert D. Hume and Judith Milhous, *The Publication of Plays in London 1660-1800. Playwrights, Publishers and the Market* (London: British Library, 2015).

²⁷ John Home, *Alfred. A Tragedy* (London: T. Becket, 1778), v.

large.²⁸ Clearly, both the theatrical and reading public were key players in negotiations of Alfred's character at this time.

An interesting area of distinction between going to watch Alfred at the theatre and reading a published play at home was the fact that, in the latter, there was no danger of a human attempt to physically represent the king. A large number of audience disappointments stemmed from the legendary Alfred being rendered down to human form in the unconvincing image of an actor: 'Mr. Lewis's Alfred originally gave no impression of our great lawgiver and hero.'²⁹ In a read play, Alfred still spoke the words and undertook the actions given to him, but that process was far more subjective for closet consumers. Also, as Home clearly hoped, the voice of the author might hold more weight in a read play over a performed one. Away from the sceptical clamouring of an audience, new interpretations may have received more patient consideration.

Another benefit which the prevalence of theatrical pieces lends to this study is the closely intertwined relationship between the producers, performers and audiences of these texts that cannot be paralleled in any other form. As O'Quinn has shown, 'the entire house, and not merely the stage, operates as a performance space.'³⁰ O'Quinn's approach of analysing these performance spaces in their entirety is one which I attempt to replicate in a number of key sections. In chapter one, for instance, I consider the actions of a prominent aristocrat

²⁸ 'C.', 'ART. XII. Alfred; a Tragedy,' *Monthly Review, Or, Literary Journal, 1752-1825* 58, (February 1778): 144.

²⁹ *London Chronicle*, January 20-22, 1778.

³⁰ Daniel O'Quinn, *Staging Governance: Theatrical Imperialism in London, 1770-1800* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2005), 11.

who stood up at the climax of Garrick's reworked masque to sing 'Rule Britannia.' According to newspaper accounts, this aristocrat makes her own spectacle, becoming part of the 'performance space' beyond the stage, as other audience members turn to appreciate her patriotism. This is an instance not just of Alfred being performed, but of individuals making a performance out of their own responses.

Similarly, John Penn attempts to unite the social strata of the theatre audience in the prologue to *The Battle of Eddington* (1796). He draws a conceptual link between Alfred's mission to politically unite the peoples of the British Isles and the social role of the theatre in bringing those people together under one roof. Through the theatre, the Saxon king is able to present messages of mass unity to a mass audience. As Bolton has argued, 'The construction of an evening's entertainment invited Georgian audiences to participate in a heterogeneous fantasy of communal identity, and theatrical paratexts – prologues and epilogues in particular – repeatedly present audiences that are fixated by the scene of the theatre itself: the scene of the Town coming together to be mirrored on the stage.'³¹ As shall be given special attention in chapter four, this unique ability of the theatre to instil a sense of public identity on its audience lent Alfredian drama an advantage over other literary forms. Reading a novel or an epic poem concerning Alfred may work in stirring an individual heart, but only on stage could the Saxon king prompt a shared, public display of national and social sentiments. The character of Alfred flourished as part of this theatrical culture which included audiences in its performances and prompted them to respond. 'Theatre,' as Bolton summarises, 'invited spectators to participate in a fantasy of

³¹ Betsy Bolton, 'Theorising Audience and Spectatorial Agency,' in *The Oxford Handbook of the Georgian Theatre, 1737-1832*, eds. Julia Swindells and David Francis Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 32-3.

communally embodied, public identity.³² Alfred's speeches, across all plays looked at in this thesis, have the express intention of projecting their message outwards from the confines of the play itself into the pit and galleries. The messages of national and social unity contained within are intended as much for the eighteenth century audience as the play's ninth-century vassals. Just as the editors of *The Oxford Handbook of the Georgian Theatre* have 'come to understand the Georgian theatre as an affective and ideological engine of, and not simply a mirror for, the period's structures of feeling,' so too should we understand theatrical depictions of Alfred as instruments of that engine.³³ They undertake its ideological work and help the theatrical space itself to function as a machine of society.

Through the copies of plays sent to the Lord Chamberlain for censorship, there is also the potential to identify changes between the submitted work and that which was published. The majority of Alfred plays appear to sail through the censor's office unimpeded, with only minor changes requested. However, one play in particular was heavily edited: John Penn's *The Battle of Eddington* (1796), the changes to which shall be discussed in detail in chapter four. In summary, they largely involve the contentious issue of Ireland's loyalties and role within the French Revolutionary war. There are no alterations to Alfred's character itself, though, and the Lord Chamberlain's changes seek to strengthen rather than undermine the play's primary message regarding Alfred's potential as a unifying figure.

³² Ibid., 37.

³³ David Francis Taylor, 'Introduction,' *The Oxford Handbook of The Georgian Theatre, 1737-1832* eds. Julia Swindells and David Francis Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 5.

Despite Penn's play, the absence of changes anywhere else is perhaps surprising given the contested nature of Alfred's character, particularly in the middle of the century. This state of affairs, however, does provide some fuel for speculation on issues of authorial intention and interpretation of Alfred from the governmental perspective. The revived version of the Thomson-Garrick masque was seemingly not submitted to the censor, just like every version of the masque since 1745. Evidently the censor's office was not picking up on the dynamic changes this text was going through between the decades of the 1740s and 1770s. Other plays, such as Home's *Tragedy* (1778), show no meaningful changes between the published edition and that submitted to the Lord Chamberlain. This suggests that the plays themselves were not considered politically sensitive material and provides further evidence for the argument expressed elsewhere in this introduction that the literary Alfreds of the late eighteenth century were largely depoliticised versions of those circulating in radical and conservative tracts or histories.

The Alfred Story

This section explains what is meant by 'the Alfred story' and explains the literary-cultural exploration of the Alfred phenomenon contained in this thesis. As Keynes has demonstrated, 'The development of the Alfredian myth was set in motion during the king's own lifetime', principally through the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and Bishop Asser's *Life of Alfred*.³⁴ Both of these texts transmitted the historical events of Alfred's reign, including

³⁴ Keynes, 'Alfred,' 227-46. Keynes's essay is particularly helpful in highlighting the origins of the chief mythological elements of Alfred's story and I rely on the timeline he establishes for my comparison of the early development of the king's legacy with the eighteenth century.

exile, victory at Edington and subsequent reign of strength and innovation, to later centuries.

Both of the above Saxon texts were produced in Alfred's kingdom and, unsurprisingly, depicted the king in a positive light. In them, a number of the elements of the Alfred mythology were set in motion: the story of the young prince taken to Rome aged five and proclaimed the future king of his people by the Pope (*Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*); the young Alfred triumphing over his siblings in a literary contest and thereby winning a book of poetry from his mother (Asser); the conscientious older man inventing the candle clock in order to make the most effective use of time (Asser). These early stories were frequently reproduced in the eighteenth century, most often in histories or short biographies, but they rarely appear in literary works. It is likely that Alfred's travels to Rome inspired the European odyssey of Sir Richard Blackmore's *Alfred: An Epick Poem* (1723), but later texts are much more locally bound to Wessex. Additionally, the growing Protestantism of the British nation made this visit an increasingly awkward and unwanted part of the legend. There was also an increasing desire to celebrate home-grown heroes to demonstrate that the English world was of equal standing, if not superior to, the ancient Roman or Greek.³⁵ Alfred's blessing by any kind of continental power, Catholic or otherwise, was undoubtedly unwelcome and does not appear in any of the literary texts considered in this thesis.

³⁵ For further detail, see Linda Pratt, 'Anglo-Saxon Attitudes?: Alfred the Great and the Romantic National Epic,' in *Literary Appropriations of the Anglo-Saxons from the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Century*, eds. Donald Scragg and Carole Weinberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 122-137.

One story that became more popular was that Alfred captured a Danish raven standard that the invaders believed to have magical powers. The symbolic and spiritual victory of the banner capture was especially retold at the end of the century, particularly in John O’Keeffe’s comedic *Alfred*, originally called *The Magic Banner*.

In the eleventh century, two stories became part of the myth that would have a lasting impact on eighteenth-century literary Alfreds. The first, the *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto*, told of the exiled king sharing his last loaf of bread with a stranger, who turned out to be St. Cuthbert. Although this episode did not have the same significance in Protestant Britain as it had during the Catholic medieval period, it clearly inspired some alternative storytelling. The highly significant character of the Hermit, present in many of the Alfred masques between 1740 and 1760, who makes a return in two epic poems of 1800 and 1801, is clearly based on St. Cuthbert. Stripped of his sainthood, this humble figure rewards the monarch’s kindness with the benefits of his spiritual powers. Also introduced in the eleventh century is the tale of Alfred’s burning of the cakes in the *Vita prima S. Neoti*. In exile, Alfred finds shelter in a cottage and is asked to keep a watch on some baking bread. Consumed with concern for his kingdom, the absent-minded monarch allows the cakes to burn and is accordingly reprimanded. A huge part of the Victorian cult, this episode is notably absent from almost all of the texts considered by this thesis. The fact that this cornerstone of the cult features so little here serves to justify the consideration of eighteenth-century Alfreds as distinct from later conceptions.

William of Malmesbury was the first to introduce what was to prove the most popular episode of Alfred's life in the literature of the eighteenth century: the tale of the Saxon monarch disguising himself as a harpist in order to sneak into the Danish camp and ascertain the strength of his enemy. This part of the story would be referred to throughout the eighteenth century, proving to be one of the myth's most popular elements, as well as causing a great deal of contention when not told to the satisfaction of audiences.

Malmesbury was also responsible for establishing Alfred as the instigator of hundreds and tithings in England, and in the *Mirror of Justices*, a thirteenth-century tract, 'Alfred makes his first appearance in his capacity as the originator of a constitution.'³⁶ These were widespread claims in the eighteenth century and can be found in countless national and local histories. Again, however, they were rarely conveyed in literary works. The same can be said for Alfred's supposed founding of the University of Oxford, a story first told in the middle of the fourteenth century. The claim itself found a lot of traction in historical texts, particularly amongst those with some connection to Oxford itself.³⁷ But this was a story that didn't resonate outside of elite circles, and certainly didn't lend itself to dramatic retellings of the king's life, demonstrating little about either the king's inner struggles or military prowess. The more political aspects of Alfred's story, including his supposed founding of the English constitution, institution of juries and hundreds and tithings, have a negligible role in fictional works, most often forming part of a victory speech in which he sets out the ambitions of his reign. Similarly, countless local histories throughout the century referenced Alfred's building works, civic improvements and institutions as frequent reference points in the development

³⁶ Keynes, 'Alfred,' 235.

³⁷ See Cox, 'King Alfred', 37-39.

of their own areas, giving the king an originary significance on a local as well as a national level.³⁸ Other than forming part of a post-battle proclamation, however, these prevalent reference points are also largely absent from literary works.

The Elizabethan age was the period in which the majority of the mythical elements of the Alfred story gained respectability, mostly through the work of Archbishop of Canterbury Matthew Parker. During the medieval period, Alfred was outshone by other legendary kings, including King Arthur and Edward the Confessor. But nationally-minded Protestants such as Parker gave Alfred the opportunity to take prominence through his translations of Latin texts into the Saxon vernacular; an Anglicising project that appealed to the Tudors. Later in the seventeenth century, Sir John Spelman 'effectively determined the parameters of Alfredian studies' through his biography of the Saxon monarch, the *Life of King Alfred* (c. 1640).³⁹

These constitute the main elements of Alfred's life and reign that, in varying combinations, formed the spine of 'the Alfred story' in the eighteenth century. When it comes to the phrase 'the Alfred story,' then, I mean the narrative constructed around the combined mythological and historical elements of the king's reign, as told or understood by eighteenth-century Britons. I am largely uninterested in the accuracy of the story in regards to its historical 'truth' – whether as understood today or at the time.

³⁸ For example: 'The Houses within the City Walls (which are said to have been built by King Alfred about the year 900).' *The New Bath Guide*, 5th edition (Bath: C. Pope, 1770), 40. *The Complete English Traveller* (London: J. Cooke, 1773) makes multiple references to Alfred as the founder of towns or historical structures across the country.

³⁹ Keynes, 'Alfred,' 254.

The Alfred story as it stood in the middle of the century, then, was essentially a tale of fortitude and insecurity, concerned with the emergence of a latent greatness in the figure of King Alfred, kept from power by evil forces. This greatness would eventually become manifest through the king's restored faith in himself and ultimately through military victory. Exile and isolation on Athelney provided the raw materials for the former state of affairs, triumph at the Battle of Edington the latter. Excepting the texts considered in chapter four, each of the literary works I consider is primarily based upon this narrative structure. The original masque of the 1740s, for instance, deploys the Alfred story as an allegory for Prince Frederick's frustrated time as Prince of Wales, in which he was prevented from taking the throne. Home's *Alfred: A Tragedy* (1778), however, uses the Alfred story as an opportunity to depict intense personal suffering that is eventually banished through the strength of positive, martial masculinity. And Anne Fuller in 1789 uses the Alfred story in *The Son of Ethelwolf* to demonstrate how a monarch is lost without the support of their subjects, but who can achieve great things once it is achieved. On the most basic level, the Alfred story is the telling of trial by exile, followed by turn of fortune or mental state to victory. Questions surrounding the details of this trial (how and why it came about, what was endured, what was overcome) depend upon the interpretation and imagination of individual authors.

The progression of changes to the malleable Alfred story across crucial periods in the eighteenth century, which is charted through this thesis, is as follows. In the texts considered in chapters one and two, the story is as described, becoming more grand and spectacular, certainly, but still a story of national salvation and personal redemption that

only Alfred can accomplish. These versions heavily feature Athelney, exile and Edington, with the majority of the drama focused upon Alfred coping with initial defeat and the kidnapping of his wife, his disguise mission into the Viking camp and various other undercover interactions between the king in exile and his subjects. Alongside these key moments, a number of other elements appear, scattered throughout the texts and only playing minor roles, such as capturing the banner, burning the cakes and a de-Catholicised version of the St. Cuthbert episode.

The texts considered in chapter three still have many of these elements, but the character of Alfred is developed much more strongly: emphasis is given to attributes of patience, faith, confidence in others and willingness to learn from his subjects. There is a lot more interest in what makes Alfred wise, a good ruler and able to overcome difficulties. This allows writers to develop Alfred as a fully-rounded character and have him interact with a greater ensemble of subjects. The despair so prevalent in earlier depictions is significantly diminished and always overcome. The king's undercover activities take on an increasingly important role, peaking in 1789 with Anne Fuller's *The Son of Ethelwolf*. This novel is almost exclusively interested in instructive conversations between the monarch and his subjects. The more Alfred's significance to ordinary Britons increased, the more the weight of these interactions grew. In this shift we can see the lessening of the king's political and military significance in literary works, and more focus given to his character as an influence upon others. The role he played in uniting his subjects becomes more prominent than his role as victorious warlord or constitutional reformer.

The texts of the fourth chapter take this unifying role to its peak. All three of the plays considered in 1796 depict Alfred in the midst of his reign – already powerful and prepared to deploy loyalist rhetoric supporting constitutional monarchy. This reflects the growing familiarity and popularity of Alfred’s story. By 1796, audiences knew the king and what he fought for; now they wanted to see him successful, putting into action the values he championed. This allowed the Alfreds of this cluster to represent established values and continuity, rather than being an instigator of change himself. He is a king firmly on the throne, defending against invaders clothed by their writers in the attire of revolutionaries. Edington is dropped and replaced with victory over the Viking warlord Hasten in 896. The anniversary of the victory is clearly an influence, but by mobilising this particular event later in the king’s reign, Alfred’s rule is more stable and his ability to pull together subjects from across the British Isles more believable. Threats of French invasion and internal revolutionaries caused writers to stress far more significantly Alfred’s abilities as a pan-British leader, for which his military strength and sound kingship are seen as particularly appealing to ancient Scots, Welsh and Irish.

In regards to what ‘the Alfred story’ means for the disciplinary orientation of this thesis, my work is interested in a deliberately flexible range of evidence for this narrative, as driven by the cluster approach. I have not hesitated to include non-fictional texts when they offer productive comparisons, such as Obadiah Hulme’s *An Historical Essay on the English Constitution* (1771) in chapter one, Alexander Bicknell’s *Life of Alfred the Great* (1777) in chapter two, and David Williams’s *Lessons to a Young Prince* (1790) in chapter three.

To turn to a theoretical interpretation of the Alfred story, it represents the unity of both myth and history. 'Myth and history are often considered antithetical modes of explanation,' Heehs states, 'those who study the data of one field tend to look down on or exclude those of the other.'⁴⁰ My literary approach attempts to bring the historiography of Alfred to a state in which myth and history are of equal importance. I refer to 'the Alfred story' as a means of combining myth and history into a single narrative collated from aspects of both. In my interpretation, the 'facts' of history combine with the tales of the myth - the 'set of propositions, often stated in narrative form, that is accepted uncritically by a culture or speech-community and that serves to found or affirm its self-conception.'⁴¹ Alfred's exile on Athelney, for instance, I would largely define as history; the king's disguise mission into the Danish camp as a harpist a probable myth. But when it comes to scrutinising the choices of literary writers, writers whose primary intention is to entertain their audiences, the arguable or probable distinctions between these terms lies outside the concerns of this study. What is of most interest to me is the incorporated whole: the melange of history and myth into something that is neither and both simultaneously. I take each text to be thus regardless of genre and heedless of the protestations of any authors claiming to be representing authenticated fact.

That isn't to say that the truth or accuracy of a particular text is ignored. Questions of historical authenticity come of interest to the literary scholar when they impact upon the believability of the narrative and the subsequent effectiveness of its impact upon an audience or reader. In fact, Home's *Alfred* (1778) is interesting because critics and audiences

⁴⁰ Peter Heehs, 'Myth, History, and Theory,' *History and Theory* 33, no.1 (Feb. 1994): 1.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

were unhappy with his liberality with the truth. There is clearly a very real, but impossible to define, 'final adequacy' of Alfred storytelling, one that depends on the subjective suspension of belief of audience members and the background preparation they have received before encountering a given work. New developments in the Alfred story are measured against previous conceptions by writers and audiences alike. Where there is significant friction in this process, we can learn a great deal about the limitations of interpretations of the Saxon monarch in the public eye. Where innovations seemingly slide naturally into the narrative, we can discern not just what stories eighteenth-century audiences heard about King Alfred, but what stories they *wanted* to hear about him. Changes to myth or history in retellings of stories, as Heehs explains, 'are important symptoms and therefore indicators of problems which might not otherwise be recognised.' I treat the flurry of innovative works regarding King Alfred in the latter half of the eighteenth century as indicators of such problems - problems identified and made coherent in isolation through my use of textual clusters. Alterations to the Alfred story are not mere whims, nor bored attempts to renovate well-trodden paths: 'they are evidence.'⁴²

Early Eighteenth-Century Alfreds

Alfred begins the eighteenth century as a praiseworthy figure in a period of history treated with disdain. Defoe wrote: 'With Hengist: Saxons; Danes with Sueno came, / In search of plunder, not in search of Fame [...] All these their barbarous offspring left behind.'⁴³ From the accession of George I in 1714, however, loyal Hanoverians invoked Saxonism as a legitimising strategy for the new dynasty. According to Joanne Parker: 'Royalist scholars

⁴² Ibid., 12.

⁴³ Daniel Defoe, *The True-Born Englishman* (London: 1701), 11.

tried to counter widespread British antipathy to a foreign monarch on the throne by encouraging interest in Britain's Anglo-Saxon rulers and promoting the notion of racial descent from them to the Hanoverian succession.⁴⁴ Not only was this responsible for raising Alfred's profile amongst the educated elite, it also came with distinctly nationalist overtones. The consequence of this legitimising mission was the claim that there was something definably British about the Anglo-Saxons themselves. The dedication 'To The King' which Edmund Gibson placed in his 1722 edition of Camden's *Britannia* proudly claimed: 'Not only our Histories, but our Language, our Laws, our Customs, our Names of Persons and Names of Places, do all abundantly testify, that the greatest part of your Majesty's Subjects here, are of Saxon Original.'⁴⁵ Despite this, Saxon literary enthusiasts outside of elite Hanoverian supporters were few. In his 1731 *Advice to the Poets*, Aaron Hill lamented that British writers were 'slow, to sing the Saxon Fame.'⁴⁶

Alfred's first appearance in eighteenth-century literature came in the form of Sir Richard Blackmore's 1723 epic poem *Alfred*. This text evidences a lack of interest in the recorded events of Britain's ancient Anglo-Saxon culture and society. The plot takes Alfred out of Saxon England into Classical Europe, on an odyssey around Germany, Italy, Spain and North Africa. On his travels he assists local nobility and magistrates struggling with a variety of civil turmoils. It isn't until the twelfth and final book, in which Alfred returns to England, that we encounter any kind of Danish threat and Alfred's salvation of his kingdom comes only as the

⁴⁴ Joanne Parker, *'England's Darling': The Victorian Cult of Alfred the Great* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2007), 41.

⁴⁵ William Camden, *Britannia: or a Chorographical Description of Great Britain and Ireland*, 2nd ed. Vol. 1. (London: Awnsham Churchill, 1722), iv-v.

⁴⁶ Aaron Hill, *Advice to the Poets* (London: T. Warner, 1731), 35.

coda to his more intrepid European adventures. Blackmore's epic evidences an interest in Alfred in name only, as an ancient English intermediary through which the Classical Mediterranean can be explored.

Despite its deviations from Saxon history, Blackmore's poem is nonetheless prescient in regards to the literary mission upon which the figure of Alfred would embark over the coming century. Despite engaging the king in classical fantasy, Blackmore's attempt to give a certain degree of importance to Alfred's reign in the national consciousness is worthy of attention. Blackmore had form in drawing attention to historical monarchs of national importance, with his previous epics *Prince Arthur* (1695) and *King Arthur* (1697). The poet's preference for Classical plot, style and allusion lent the weight of the recognised cultural form for national origin myths into Alfred's story and placed the Saxon king in a legitimising literary environment. Blackmore's epic is the watershed moment from which writers began considering Alfred as a suitable hero for fiction.

Whilst Blackmore's poem can evidence Alfred's growing cultural significance, it also indicated areas in which the figure of the king was deficient, limiting his impact on eighteenth-century readers. There is a notable absence of the events of the Alfredian myth. The poem contains no burnt cakes, no disguised minstrels and the king doesn't set foot in Athelney. So although Blackmore does seem keen to put forward Alfred's credentials as a national hero, he doesn't construct the case for his importance via the king's historical story itself. There is no role for what would become the most iconic episodes later in the century.

It would actually be the dedication of Blackmore's poem that would prove most prescient. Dedicated to 'His Highness the Illustrious Prince Frederick of Hanover', *Alfred* was intended to inspire the grandson to George I, in order to 'form his Mind for Empire, and the Steady Direction of the Reins of Government.'⁴⁷ A decade or so later it was Frederick himself who was keen to push the association with Alfred.

Frederick left Hanover in 1728 upon his father's accession to the throne as George II and set about distinguishing himself from his father's politics and cultural influences.⁴⁸ The loyal group of politicians, nobility and artists who centred around the young prince in the 1730s were referred to as 'The Patriots' and they were united by their opposition to the politics of George II and Robert Walpole. The Patriots prioritised Britain's growing naval empire across the Atlantic and, as Gerrard has shown, they promoted 'an active engagement with the British past, with its patriotic glories and its historical myths.'⁴⁹ One of the 'patriotic glories' celebrated by the Patriots and given new life by their ideology was the story of King Alfred.

The Patriots saw in Alfred the manifestation of the virtues expressed in Viscount Bolingbroke's *The Idea of a Patriot King*, a political manifesto published in 1740. Bolingbroke's text calls for a monarch who ruled *for* his people; a compassionate, reasoning

⁴⁷ Sir Richard Blackmore, *Alfred. An Epick Poem* (London: James Knapton, 1723), iii.

⁴⁸ For recent scholarly interest in Frederick and the Patriots and a reappraisal of his contribution to opposition politics, often judged to be lukewarm, see Robin Eagles, 'Frederick, Prince of Wales, the 'Court' of Leicester House and the 'Patriot' Opposition to Walpole, c.1733–1742,' *The Court Historian* 21, no.2 (2016): 140-156 and "No more to be said"? Reactions to the death of Frederick Lewis, prince of Wales,' *Historical Research* 80, no.209 (2007): 346–367; also Gabriel Glickmann, 'Parliament, the Tories and Frederick, Prince of Wales.' *Parliamentary History* 30, no.2 (2011): 120-141.

⁴⁹ Christine Gerrard, *The Patriot Opposition to Walpole: Politics, Poetry, and National Myth, 1725-1742* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 8.

manager of affairs for the population's benefit, concerned entirely with the prosperity and happiness of his subjects.⁵⁰ The Patriots located these ideals in both Frederick and Alfred, and throughout the 1730s and 40s the two men were frequently connected. James Thomson, Patriot poet and receiver of a generous allowance from Frederick, wrote in *The Seasons*:

[...] Alfred thine,
 In whom the Splendor of heroic War,
 And more heroic Peace, when govern'd well,
 Combine; whose hallow'd Name the Virtues saint,
 And his own Muses love, the best of Kings.⁵¹

However, although the Saxon king was extremely popular amongst Patriots, he shared the stage with the group's many other heroes, as in the poem's following line: 'With him thy Edwards and thy Henrys shine.'

The bust of Alfred at Stowe, the country home of prominent Patriot Viscount Cobham, serves as the perfect symbol of Alfred's cultural currency at this point in the century. Commissioned in 1734, the Temple of British Worthies houses a pantheon of historical British figures who exemplify Patriot values.⁵² On one of the plinths stands Alfred, his inscription proclaiming:

⁵⁰ This way of thinking about Alfred's kingship had lasting implications. 'This great man [Alfred] was even jealous of the privileges of his subjects; and his whole life was spent in protecting them, his last will breathes the same spirit, declaring that he had left his people as free as their own thoughts.' Edmund Burke, *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke, Vol.1: The Early Writings*, eds. T.O. McLoughlin, James T. Boulton and William B. Todd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 411. The most significant literary inheritances of this idea can be seen in John Home's *Alfred* and Alexander Bicknell's *Patriot King*, discussed in chapters two and three respectively.

⁵¹ James Thomson, *The Seasons* (London: A. Millar, 1744), 115.

⁵² Figures 1-3.

Figure One

Bust of King Alfred the Great in the Temple of British Worthies, Stowe, Buckinghamshire.



Figure Two

Alfred's inscription on The Temple of British Worthies at Stowe, Buckinghamshire.



Figure Three

The Temple of British Worthies at Stowe, Buckinghamshire.



The mildest, justest, most beneficent of kings
Who drove out the Danes, secured the seas, protected learning
Establish'd juries, crush'd corruption, guarded liberty
And was the founder of the English constitution

The king's relevance to the mercantile, imperial vision of Patriot politics is clear, as is the attribution of the guardianship of liberty.

For the Patriots, the constitution Alfred supposedly instituted during his reign was pivotal and provided them with an idealistic model against which the Walpole ministry would always fall short. In Alfred himself they found a king concerned with the welfare of his people; a king, they believed, that Britain sorely lacked in the present moment. To be considered a great 'British worthy' was clearly a significant tribute to the Saxon king and this Patriot praise laid the foundations for Alfred's later popularity. However, just like Blackmore's poem, Patriot endorsement came with its limitations. Not only is Alfred just one among many, the relative powerlessness and ineffectiveness of Patriot political ideology meant that the Temple of British Worthies, grand as its symbolism was, nevertheless remained a mere monument to protest and frustration. Instead of conducting formative cultural work among the wider public or literary world, Alfred remained buried in the woods of Buckinghamshire.

All this was to change thanks to the birthday celebrations in 1740 of Princess Augusta, the infant daughter of Frederick. The Prince of Wales commissioned his undersecretary, the playwright David Mallet, along with James Thomson, to write a masque to be performed at

his house at Cliveden to mark the occasion. The story they chose to tell was that of King Alfred and would be the first performance of *Alfred: A Masque*.⁵³ The masque was also partly an ‘anniversary celebration of the accession of the House of Hannover on 1st August,’ demonstrating once again the legitimising strategy of reinforcing Hanoverian-Saxon connections.⁵⁴ Contemporary newspapers saw the masque as a personal and private performance, praising not so much the work itself, but the fact that Frederick was celebrating his dynastic position with such grand themes:

There was never any Thing gave me greater Pleasure, than to hear, that the Heir Apparent to our Crown was entertaining himself with a Masque, wherein our great King Alfred was represented, as rising from the utmost distress, to redeem and establish the Liberties of his Country.⁵⁵

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the masque genre was ‘the one indigenous form that England at this time possessed, and was indelibly associated with ideas of national identity.’⁵⁶ It ‘focused on the figure of the ruler and celebrated the triumph of harmony over hostile forces.’⁵⁷ More importantly, the masque form in the eighteenth century was part of ‘efforts to create an indigenous operatic tradition’ and was deployed by Colley Cibber at the

⁵³ See Oliver Cox, ‘Frederick, Prince of Wales, and the First Performance of ‘Rule, Britannia!’ in *The Historical Journal* 56, no.4. (December 2013): 931-954, for a demonstration of how the motivations of the Patriot group and the worries facing them helped to shape this performance, along with analysis of contemporary eyewitness accounts. See also: Michael Burden, *Garrick, Arne and the Masque of Alfred* (Lewiston: The Edwin Meller Press, 1994) and Alan D. McKillop, ‘The Early History of Alfred,’ *Philological Quarterly* 41, no.1 (1962): 311-324.

⁵⁴ Todd Gilman, *The Theatre Career of Thomas Arne* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2013), 119.

⁵⁵ *London Magazine*, August, 1740, quoted in Alan D. McKillop, ‘The Early History of Alfred’ in *Philological Quarterly* 41, no.1 (1962): 312.

⁵⁶ Michael Burden, ‘Opera in Eighteenth-Century England: English opera, masques, ballad operas’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Eighteenth-Century Opera*, eds. Anthony R. DeDonna and Pierpaolo Polzonetti (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 210.

⁵⁷ Guy Spielmann, ‘Court Spectacle and Entertainment,’ in *The Oxford Handbook of the Baroque*, ed. John D. Lyons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 813. For more on the seventeenth-century court masque, see, Andrew Walkling, *Masque and Opera in England, 1656-1688* (London: Routledge, 2017).

start of the century to 'establish the English language on the operatic stage.' Scattered and occasional appearances of masques throughout the rest of the century 'marked the current feeling of the population, celebrated the Royal family, and provided an injection of patriotic fervour.'⁵⁸ This is the context within which the early Alfred masques were working: a national creative endeavour celebrating an indigenous topic and an indigenous hero, with overtones of praise for Britain's current rulers as inheritors of that glory. In the case of the Patriots, this was Frederick.

The plot of the Thomson-Mallet masque is intertwined with these conditions of its staging, and Alfred's character is consequently affected by both. The events of the play take place on the Isle of Athelney during Alfred's exile as a parallel of Frederick's own isolation from the throne. A dangerous sense of siege accompanies the action: 'the raging foe is all around us', as Alfred hides amongst 'a deep defence of woods [...] A sheltering grove.'⁵⁹ As Alfred is revitalised at the masque's conclusion, the drama heralds the arrival of Alfred's England and stages a projection forward from his reign to British royal and national successes in succeeding centuries. Part of the Hermit's magic is the summoning, for the purposes of Alfred's education, 'a long line of kings, / From thee descending, glorious and renown'd', including the spirits of Edward III, the Black Prince, Elizabeth I and William III.⁶⁰ These glorious monarchs, who all keep Alfred company in statue form on Cobham's Temple of British Worthies, tie the successes of Alfred's reign into the wider Patriot vision and lend an immemorial significance to his personal achievements.

⁵⁸ Michael Burden, 'The Independent Masque 1700-1800: A Catalogue,' *Royal Musical Association Research Chronicle* 28 (1995): 59-61.

⁵⁹ James Thomson and David Mallet, *Alfred: a Masque*, (London: A. Millar, 1740), 8.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

These would be encapsulated in the masque's most iconic element. Towards the end of the performance, a bard stepped forward to sing:

When Britain first, at heaven's command,

Arose from out the azure main;

This was the charter of the land

And guardian Angels sung this strain:

'Rule Britannia, rule the waves;

Britons never will be slaves'⁶¹

Thomas Arne's musical masterpiece would inspire Britons for the rest of the century and carry the name of Alfred in its wake. Its espousal of Patriot values of trans-Atlantic empire and unconquerable, unequalled British liberty would drive forward generations. As Joanne Parker argues: 'In terms of the development of the Alfredian myth, this marked the first popularisation of Spelman's claim that Alfred created the navy [...] The ditty also represented the beginning of Alfred's role as a hero of *British* rather than merely English history.'⁶² The Hermit, overshadowing Alfred somewhat, sums up the visionary message of this musical climax in the masque's closing lines: 'Britons, proceed [...] rule the main', from 'the golden South', 'soft East' and 'stormy North.' Notably, Alfred's success is tied in with the American colonies, 'beyond the vast Atlantic surge' where '[Britain's] sons [...] sow / The seeds of rising empire, arts and arms.'⁶³ The full score to 'Rule Britannia' was published in 1742, and the development of the masque with this song as its climax would make military

⁶¹ Ibid., 42.

⁶² Parker, *England's Darling*, 64-5.

⁶³ Thomson and Mallet, *Alfred*, 43-4.

victory the dominant theme.⁶⁴ Charles Burney, apprentice to Arne and composer of the music of the 1751 version, described 'Rule Britannia' as: 'the best song that ever was produced by a native of England in our language. The whole nation has since been of my opinion.'⁶⁵ But Alfred's personal greatness in this first masque was in the end a little too hidden. Mallet would himself later acknowledge that Alfred was not 'the principal figure in his own Masque.'⁶⁶

The first version of the masque to make it to the public stage after the Cliveden performance was Thomas Arne's *Alfred, an Opera* in 1745.⁶⁷ The *Opera* evidences that, for Arne, Alfred was not yet primarily a military figure; it is the Earl of Devon who triumphs as the masque's warrior. Alfred is described as a 'gracious Monarch, sunk with Grief [...] Lost to all Comfort and Relief.' Rather than a warrior, he is the 'Father of the State.'⁶⁸ Nevertheless, as Gilman has shown, 'in this year of the Jacobite rebellion, 'Rule Britannia' became very popular', continuing Alfred's legitimising connection with the Hanoverian regime.⁶⁹ In contrast, the character of Alfred in Mallet's 1751 rewrite is far more militaristic.⁷⁰ The king's role is largely dictated by two concerns: firstly, the masque being a public, rather than a private (royal), performance and, secondly, an effort to make Alfred: 'what he should have

⁶⁴ Roger Fiske, *English Theatre Music in the Eighteenth Century*, 2nd ed. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 191.

⁶⁵ Charles Burney, *Memoirs of Dr. Charles Burney, 1726-1769*, eds. Garry Bowers, Kerry S. Grant and Slava Klima (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 99.

⁶⁶ David Mallet, *Alfred: a Masque* (London: A. Millar, 1751), i.

⁶⁷ See figure four for Burden's graphical illustration of the development and interconnectedness of the different versions of the masque. This version of the masque was performed at Drury Lane on 20th March and 3rd and 25th April 1745, and 12th May 1746.

⁶⁸ Thomas Arne, *Alfred, an Opera* (London: A. Millar, 1745), 11; 5.

⁶⁹ Gilman, *Arne*, 154.

⁷⁰ Mallet's masque was performed 15 times at Drury Lane between 21st February and 19th April 1751.

Figure Four

'Relationship of the libretti of the masque of *Alfred*.' Michael Burden. Table 21 from *Garrick, Arne and the Masque of Alfred* (Lewiston: The Edwin Meller Press, 1994), 127.

Relationship of the libretti of the masque of *Alfred*

The arrows indicate that material from the earlier libretto can be found in a later version.

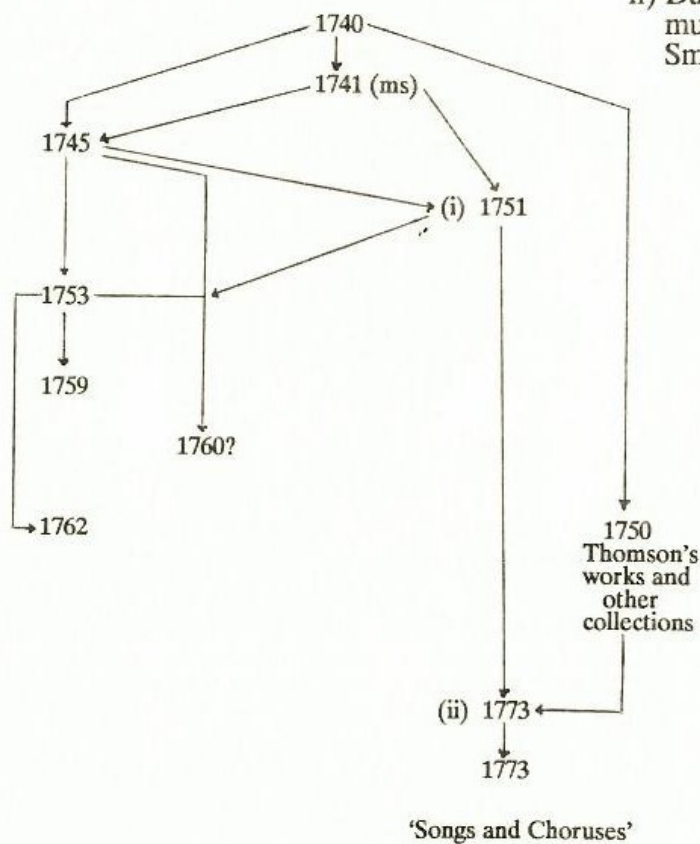
Libretti prepared by Thomas Arne primarily as vehicles for his music.

Libretti relating to James Thomson; music by Thomas Arne.

Libretti prepared for David Garrick for his self-aggrandisement

i) David Mallet;
music by Charles Burney with Arne

ii) David Garrick;
music by Theodore Smith with Arne



been at first, the principal figure in his own Masque.⁷² With Thomson dead, Mallet had free rein to rework the text however he wished. 'The result,' according to Fiske, 'though less poetic, is a little more dramatic.'⁷³ No longer a vanity or confidence-boosting project for Frederick and the Patriots, the former having also died by 1751, it is clear that Alfred's social, public role was considered with some degree of seriousness. The prologue attempts to picture Mallet as a playwright concerned with doing justice to the figure of Alfred and the drama that follows 'spread[s] his fame, and share[s] his love.' Additionally, there is a tangible sense of artistic anxiety in regards to audience approval of the representation. The final lines of the prologue represent the audience as a jury, tying the performance in with Alfred's legal legacy. This depiction of the king 'by free Britons, will be freely tried.'⁷⁴ The task of representing Alfred is figured as a laudable, if challenging, public duty, enabling popular celebration of the king to find a forum.

The masque's expanded scope under Mallet also indicates the desire to transform Alfred's story from that of a frustrated exile into a popular national drama, culminating in the king's emergence as a military hero. In regards to making Alfred the masque's 'principal figure,' no surer statement could have been made than the casting of David Garrick in the role of the Saxon king. The weight and credibility which his representation alone would bring to Alfred's character was a significant statement for the cultural currency of the king's image. With the prologue making it clear that this is a play about Alfred and his achievements, the audience is prompted to revere a man: 'In arms renown'd, for arts of peace ador'd, / Alfred,

⁷² Mallet, *Alfred*, iii.

⁷³ Fiske, *English Theatre*, 224.

⁷⁴ Mallet, *Alfred*, iv.

the nation's father, more than lord.'⁷⁵ The vital combination of success in war and peace was a formula that would be constantly repeated in panegyrics of the king for the rest of the century, and became stock vocabulary for expressing Alfred's exemplary character. In 1751, Alfred is militarily capable, strategically wise and emotionally resolute. The prologue may praise Alfred in both war and peace, but it is exclusively a champion of the former who actually takes to the stage.

In tribute to Alfred, Mallet also rewrote the lyrics of 'Rule Britannia' to incorporate special verses about Alfred:

How blest the prince, reserv'd by fate,
In adverse days to mount thy throne!
Renew thy once triumphant state,
And on thy grandeur build his own⁷⁶

Making Alfred part of this powerfully patriotic song is an unequivocal signifier of the growing union between the figure of King Alfred and the national mission of the British state as understood and celebrated by its people.

The success of Mallet's rewrite of the masque and his far more militaristic conception of Alfred had a marked impact upon all future presentations of the drama, including Arne's continuing experimentation with his musical productions throughout the 1750s. The first of these was *Alfred the Great. A Drama for Music*, performed at the King's theatre on 12th May

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 65.

1753. Dialogue for this particular performance is taken primarily from Mallet's revised play and improvements to Alfred's assertiveness are therefore replicated. But in Arne's telling of the story, his dedication to music in large part undermines Alfred's military role; the king's strengthening character is manifested not in combat or shrewd wartime management, but in a faith in the invigorating effects of dance and music. In regards to Arne's masques in particular, it is difficult to argue with the assessment that their continued reinvention: 'was solely a matter of personal preference, rather than any serious attempt to provide a new or more attractive work for the public [...] What made it sufficiently popular to encourage this continual activity was the inclusion of 'Rule Britannia' in every version.'⁷⁷ However, the king's crucial transformation into a warrior does remain a vital, if delayed, part of the performance: 'thou shalt see me cloath'd in martial Terror, / Vindictive in the Cause of Liberty.'⁷⁸

1753 also saw the only other non-masque, literary text with Alfred in the title between 1723 and 1778: *Alfred the Great; Deliverer of his Country. A Tragedy*, written by an unknown author. The play is an enthusiastic engagement with the Alfred myth – far more expansive than the Athelney-focused masques and incorporating Alfred's entire Wessex dynasty into the narrative, including three sons and a daughter. The play includes the king's exile, his burning of the cakes and his disguise visit to the Danish camp, alongside military victory at Edington, the capture of the Danish raven banner and the founding of the Royal Navy. Despite the inclusion of all these fundamental elements of the Alfred's story (a collection that wouldn't be seen in a literary work until the final decades of the century) the play still

⁷⁷ Michael Burden, *Garrick, Arne and the Masque of Alfred* (Lewiston: The Edwin Meller Press, 1994), 96-7.

⁷⁸ Thomas Arne, *Alfred the Great, A Drama for Music* (London: 1753), 23.

appears tentative in celebrating outright the king's achievements as the rather inauspicious start to the Prologue suggests: 'Britons to Night; We shew that to retreat/ And temporise, once made a Monarch great.'⁷⁹ Although this is no doubt intended to be praiseworthy, it lacks the hyperbolic confidence in Alfred's legendary status of later texts. The play is also prescient in its attempt to pitch Alfred as a uniting force for all of the peoples of the British Isles – something that wasn't common in Alfred storytelling even by the late 1790s. The Battle of Edington begins with 'The English Standards' flying alongside the 'Welch' and the 'Scotish.'⁸⁰ However, it is worth noting the uncomfortable nature of this union: 'So we preserve the Scotch, and Welch our Friends,/ And by Northumbria, keep 'em both asunder:/ But Son be jealous, never lose an Inch/ Of that same Barrier.'⁸¹ Notably, this play was never performed.

Arne would try to find success once more with his 1753 script, with single performances in 1754 in March at Drury Lane and April and May at Covent Garden, under the title of *Alfred the Great, an Oratorio*. Just like the *Opera*, neither of these *Alfreds* would be commercial successes.⁸²

⁷⁹ *Alfred the Great; Deliverer of his Country* (London: M. Mechell, 1753), 3.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁸² After 1754, Arne's Alfred was performed in its various incarnations in 1755 (DL 19th March), 1759 (CG 2nd February, 12th May; DL 23rd and 30th March), 1760 (CG 27th March), 1761 (Kings 12th March) and 1762 (DL 17th March, CG 23rd March). See William Van Lemep et al. *Index to the London Stage* (Carbondale and Edwardville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1979), 540.

History, Politics and Nationalism

Whilst the Alfred masques emphasised Alfred's role as military saviour, the histories of the early- and mid-eighteenth century were laying the foundations for Alfred's political significance. Rapin de Thoyras's *Histoire d'Angleterre*, translated by Nicholas Tindal (1727), 'rapidly established itself as the standard treatment of English history before and after the Norman Conquest.'⁸³ Specifically, however, Rapin's history helped prepare the political appropriation of Alfred's figure by legitimising and popularising the belief that his Anglo-Saxon constitution was an immemorial right of Britons:

Whoever has any knowledge of the English Constitution, will easily be convinced, that the Customs now practised in that Kingdom, are, for the most part, the same the Anglo-Saxons brought with them from the northern Countries, and lastly from Germany.⁸⁴

These were themes pursued by the Patriots, and Bolingbroke's writings in *The Craftsman* newspaper indicate how such an understanding of Saxon history could be used to reform modern-day politics, formulating change as restoration:

The natural Effect of such Reflections [...] must be to raise in our Minds the honest Ambition of emulating the Virtue and Courage of our Forefathers, in the Cause of Liberty; and to inspire a reasonable Fear, heightened by Shame, of losing what They preserved and delivered down to us.⁸⁵

Through this interpretation, popular liberties such as an extended franchise and more frequent elections, not to mention a restriction on the king's powers, could be dressed up as having a Saxon precedent, lent legitimacy and emotional resonance through the prism of the achievements of the great Alfred, and mobilised as a political argument for reform. As

⁸³ Keynes, 'Alfred,' 273.

⁸⁴ Paul Rapin de Thoyras, *The History of England* vol.2, trans. Nicholas Tindal (London: James and John Knapton, 1728), 138.

⁸⁵ *The Craftsman*. Nov 9, 1734.

the century progressed, Alfred also became a signature element of the Whig 'Norman yoke' theory of British constitutionalism, which went as follows:

Before 1066 the Anglo-Saxon inhabitants of this country lived as free and equal citizens, governing themselves through representative institutions. The Norman conquest deprived them of this liberty; and established the tyranny of an alien king and landlords. But the people did not forget the rights they had lost.⁸⁶

Adherers to this historical belief would continually call up Alfred as the figurehead of the pre-Norman liberties of the English constitution.⁸⁷

More critically for this study, mid-century histories also helped to establish a tangible grasp of the king's personality and character, evidencing a familiarisation of Alfred in the educated eighteenth-century world. Smollett confidently told his readers that: '[Alfred] was, doubtless, an object of the most perfect esteem and admiration; for exclusive of the qualities which distinguished him as a warrior and legislator, his personal character was amiable in every respect.'⁸⁸ Hume went further:

The merit of this prince, both in private and public life, may with advantage be set in opposition to that of any monarch or citizen, which the annals of any age or any nation can present to us. He seems indeed to be the complete model of that perfect character, which, under the denomination of a sage or wise man, the philosophers have been fond of

⁸⁶ Christopher Hill, *Puritanism and Revolution: Studies in Interpretation of the English Revolution of the 17th Century* (London: Panther Books, 1968), 64-65.

⁸⁷ See chapter one for an in-depth consideration of how Alfred was mobilised to support this view.

⁸⁸ Tobias Smollett, *A Complete History of England* vol.1 (London: James Rivington and James Fletcher, 1757), 148.

delineating, rather as a fiction of their imagination, than in hopes of ever seeing it reduced to practice.⁸⁹

Hume's observations are important for this study in two ways. Firstly, they signify a popular conception of the king himself, indicating that Alfred had an individual reputation at this time. This was an influential text: 'it was Hume, in effect, who set the view of English history which prevailed throughout the reign of George III', including the 'learned and somewhat austere' image of Alfred it presented.⁹⁰ But secondly, Hume makes an appeal to eighteenth-century writers to create more dynamic and believable Alfreds: 'we wish to see him delineated in more lively colours, and with more particular strokes, that we may at least perceive some of those small specks and blemishes, from which, as a man, it is impossible he could be entirely exempted.'⁹¹ Hume's appeal is fascinating from a literary point of view and raises the question of historical and personal legitimacy in depictions of the king that will be discussed throughout this thesis. It also constitutes something of a call to arms for literary writers to represent the events of Alfred's life and character creatively. 'Hume indirectly confesses and indulges,' James Noggle writes, 'the possibility of fantastic distortion of the past, a presentistic fiction of the imagination projected backward.'⁹²

⁸⁹ David Hume, *The History of England* vol.1 (London: A. Millar, 1762), 63.

⁹⁰ Keynes, 'Alfred', 282.

⁹¹ Hume, *History*, 63.

⁹² James Noggle, *The Temporality of Taste in Eighteenth-Century British Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 106. Consider also Edmund Burke's opinion: 'It is much to be lamented that a character, so formed to interest all men, involved in reverses of fortune, that make the most agreeable and useful part of history, should be only celebrated by pens so little suitable to the dignity of the subject.' *Writings and Speeches*, 410.

Meanwhile, at Stourhead, an eighteenth-century country house and landscape garden in Wiltshire, an architectural illustration of Alfred's mid-century significance was taking shape. On 23rd October 1762, after reading about Alfred in Voltaire's *L'Histoire Générale*, Stourhead's owner, Henry Hoare II, proposed in a letter to his daughter Lady Bruce: 'to erect a Tower on Kingsettle Hill where He set up His Standard after He came from His concealment in the Isle of Athelney near Taunton & the Earl of Devon had worsted the Danes.'⁹³ To complement the tower, Hoare also commissioned an impressively large bust of the Saxon king from Rysbrack and proceeded to adorn the lake in his gardens with Gothic structures, including a cottage, convent and 'druid's cell.' The implications of such enthusiasm for the Saxon past are useful for this study for two primary reasons: firstly, Alfred's singular prominence as the nation's hero marks out his triumphant emergence from the historical pantheon onto a platform of his own, no longer sharing with Arthur or Elizabeth. And secondly, the relationship between antiquity, military triumph and liberty present in the depictions at Stourhead serves to illustrate the tension between depictions of the political and the warrior king.

Shortly after proposing this construction, Hoare wrote to his son-in-law Lord Bruce on 18th November 1762 with a draft inscription for its base. Alongside the headline phrase, 'In memory of Alfred the Great, The Founder of the English Monarchy', were the expected praises of Alfred's political achievements, as 'The Giver of most excellent Laws, Jurys, the Bulwark of English Liberty' and as the man responsible for putting in motion Britain's overseas empire. 'By a determined courage & unwearied attention to the increase of our

⁹³ Kenneth Woodbridge, *Landscape and Antiquity: Aspects of English Culture at Stourhead 1718 to 1838* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 53.

Naval Force,' Hoare wrote, Alfred 'protected us from Foreign Invasions & extended our Trade to the remote parts of The Globe.' It is a lengthy and comprehensive dedication, bringing together all of the varying strands of affection and admiration directed towards the figure of the king in the period. But in addition to these by now familiar accolades was an intriguing section which attempted something quite novel:

Britons will revere the Ashes of that Monarch by whose Lessons They have (under the protection of Divine Providence) subdued Their Enemy's this year with invincible Force by Land & Sea, in Europe, Asia, Africa & America, stop'd the Effusion of human blood & given peace & rest to the Earth.⁹⁴

By this reference to British successes in the Seven Years' War, Hoare was creating a direct association between Saxon and Georgian Britain. King Alfred's Tower had the dual purpose of celebrating not only Alfred's own military actions and victory, but also the remarkable successes of the British nation in the contemporary era, tying the two periods together with a strong sense of continuity. No longer just a figure of the past, Alfred was credited with helping to bring about the triumphs of the nation in the present day. This monument to antiquity, to monarchy, to liberty, was also unequivocally intended to be a monument to Britain's present-day conquests. The Seven Years' War was 'the fulfilment and ultimate expression of the mercantilist-imperialist goals and aspirations articulated for the past three decades [...] Politically, ideologically and materially, the war thus enhanced the potency of that heady brew of empire, liberty and national aggrandizement that had been rapidly consumed by large portions of the political public.'⁹⁵ In monuments like King Alfred's tower,

⁹⁴ Ibid., 55.

⁹⁵ Wilson, *Sense of the People*, 193.

and through other means such as popular performances of Rule Britannia, Alfred was seen as a foundational figure in this national destiny.

The inside of the tower was completely hollow and entirely uninhabitable. According to Cox, Alfred's tower was interpreted as 'both viewing platform and political monument' by contemporary visitors and provided a historical and romantic thrill to those imagining the ancient Saxon landscape.⁹⁶ The statue of Alfred on the tower itself is indicative of this commemorative, military focus.⁹⁷ The ten-foot-high Alfred is depicted as a warrior king, holding a sword by his side and clad in a somewhat un-Saxon medieval suit of armour. In contrast, the bust which Rysbrack made to stand in the house is not at all militaristic.⁹⁸ Instead of the short-cropped beard and hair of the military statue, Rysbrack's Alfred sports an unwieldy beard and long curly hair, dressed not in armour but in stately fur-lined robes. His stare is pensive, not commanding, representing a philosopher rather than a warrior. These two depictions of Alfred, produced within the same decade for the same patron, highlight the two main roles which Alfred had come to play in eighteenth-century British society. One, the commanding presence on the hill: imposing, militaristic, nationalistic -

⁹⁶ Oliver Cox, 'A Mistaken Iconography? Eighteenth-Century Visitor Accounts of Stourhead', *Garden History* 4, no.1 (2012): 108. Also useful for imagining King Alfred's Tower within the wider Stourhead landscape are: John Dixon Hunt, 'Stourhead revisited and the pursuit of meaning in gardens', *Studies in the History of Gardens and Designed Landscapes* 26, no.4 (2006): 328-341; Michael Charlesworth, 'Movement, intersubjectivity and mercantile morality at Stourhead', in *Landscape, Design and the Experience of Motion* ed. Michel Conan (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2003), 263-85. For a consideration of the temporality of nationhood in eighteenth-century landscape gardens, see James Noggle's chapter 'The Britishness of the Present at Stowe' in *The Temporality of Taste in Eighteenth-Century British Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁹⁷ Figures 5 and 6.

⁹⁸ Figure 7.

Figure Five

King Alfred's Tower, Stourhead.



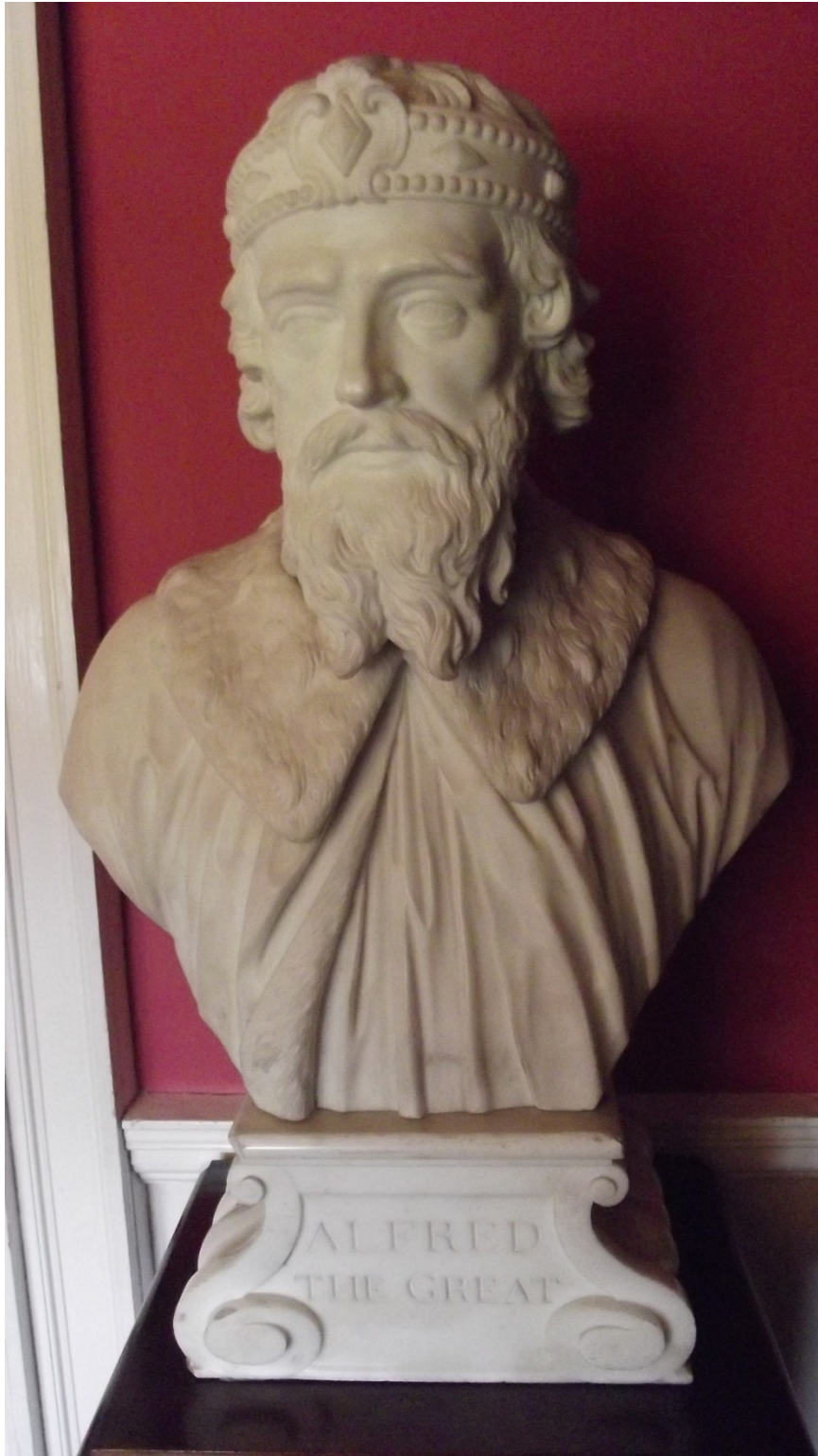
Figure Six

The statue of Alfred on King Alfred's Tower, Stourhead.



Figure Seven

Rysbrack's Bust of Alfred, Stourhead.



concerned with an uncompromising assertion of British liberties. The other, intended for the home, no less grand or worthy of respect, is nevertheless philosophical and stately.

In another letter to Lady Bruce on 28th April 1770, Hoare prayed: 'I hope it will be finished in as happy Times to this Isle as Alfred finished his Life of Glory in then shall I depart in peace.'⁹⁹ For Hoare, the symbolism of Alfred's life was therefore tied in with Britain's current prosperity, a fitting origin point for the successes currently being experienced by the nation.

Stourhead serves as a great example of how the military Alfred and the champion of liberty could coexist quite happily in the same figure. The crisis in America, as Wilson argues, would soon destabilise any idea of national consensus and undermine the values that Alfred had come to symbolise to the British political public: 'apprehensions about the socially and morally corrosive force of empire raised doubts about the viability of the libertarian, imperial dream.' For Britons, and indeed for the figure of Alfred: 'the American war tarnished the once-glittering vision of a free and virtuous empire.'¹⁰⁰ The decade of the 1770s, where this thesis begins, witnessed a profound destabilisation of what Alfred had come to represent: the pre-eminence of English liberty, constitutional monarchy and the domination of the Royal Navy.

⁹⁹ Woodbridge, *Landscape*, 61.

¹⁰⁰ Wilson, *Sense of the People*, 204 and 277.

By means of an introduction to how this thesis will explore the relationship between literary Alfreds and notions of Britishness and Englishness, it is worth considering what both these terms mean and where Alfred predominantly lay. Wilson's arguments on the best means and methods of exposing and studying nationalist expression are particularly useful in defining the parameters of my study in this area:

The histories of these multiple and heterogeneous experiences of national identification and disavowal cannot be reduced to histories of 'nationalism' per se, but must be recovered instead through the analysis of the fragmentary and often paradoxical modes and meanings of cultural expression that constructed identities themselves, and the analysis of representational and material practices as well as policies.¹⁰¹

My study of Alfred storytelling can be considered as such an analysis: an analysis of the 'fragmentary [...] cultural expression' that simultaneously built up and navigated British and English national identity. The rapidly and dynamically evolving forms of Alfred storytelling evident in this period certainly fit the criteria of a fragmentary and often paradoxical phenomenon, but through it we are able to gain a number of specific insights into definitions of Britishness in this period. This is yet another benefit of the cluster approach my study takes. By focusing on four key Alfred moments, the contributions of these stories to our understanding of Britishness is localised and specified, and there is some hope of pinning down the work which the figure of the Saxon king is being asked to undertake at these moments. As Wilson later states, 'the specific meanings of [Englishness] depended upon the contexts of its articulations.'¹⁰² My approach, which deliberately provides detailed assessments of specific and clustered articulation through the single figure of King Alfred,

¹⁰¹ Kathleen Wilson, *The Island Race: Englishness, Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 4.

¹⁰² Ibid.

provides scholarship with the sharp, bright fragments of insight that slot into the larger, stained-glass image of our understanding of British and English national identity.

As I have previously described, a night out at the theatre provided the eighteenth-century public with an explicitly performative arena for social and national cohesion, in which an individual could discern and display their connection to the people around them. 'National identity,' Wilson writes, 'was performed through group and individual interactions in the matrix of everyday relations, where the public and the domestic, the personal and the historical intersected, and social performance was paramount in defining the relations between self and world.'¹⁰³ Telling or experiencing the Alfred story, the story of national origin, was itself an act of engagement with national themes and national belonging, one in which readers or audiences could question where the 'personal and historical intersected' in their own lives.

Particularly towards the end of the century, when the Alfreds in literary works were intended for a wider reading public, the Saxon king provided a role model of the 'national character.' The texts studied in chapters three and four evidence this reaffirming interaction between monarch and subject. Shared ideologies and characteristics are interchanged and reinforced through the social interactions between monarch and subject, as well as between subjects. Wayward or foreign individuals, such as the Viking Voltimar in Cumberland's *Days of Yore* (1796), are folded into the national ranks as a result of their shared values, overcoming issues of race or place of birth in an ideological union. In the

¹⁰³ Ibid., 3.

words of Edmund Burke, writing the very same year: ‘Nation is a moral essence, not a geographical arrangement.’¹⁰⁴

Burke is also interesting to consider when thinking about Alfred’s own nationality. Writing mid-century, he views Alfred predominantly as an English monarch: he is ‘the wisest and bravest of all the English princes,’ brings men of learning ‘into England’ and distributes England into shires, hundreds and tithings. Burke even describes Alfred’s heir as being decidedly hostile towards the other nations of the British Isles, identifying them as distinct kingdoms: ‘[he] made war with success on the Welsh, the Scots and the Danes, and left his kingdom strongly fortified.’ Here, at least, Burke does not make the case for Alfred as a pan-British monarch.¹⁰⁵

One of the developments in Alfred storytelling that this thesis will chart, however, is the way in which Alfred’s significance to the non-English British Isles is steadily increased and worked into the overall narrative. In the first instance, Alfred was certainly written about by a number of non-English writers in this period, of which David Mallet, John Home, Anne Fuller and John O’Keeffe all appear in this thesis. What this suggests is that even though Alfred may have been interpreted by some as English, there was a significant interest in appealing to his values and considering him an appropriate and accessible figure regardless of a writer’s nationality. As chapter four will show, the Saxon king’s defeat of the Danes is increasingly highlighted as beneficial for all indigenous Britons, and characters from all nations are increasingly introduced as allies to the Saxons, ultimately united under Alfred’s

¹⁰⁴ Edmund Burke, *Thoughts on the Prospect of a Regicide Peace* (London: J. Owen, 1796), 58.

¹⁰⁵ Burke, *Writings and Speeches*, 408, 411-14, 414.

banner in battle. In the middle of the century, Alfred's connection with the Welsh, Scottish and Irish is presented (if at all) as a saviour by proxy, but by 1800 Alfred is marching into battle with representatives of these nations by his side. Alfred begins the latter half of the eighteenth century as a predominantly English phenomenon, in the style of Burke's *Essay*, but the Saxon monarch's story is steadily, but increasingly, reworked, so as to provide a model of pan-British kingship.

*

Beginning in the early 1770s and concluding at the start of the nineteenth century, the story told by this thesis is essentially one of disruption and contestation, then finally redefinition, of King Alfred's national role. The contestation over the meaning of Alfred in this period is in large part a product of the wider 'struggle for control over the interpretation of English history' previously identified by Wilson. 'The Georgian decades,' she writes, 'constituted a pivotal moment in the debates over contending narratives of English history that could be used to legitimise existing constellations of power or the demands for their radical reformation, represented not least in the production of national histories and competing interpretations of their meaning.'¹⁰⁶ For instance, Alfred's reign could be used to establish a legitimising continuity for contemporary institutions. The monarchy, the constitution, the rule of law: all were inheritances from the ancient past that demanded to be defended from radical new alternatives. Conversely, Alfred's reign could be seen as a lost golden age: 'an ideal standard against which the incursions of governors, ministers or even ultimately of

¹⁰⁶ Wilson, *Sense of the People*, 21.

parliament itself could be measured and condemned. The modern English could be shown to have degenerated through luxury and the corruption of political life from the virtue of their ancestors.¹⁰⁷ King Alfred could therefore serve as the figurehead for arguments for change as well as continuity.

The crisis caused by the American Revolution provided fertile ground and high stakes for this battle over the meaning of Britain's past: the catalyst for the divergent literary Alfreds that emerge from this period. In the words of Daniel O'Quinn, during the late 1770s and early 1780s in particular, 'the performance of patriotism was vexed because its relation to the mythic national past was destabilized.'¹⁰⁸ However, the national soul-searching of the following decades and, ultimately, the developments of the French Revolution, saw the figure of Alfred claimed by loyalist supporters, as radical thought largely shifted from questions of history onto the theme of universal rights. Although scores of reformers did still champion Alfred during the 1790s and beyond, the Saxon king was largely appealed to by supporters of the state and the monarchy. This was overwhelmingly the case in the literary and creative texts which form the focus of this thesis.

As discussed, each chapter is focused upon a cluster of texts produced within a relatively short period and responding to a similar set of stimuli. The first chapter looks at the beginnings of the American crisis and presents contestation over Alfred's figure as a lens through which we can view the wider destabilisation of the English-speaking world in the first half of the 1770s. In the first instance, it will take the story of *Alfred: a Masque* to its

¹⁰⁷ Marshall, *Making and Unmaking*, 50.

¹⁰⁸ O'Quinn, *Entertaining Crisis*, 35.

conclusion with the final version of the play performed in 1773. The chapter will present the rewriting of the masque and the details of its performance onstage at Drury Lane as the culmination of this increasingly militaristic and patriotic spectacle. It will also look at how Alfred and his story were used by Garrick to facilitate nationalistic expression and celebration. In tandem, this section will show that running alongside this celebratory version of the Saxon king was a more disruptive figure, used to symbolise the political vision of the decade's radical reformers, by means of Obadiah Hulme's 1771 *Historical Essay on the English Constitution*. This far more politicised version of the Saxon king, highly dependent upon Whig histories and Norman Yoke mythology, appealed to Britain's ancient Saxon history as an era when true liberty abounded, uncorrupted by either French conquest or modern-day degeneracy. This period evidences something of an identity crisis in the figure of the Saxon king, which prompted the attempts to re-imagine him in the novel ways considered in the rest of the thesis.

My second chapter takes the notion of contested Alfreds away from overtly political interpretations into ideas of flexible characterisation and accurate historical portrayal. As its focus, it looks at John Home's 1778 play *Alfred. A Tragedy*, which depicted a version of the king inspired by the literature of sensibility. Home's Alfred maintains the strong sense of suffering and mental torture present in the masques and generates most of its drama from this emotional turmoil, rather than from the conflict between Vikings and Saxons. This approach to Alfred's story was heavily influenced by the ongoing events of the American War. When the play proved to be a critical and commercial disaster, Home's subsequent justification of his literary and historical choices contained many parallels with the defence

of General John Burgoyne, defeated in the war and forced to account for his actions in the Houses of Parliament. Burgoyne's heavy reliance upon feeling and sensibility in his justification fell on deaf ears, as did that of Home, and both instances demonstrate the limitations of the language of sensibility in a military context. In comparison with other representations of Alfred at this time, such as Alexander Bicknell's biography *The Life of King Alfred the Great* (1777), I intend to show how the nature of Alfred's personality became a crucial part of the literary response to the trans-Atlantic conflict.

The texts of the third and fourth clusters leave behind the American War and proceed to focus upon the relationship between depictions of Alfred and the conduct of George III and his son George, Prince of Wales. Chapter three looks at the end of the 1780s and the troubles of the Regency Crisis, during which Anne Fuller published the first Alfred novel, *The Son of Ethelwolf*. Ethelwolf was Alfred's father and Fuller's novel was intended to encourage the wayward Prince to fix his behaviour and become a more responsible heir-apparent. The text presents an entirely new take on Alfred's exile, in which the king wanders the countryside encountering his subjects, hearing their stories and learning valuable lessons. Alfred is frequently the receptacle of the text's moral messages and as a figure whom the Prince of Wales is hoped to imitate. It was at this time that Bicknell published the script of *The Patriot King* (1788), actually written ten years earlier. In addition, Ebenezer Rhodes's *Alfred, a Tragedy* (1788) was published in Sheffield and sold in London, and David Williams's *Lessons to a Young Prince* (1790), also directed at the young Prince George, followed shortly after. These texts taken together show not just the increasing desire for Alfred to serve as a model for the monarchy, but also as a source of personal inspiration for everyday Britons; a

model for both the national and personal character. As Rhodes proclaims in his play's prologue: 'each may find an Alfred in his heart.'¹⁰⁹

The final chapter of this thesis considers three theatrical Alfreds all performed and published in 1796, as the king is approaching the apotheosis of his fame. Heavily influenced by the French Revolutionary War, these plays all serve to defend the principles of limited monarchical government. Richard Cumberland's *Days of Yore* and John O'Keeffe's comedy *The Magic Banner* (later renamed *Alfred*), both present an amiable, affable Alfred keenly involved with his subjects, playing not just a constitutional but also a social role in their lives. These plays seek to illustrate the crucial role of the monarch in the functionality of British society and everyday life. Inspired by the growing affection expressed towards the figure of George III, these dramas, especially O'Keeffe's, engage playfully with the style of kingship George was responsible for promoting and by doing so employ Alfred as a conservative force. Similarly, John Penn's *The Battle of Eddington*, also published and performed in 1796, seeks to present the story of Alfred's victory over the Danes as an example and warning to contemporary Britons. Penn's play serves to caution those enticed by revolutionary ideals and presents Alfred as the originator of true liberty and constitutional monarchy as his legacy. All three plays are notable for their coherence in presenting a stable image of the Saxon king with a loyalist agenda, as 'the dramatic interpretation of the Alfred myth functions as a barometer of political opinion on liberty.'¹¹⁰ As a force for patriotism, loyalty and liberty of the British subject, Alfred had by now become almost exclusively aligned with the forces of loyal nationalism.

¹⁰⁹ Ebenezer Rhodes, *Alfred, an Historical Tragedy* (Sheffield: J. Gales, 1789), 5.

¹¹⁰ Wehlau, 'Alfred and Ireland', 803.

The thesis concludes with a short consideration of the two epic poems that brought Alfred into the nineteenth century, written in 1800 and 1801 by Joseph Cottle and Henry James Pye respectively. Both entitled *Alfred, an Epic Poem*, they celebrate Alfred's salvation of Wessex as the originary moment of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, as Alfred gathers a pan-British force of Saxon, Welsh, Scottish and Irish soldiers to defeat the Danes. The Saxon king's role as national figurehead is of paramount concern in both these poems. They therefore exemplify the conclusion of the king's eighteenth-century journey and the beginning of his nineteenth-century apotheosis.

CHAPTER ONE

‘Characteristic of the British nation’: Alfred in the Early 1770s

At David Garrick’s reworked and, as the newspapers and published edition of the script termed it, ‘revived’ masque, the performance was more notable for its nationalistic spectacle than its historical drama. What caught the attention of audiences and critics was the grand finale performance of ‘Rule Britannia’, which uprooted the action from Anglo-Saxon England and replanted its audience in contemporary Portsmouth, at the scene of George III’s most recent review of his naval forces. According to *The London Chronicle*, as Alfred and the Saxons’ triumph is confirmed at the end of the play, the Hermit uses his magic to transform the stage:

Waving his wand, the umbrageous scene gradually breaks away as by the power of enchantment, and discovers a grand representation of the late Naval Review at Portsmouth.¹¹¹

Not only did this ‘grand representation’ include Philip De Louthembourg’s first full stage-painting in England, it was followed by a puppet show in which model ships were paraded across the stage and made to fire their guns. The unsubtle confidence of this transformation prompted enthusiastic displays of nationalism in newspaper reviews and scenes of patriotic jubilation amongst audiences. Alfred was championed onstage for his military victory and salvation of England through his fearless leadership. Moreover, as a symbol of British liberty and military supremacy, Alfred provided a rallying point for wider patriotic display.¹¹²

¹¹¹ *The London Chronicle*, Oct 9-12, 1773.

¹¹² Garrick’s *Alfred* was performed at Drury Lane on the 6th, 9th, 11th-13th, 15th-16th, 18th, 21st and 25th of October, 1st, 6th, 9th and 25th November and 28th December 1773, see Van Lemep et al. *Index*, 540. It was the same year in which parliament passed the Tea Act and tensions throughout the year led to

By 1773, reviving *Alfred* had been on Garrick's mind for a number of years. Burden suggests that the actor's previous incarnation as Alfred in Mallet's 1751 masque might have encouraged the now theatre manager to recreate some of that magic: 'it is possible that Garrick, conscious of his own standing, desired to be associated once more with a by now notoriously patriotic masque.'¹¹³ In *Alfred*, he may well have seen an opportunity to stroke his own ego, through both continuing his personal association with the popular king and by bringing to his audiences a patriotic spectacle they would consider of national importance. Fiske also believes that a Garrick-led revival of the masque was somewhat inevitable, claiming that he 'was never for long able to ignore the Ancient Kings of Britain.'¹¹⁴ In December 1770 Garrick presented the similarly titled *Masque of King Arthur*, a project he had been working on for some time and may well have inspired an *Alfred* follow-up.

In fact, in a letter to Reverend Hawkins on 16th October 1771, Garrick makes it clear that production of the revived *Alfred* masque is already in progress, asking his correspondent: 'did you not know that we have a masque called 'Alfred,' which is preparing to be revived at our house with new music?' It is clear from this letter that the Drury Lane manager had some fairly strong opinions on how *Alfred*'s story should be told. Hawkins was actually writing to Garrick to promote an *Alfred* play of his own, a tragedy which Garrick rejected. But in so doing, Garrick gives us some indication of the motivations behind his own version of the Saxon monarch. 'The great business of *Alfred*'s mind seems to sleep,' he writes to

the Boston Tea Party in December. The importance of showing Britain's naval strength and celebrating its history may well have resonated with these issues.

¹¹³ Burden, *Garrick*, 68.

¹¹⁴ Fiske, *English Theatre*, 366.

Hawkins, 'at least as it appears to the reader: and though in the fourth act the Danes make an attack, and Alfred kills Hubba, yet in the course of the fable there is no solicitude or interest kept up about the delivery of Britain from her enemies.' Garrick continues to criticise the characterisation of the Saxon king and his attempt in Hawkins's proposed play to 'try by the most unjustifiable means the strength of Emma's virtue': 'Will an audience think this a proper employment for the Great Alfred, at the time he has driven the Danes from his kingdom?'¹¹⁵ Garrick's sees the Alfred story as one of national and military triumph and, in his view, the 'delivery of Britain from her enemies' needs to be the primary dramatic pull for audiences. For Garrick, then, telling the Alfred story was a matter of military triumph as well as a creative endeavour requiring careful attention to pre-existing popular conceptions.

Pedicord and Bergmann provide a comprehensive account of the detailed preparations Garrick went through for the 1773 revival. *Alfred*, they write:

received a great deal of attention from Garrick who not only tried to make the masque interesting as a drama and attractive as a spectacle, but who also consciously attempted to restore those elements of the original version which he thought to be superior to the piece which Mallet had created out of the older masque. Garrick's revision reads better than Mallet's and probably acted better; but his reinstating of Thomson's original ode, 'Rule, Britannia,' was undoubtedly the most telling change.

This was a play which Garrick paid meticulous attention to: he made notes on copies of the original masque and 'cast a well-balanced group of actors and his best singers in the parts.' 'The printed text of 1773,' Pedicord and Bergmann conclude, is 'basically Garrick's

¹¹⁵ David Garrick, *The Private Correspondence of David Garrick* (London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1835), 440-41.

version.’¹¹⁶ What Garrick’s assiduity reveals is the seriousness with which he undertook the task of presenting Alfred onstage and his priorities when doing so. The reinstatement of ‘Rule Britannia’ was Garrick’s masterstroke in achieving his primary, patriotic aim. Moreover, this was a man who ‘felt he knew his audience, what it wanted, and what it should have.’¹¹⁷ If Garrick was right on this occasion, then his version of Alfred was just what eighteenth-century audiences were both expecting and wishing to see. The performances themselves were widely acclaimed, although not especially lucrative, due to the cost of their lavish presentation, upon which Garrick insisted.¹¹⁸ It would seem that Garrick was genuinely committed to the spirit of the masque and didn’t produce it merely for profit.

Yet, this chapter will show, the relatively straightforward warrior king of the 1773 masque, whose own reign served as a point of continuity and vindication for the contemporary state, was just one of many Alfreds employed during this period. Alongside this supportive Alfred were a number of conceptions of the Saxon king intended to criticise and even reform the state he was championing at Drury Lane. For instance, only two years after the performance of the revived *Alfred*, on 7th November 1775, Temple Luttrell, MP for Milborne Port, made a speech to parliament calling for political reform using Alfred’s reign as both justification and point of attack. ‘The subjects of the British empire’, he said, ‘claim liberty and property, according to their ancient laws and customs, not as a charter-gift or indulgence, but as an inherent right never to be alienated, and at no time transferred to their monarch or proxy in Parliament.’ Alfred’s reign is in this instance a rallying point for change, not confirmation, as

¹¹⁶ Harry William Pedicord and Frederick Louis Bergmann, eds. *The Plays of David Garrick* vol.6 (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), 360-62.

¹¹⁷ Pedicord and Bergmann, *Plays of David Garrick*, xx.

¹¹⁸ Gilman, *Arne*, 530.

Luttrell insists that the current political system needs to be ‘brought back to its first principle.’¹¹⁹

Dickinson describes the effect of discontent in America on radicals back in Britain:

The colonial dispute raised profound ideological questions about the very nature of the British constitution and it led to the demand for a radical reform of parliament [...] The opposition in Britain claimed that the Government’s policy towards the colonies was clear evidence of a malign campaign against the liberty of the subject.¹²⁰

So often quoted as a representative text of radical ideology in the early 1770s, including by Dickinson himself, Obadiah Hulme’s *Historical Essay on the English Constitution* actually stands out for its refusal to partake in such cross-Atlantic solidarity. Hulme does not equate the actions of the British government in the colonies with constitutional repression at home: ‘All lands, in our distant provinces, that are acquired at the expense of the people of England, either by conquest, treaty, purchase, or by any other title, from that moment become their property; and consequently are, at all times, subject to the order, and direction of the legislative authority.’¹²¹ This hierarchy is responsible for Hulme’s position; he sees the colonies as subservient to the British parliament, and there is no affront to liberty when laws decided in parliament are enforced in America. The abuse of the liberties of native Britons, however, especially in regards to the functioning of parliament itself, is a

¹¹⁹ Hon. T. Luttrell, *Speech to Parliament, Fourteenth Parliament of Great Britain: second session (26 October 1775 – 23 May 1776)*. 7 November 1775, 123-29. U.K. Parliamentary Papers, accessed 12 October 2015. https://parlipapers-proquest-com.libproxy.york.ac.uk/parlipapers/docview/t70.d75.pr_1774_1780-000142?accountid=15181.

¹²⁰ H.T. Dickinson, *Liberty and Property: Political Ideology in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (London: Methuen, 1979), 214-5.

¹²¹ Obadiah Hulme, *An Historical Essay on the English Constitution*, (London: Charles Dilly, 1771), 179.

matter to be debated. In Hulme's analysis, Alfred's law therefore justifies calls for parliamentary reform at home but forbids it in America.

In contrast to Garrick, Obadiah Hulme's motivations prove extremely difficult to assess. 'Virtually nothing is known about Hulme,' T. M. Parssinen writes, 'except that he was a Yorkshireman and the brother of Nathaniel Hulme, a physician.'¹²² Moreover, his *Essay* was initially published anonymously and then serialised in *The Patriot* in 1792 without mention of an author. It wasn't until much later that his authorship became known and even then, the work was frequently misattributed. In regards to Hulme's motivations, one thing that is absolutely clear is his belief in the Norman yoke theory, in which the English people lived in a free society until the invasion of 1066 and the imposition of feudalism. Hulme was important in reviving this mythology in the 1770s, in what Garver terms 'a new and aggressively populist manner.'¹²³ In particular, Hulme deploys the Norman yoke to highlight to his readers the corruption of the House of Commons and the need for its restoration under the terms of the ancient constitution. This approach dominates the *Essay* and also finds place in Hulme's only other work: 'it may be a question with some men, whether the House of Commons, as it is new-modelled, affords the same security now to the people at large, as it did anciently. For my part, I am clearly of opinion that it doth not, but far, very far otherwise.'¹²⁴

¹²² T.M. Parssinen, 'Association, Convention and Anti-Parliament in British Radical Politics, 1771-1848', *The English Historical Review* 88, no.348 (1973), 505.

¹²³ Lee Garver, 'Seafarer Socialism: Pound, 'The New Age', and Anglo-Medieval Radicalism', *Journal of Modern Literature* 29, no.4 (2006), 4.

¹²⁴ Obadiah Hulme, *A Plan of Reconciliation between Great Britain and her Colonies* (London: J. Johnson, 1776), 28. See also 30-1 and 35-6 for Hulme's Norman yoke attitudes.

We can glean something about the character and motivations of Hulme from both his political tracts. He is most invested in espousing the greatness of the Anglo-Saxons in two key areas: parliamentary reform and providing potential solutions for American unrest. He considers his writing as a kind of public duty, and in introductions to both texts he makes an appeal for himself as a historically-educated citizen, espousing ideas that have not found traction in political debate thus far. His depictions of King Alfred and the society he led, therefore, are couched in this eagerness of a seemingly humble individual, pressing overlooked historical information into public hands. Unlike Garrick, Hulme is fighting for his platform and his right to be listened to. He therefore creates a historical account that is meticulous in its deposition of reasoned interpretation, but no less passionate in its interpretations.

The reach of Hulme's *Essay* has largely been measured by the impact he had upon metropolitan radicals with more vociferous and action-oriented arguments than his own, specifically James Burgh and John Cartwright. Page describes the *Essay* as 'one of the earliest and most important tracts to question the structure of the British electorate [...] radicals propounded its basic ideas until it became a pillar of Victorian historiography.'¹²⁵ Miller identifies Hulme's text as part of Cartwright's 'inherited canon of radical ideas' and more recently Gibson locates in Hulme the 'democratic version of the Saxon constitution

¹²⁵ Anthony Page, 'Liberty has an Asylum': John Jebb, British Radicalism and the American Revolution', *History* 87, no.286 (2002), 216.

drawn on by the Chartists.¹²⁶ Additionally, Hill provides an extensive list of instances where excerpts from Hulme were included in radical works:

In 1776 it was used by Major John Cartwright in his widely influential *Take Your Choice!* [...] The *Essay* was quoted verbatim in an address by Cartwright and issued by the Society of Constitutional Information in April 1780. In 1792 the *Essay* was serialised without acknowledgement and with interpolations, in *The Patriot*. The London Corresponding Society used its arguments to justify manhood suffrage and annual Parliaments. Its account of the Norman origin of the alliance between Church and state was still being repeated in 1807.¹²⁷

Hulme's work is continually quoted and referred to in James Burgh's *Political Disquisitions* of 1774-5. Book 3, Chapter 1 begins with an attributed quotation from Hulme's front cover: "Where annual election ends, slavery begins." Excerpts from Hulme are also used in reference to the reign of Charles II and the definition of representative government. Burgh shares Hulme's interpretation of the Norman yoke, claiming that 'Our laws are grown to be quite sanguinary. In Saxon times, they were quite the contrary' and asking: 'Is it not the fault of our kings, parliaments, ministers &c. that in our enlightened times, instead of improving, we have lost this noble police, and those virtuous manners?'¹²⁸

Despite this impressive list of radical disciples, however, both eighteenth-century radicals and modern scholars have been remarkably selective in regards to Hulme's original arguments. His most radical propositions had a demonstrable legacy, but much else in the

¹²⁶ Naomi Churgin Miller, 'John Cartwright and Radical Parliamentary Reform, 1808-1819', *The English Historical Review* 83, no.329 (1968), 708; Josh Gibson, 'The Chartists and the Constitution: Revisiting British Popular Constitutionalism', *Journal of British Studies* 15, no.1 (2017), 70.

¹²⁷ Hill, *Puritanism*, 100-1. Hill indicates that one of the longest 'interpolations' in *The Patriot* concerns Alfred and his foundation of juries.

¹²⁸ James Burgh, *Political Disquisitions; or An Enquiry into Public Errors, Defects, and Abuses* 3 vols. (London: E. And C. Dilly, 1774-5), 1:83, 1:120-1, 1:282-3, 3:163, 3:212.

Essay did not. Parssinen traces the radical idea of an anti-parliament back to the *Essay*, but makes the critical observation that Hulme made this argument ‘quite unselfconsciously.’ It was Hulme’s ‘immediate successors’ who ‘pushed the argument to its logical conclusion.’¹²⁹ Not only was Hulme content to argue for points of principle, not action, the *Essay* contained many attacks on American colonists that were *not* part of this legacy. It seems most unjust to list Hulme amongst the late century’s greatest radical writers, when his arguments are diverse and only reformist in certain areas.

In regards to its wider circulation, there are a number of indicators that demonstrate the *Essay*’s impact beyond the confines of radical London. The essay was also published in Dublin in 1771 and in 1794 could still be found in the *Catalogue of the present collection of books in the Manchester Circulating Library*. Perhaps most intriguingly, a text published in Sheffield in 1792, by an author identifying themselves only as a ‘Sheffield Razor Maker’, is demonstrably fuelled by Hulme’s *Essay*. Entitled *Ten Minutes Admonition*, the Razor Maker’s text refers extensively to Hulme and quotes (and misquotes) from the original on multiple occasions: ‘I confess I am of opinion with an author I have lately read on the subject, somewhat enthusiastic perhaps, ‘that if ever the Almighty could be supposed to have interfered particularly in any human institution, it must certainly be in that of the original construction of the British Constitution.’¹³⁰ There are similar echoes of Hulme in cries such as ‘give it back those grand sources of existence’ and ‘who can then reflect without horror

¹²⁹ Parsinnen, ‘Radical Politics’, 506.

¹³⁰ ‘Sheffield Razor Maker’, *Ten Minutes Admonition* (Sheffield: Joseph Gates, 1792), 4. C.f. Hulme, *Essay*, 32: ‘If ever God Almighty did concern himself about forming a government, for mankind to live happily under, it was that which was established, in England.’

on the vital stab aimed at it by the Septennial Act.¹³¹ Of most impact, however, is the Razor Maker's parting words, which replicate Hulme's opinions on parliamentary reform and quote directly from his title page:

Annual Parliaments, and an equal Representation therein. Nothing short of this can possibly save us. It is no *alteration*, no *innovation*. It is nothing more than bare *restoration* of our *ancient*, our *admirable*, and *glorious* CONSTITUTION – Remember this, O Britons! and let past experience root indelibly in your hearts and minds, this true and memorable maxim – 'WHERE ANNUAL ELECTION ENDS, SLAVERY BEGINS.'¹³²

Regardless of where he encountered the Historical Essay, whether in book form or as part of The Patriot's 1792 serialisation, the Razor Maker's published engagement with Hulme's text evidences that it was being read and absorbed beyond the capital long after its original publication.

Where Hulme attracted the greatest circulation, however, was in America. This is despite his virulent assertions that an uncorrupted House of Commons had the complete right to tax the colonies in whatever way it wished. Nevertheless, Thomas Jefferson 'found the story of the English struggle to end feudal tyranny and regain Saxon liberties [...] fascinating' and owned an initialled copy of the *Essay*.¹³³ The essay was 'particularly influential in popularising among Americans the myth of a 'golden age' of Saxon history' and 'on the eve on independence colonists were consulting such Whig oracles as Hulme's *Essay*.'¹³⁴ The

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 23.

¹³³ H. Trevor Colbourn, 'Thomas Jefferson's Use of the Past', *The William and Mary Quarterly* 15, no.1 (1958), 63.

¹³⁴ Peter Thomson, 'Judicious Neology': The Imperative of Paternalism in Thomas Jefferson's Linguistic Studies', *Early American Studies* 1, no.2 (2003), 202.; Trevor Colbourn, *The Lamp of*

results of Hulme's American circulation can similarly be found in the works of John Adams, who directly quoted the *Essay* in his *Thoughts on Government*: 'there not being in the whole circle of the sciences a maxim more infallible than this, 'where annual elections end, there slavery begins.'"¹³⁵

*

At this period in the eighteenth century, then, King Alfred could be a symbol of continuity as well as change. He could be invoked to support and celebrate contemporary Britain's achievements and social and political structure, in addition to criticising its flaws and highlighting its degradation. The majority of this chapter will address Hulme's highly influential *Essay*, a text in which the figure of Alfred undertakes both roles at the same time. I will argue that Hulme's positioning of King Alfred at the centre of his political thought facilitates movement in a number of political directions and is not entirely radical. Through the two texts which form the spine of this cluster - Garrick's 'revived' *Alfred* and Hulme's *Essay* - I will show how the figure of King Alfred was used to argue in favour of parliamentary reform, despite continued 'taxation without representation' in America, whilst simultaneously representing Britain's rightful naval supremacy to an audience of patriots.

Experience: Whig History and the Intellectual Origins of the American Revolution (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1998), 228.

¹³⁵ John Adams, *The Revolutionary Writings of John Adams*, ed. C. Bradley Thompson (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001), 290.

‘A piece of gross flattery’?: Supporting Britain’s Military Might in *Alfred: A Masque*

His Royal Highness the Duke of Gloucester was present on Saturday evening last at the representation of Alfred, at the Theatre Royal, Drury-lane.

Lady Bridget L—, who sat in the same side-box with his Royal Highness, was so inspired at the scene of the Naval Review, that she loudly chaunted in chorus, ‘Rule Britannia’, &c. to the no small satisfaction of the gaping pit beneath.¹³⁶

The above account of one performance of Garrick’s revived masque reveals the patriotic potential of the Naval Review: a trans-historical moment newly introduced alongside Alfred’s victory. Lady Bridget L—¹³⁷ provides her own spectacle, demonstrating the ability which Alfred has acquired to act not just as a loyalist, nationalistic symbol, but also as an impetus for others to perform nationalistic sentiments of their own. O’Quinn asserts that ‘all audience engagement with the entertainment presented at the patent theatres involved some negotiation with the state, and thus theatre always had the potential to be about governance.’¹³⁸ By drawing the audience’s attention to the continuity between Alfred and George III, translating Alfred’s dream of a naval force into the might of the globally dominant Royal Navy, and by Lady L—’s impassioned aristocratic endorsement of these connections, crucially earning the approval of the public below her, the ‘negotiation with the state’ is strongly evident. In tying so blatantly the story of King Alfred to the governance of modern Britain, this version of the masque acquires its significance not just by its content but also through its performative context. The unifying function of the spectacle in Drury Lane is of course a far cry from the masque’s original performance. The elite audience who

¹³⁶ *The General Evening Post*, Oct 9-12, 1773.

¹³⁷ Unidentified – possibly Lady Bridget Law, daughter of the Earl of Northington, reported married in London in *The Edinburgh Magazine and Review* Jan, 1774.

¹³⁸ O’Quinn, *Entertaining Crisis*, 5.

witnessed the very first masque in the gardens of Prince Frederick's private home have now become a diverse and popular public. The various social levels of the theatre are drawn together in the same patriotic spirit, as evidenced in the *Evening Post's* comments on both the 'side-box' and the 'gaping pit beneath.' The story of Alfred becomes in 1773 an opportunity for ordinary Britons to endorse and celebrate their country's military and naval power: 'the non-elite subjects reading or watching a representation of the event were hailed into a relationship with the ideological project at the heart of the celebration.'¹³⁹ This relationship is crucial for the significance of King Alfred's figure in the decade and I follow O'Quinn's emphasis on how playgoers were 'hailed' or interpellated into the Alfred story in this chapter's consideration of the masque. By doing so, we gain an insight into the cultural importance and popular engagement the masque prompted beyond the words in the script.

It is clear from newspaper reviews that in this performance, Alfred becomes less historical and more symbolic, representing British origins and supremacy over the peoples of other countries:

Many of the sentiments in this piece are truly noble, and breathe that spirit of freedom which should be the characteristic of the British nation; but the piece itself, considered as a drama, is languid for want of incident, and therefore owes much to the powers of Music to render it agreeable, on which account we cannot sufficiently commend the introduction of the grand occasional scene, which adds greatly to the business and importance of the whole.¹⁴⁰

Creating a distinction between the masque's 'sentiments', 'drama' and 'business', this review concludes that the former and the latter transcend the historical 'drama' and enable

¹³⁹ Ibid., 3.

¹⁴⁰ *Lloyd's Evening Post*, Oct 8-11, 1773.

the performance to appeal to the interests of a patriotic eighteenth-century audience. Alfred's exile and eventual victory over the Danes are in of themselves unsuccessful in giving significance to the piece, the drama of these events is deemed 'languid for want of incident.' What actually makes the masque worthy of attention is the way in which the presented themes are 'characteristic of the British nation.' The masque has become a spectacle that has gone beyond a narrow notion of story.

In fact, the whole performance is very detached from the Saxon era. Despite assertions that 'The Characters were dressed in the habits of the times',¹⁴¹ it appears that this was far from the case - certainly if the early-modern gentleman, complete with cravat and codpiece, depicted in an image of 'Mr. Reddish in the Character of Alfred' from the 1781 production is anything to judge by.¹⁴² The fact that the newspapers reflect so sparsely on historical events signifies a similar detachment. But what makes the masque so resonant is its 'spirit of freedom' and the way in which it encapsulates 'the characteristic of the British nation.' This can be seen in Alfred's words themselves. 'By justice, mercy, arms and arts improv'd', the king proclaims, 'By freedom fenc'd around with sacred laws, / Our promis'd bliss to merit and adorn.'¹⁴³ Alfred's messages of freedom are detached from Anglo-Saxon notions of governance. They steer clear of details regarding the Witenagemot or public assemblies which, as we shall see shortly, formed the backbone of more reformist Alfreds. What is

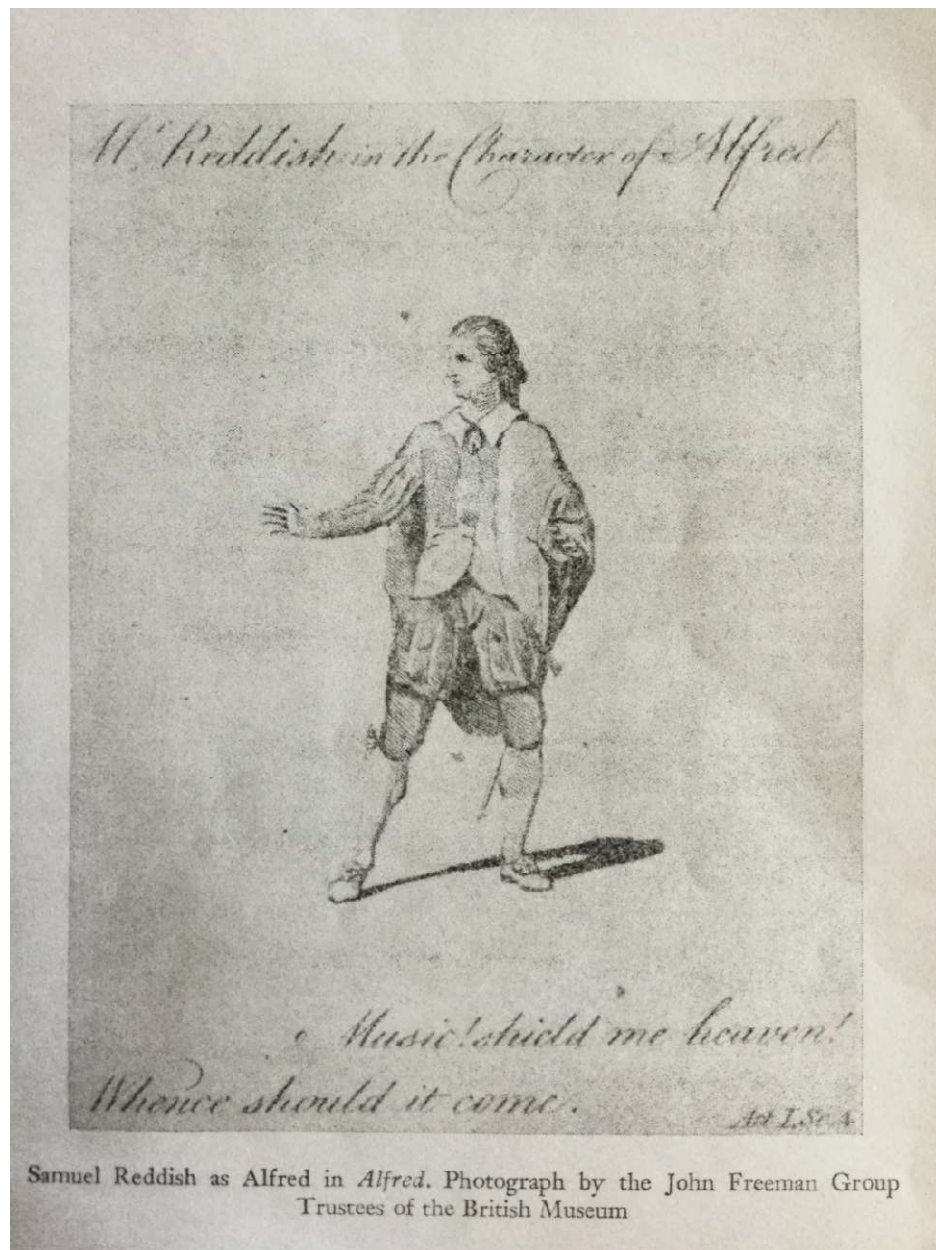
¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Figure eight. Reddish himself 'was principally successful in young, sentimental heroes, beaux, and noblemen' during his time at Drury Lane, so his performance as Alfred was perhaps lacking in the decisive, patriotic heroism Garrick had intended. But Reddish's abilities as an actor are hard to ascertain, given that his 'erratic conduct' led to 'grudging' assessments by critics. See Philip H. Highfill Jr., Kalman A Burnim and Edward A Langhans, *A biographical dictionary of actors, actresses, musicians, dancers, managers & other stage personnel in London, 1600-1800*, vol.12 (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), 284.

¹⁴³ Garrick, *Alfred*, 63.

Figure Eight

Mr. Reddish in the Character of Alfred. The John Freeman Group. rpt. in Harry William Pedicord and Frederick Louis Bergman, *The Plays of David Garrick* vol. 6 (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), 17.



important here are the sentiments of liberty and supremacy for Britain, which transcend the Saxon age and appeal directly to the Georgian.

The performance functions as an exercise in national self-approval and draws towards it the confidence and optimism of Britain's patriots. In this sense, Alfred is important to audiences not because of who he was, but how his life makes them feel about their own, how his reign makes them think of George III's and how his proto-England makes them think about modern-day Britain. This is what we witness in Lady Bridget L—'s own performance; the absorption and then release of the sentiments Alfred inspired amongst many eighteenth-century Britons. The audience's approbation, of course, signifies that such sentiments were by no means limited to private reflection but part of lived experience in London's public spaces.

This phenomenon also explains the prominence given to the 'power of music.' As an art form, music facilitates personal expressions of patriotism, as so wonderfully demonstrated by Lady L—, by enabling the audience to join in themselves. Song sheets, as well as simply recording the lyrics, also provided an element of the show that could be taken away and re-performed outside of the theatrical space itself. This performance of *Alfred* was also the first to come with its own separate musical publication: *The Songs, Chorusses, &c. in the Masque of Alfred*. The title page shows that the booklet is tied to the specific performance 'now revived at the Theatre-Royal, Drury-Lane', and as well as all the song lyrics and list of singers, it guides the reader through the performance, indicating key moments such as the

‘Triumphal Entry of Alfred’ in addition to noting where the performance differed from the printed text: ‘This verse is omitted in the representation.’¹⁴⁴

According to Gilman, *Songs* was the work of Thomas Arne, whom Garrick snubbed by commissioning a new musician to compose the score for his revival. Infuriated, Arne seemingly attempted to make at least some personal profit out of Garrick’s work. The title page of *Songs* proudly proclaims that the music currently being performed in Drury Lane’s *Alfred* was ‘composed by Dr. Arne’, despite the masque being significantly rescored by Theodore Smith.¹⁴⁵ As one of the main purposes of this chapter is to establish Alfred as a contested figure in the early 1770s, it is worth drawing attention here to the commercial rivalry between Arne and Garrick. The masque itself was subject to artistic contestation and bitter rivalry; the two professionals (actor-manager and composer) competed with each other to lay claim to the huge public appeal of the performance. Arne’s actions evidence not just a clamouring to be involved in the lucrative business of *Alfred*, but also lay claim to parts of the cultural phenomenon itself.

The lyrics to the masque’s songs do in places appeal to Alfred’s personal legacy, for instance: ‘Hear, Alfred, father of the state,/ Thy genius, heaven’s high will declare.’¹⁴⁶ But they also facilitate moments of temporal shift from the Saxon age to the present:

Our sons unborn
Still on this morn
With annual joy shall tell;

¹⁴⁴ Thomas Arne, *The Songs, Chorusses, &c. in the Masque of Alfred* (London: T. Becket, 1773), 20-22.

¹⁴⁵ Gilman, *Arne*, 529.

¹⁴⁶ Garrick, *Alfred*, 14.

How by his might,
In daring fight,
The foes of England fell.¹⁴⁷

This section, part of a grand 'procession' across the stage, is an obvious reference to the masque itself. The structure of the quotation, taking the audience from past to present, is a clear prompt to emulate Alfred's deeds. The 'sons unborn' are the audience themselves, spurred on to patriotic sentiment and action. There is a self-awareness about this production, far more prominent here than in any other version of the masque. Commemoration and celebration of Alfred are recognised as potent phenomena and, as in this example, are woven into the words of the play itself. Garrick's *Alfred* recognises in-text its own potential for spectacle and place within a public legacy.

The key moment of the 1773 masque was the 'grand occasional scene' which revealed the Portsmouth Naval Review with an accompanying performance of 'Rule Britannia':

The view of Spithead and the fleet is taken from the saluting battery, which we here see mounted with cannon. Every ship of the line is a beautiful perfect model, with rigging, &c. compleat, dressed with their proper suits of colours, and carrying their regular number of guns; the Isle of Wight in the back ground forms a just and beautiful relief; the royal yacht is seen sailing into the harbour, under a salute of the battery and the whole fleet. Numberless and various kinds of vessels are beheld under weigh, with their sails full, making their different tacks.¹⁴⁸

And although critics saw the poor-quality drama of the masque as a sign of theatrical decline, this naval climax prompted some to think otherwise regarding British painting:

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 54.

¹⁴⁸ *General Evening Post*, Oct 9-12, 1773.

This most singular exhibition is an incontestable proof of the rapid progress of the British arts. The general view is so critically exact, that one can hardly give human invention credit for the execution.¹⁴⁹

What Garrick gave to his audience in this 'exhibition', then, was a sublime display of historical achievements and contemporary talents that seemed to take precedence over the underwhelming elements of straightforward historical representation. Crucially, these elements of the spectacle were all considered in a patriotic fashion. This was a performance that, in its entirety, was interpreted as making a statement about British capabilities and the nation's place in the world.

In the first instance, the introduction of this scene is notable for the changing dynamic of the Hermit's magic from the earlier masques. Instead of revealing a roll-call of the Patriot champions of 1740, the Hermit's magic is used instead to transform the context and meaning of the theatrical environment itself, transporting the audience from the Saxon period to the present day. The Hermit's magic is now employed for the benefit of the audience, transforming him into a kind of 'master of ceremonies' for this patriotic spectacle. Crucially, intervening historical periods are bypassed by this temporal leap, promoting a clear message of continuity from Alfred's navy to that of George III. Removing the garrulous philosophy with which the Hermit promoted the Patriot pantheon, the 1773 masque simply sweeps the audience across the centuries and they are expected to comply with the implied historical interpretation. The eagerness with which Saxon becomes Georgian demonstrates a certain vindication of modern Britain and hope for its future achievements. Contemporary naval splendour and, of course, the monarch who oversees it, are presented to the

¹⁴⁹ *The London Chronicle*, Oct 9-12, 1773.

eighteenth-century public as part of Alfred's grand, national vision. It is worth also pointing out the emotive way in which this is being done, with reference to 'sentiments' in the newspapers and of course Lady L—'s patriotic rapture. Garrick's version of Alfred, then, attempted to instil in its audience a sense of national supremacy and encourage them to share in a patriotic vision of British history.

Garrick's is also an overwhelmingly military representation of the Saxon king. His revisions take the role which he himself played over twenty years earlier and bring it to a pinnacle of warriorhood. The proud spectacle of 'Rule Britannia' in tandem with the naval review is a powerful military statement, and it comes on the back of military victory: 'Alfred rose / in all his terrors; o'er the mounded camp / Tempestuous drove; from space to space along / Spred slaughter and dismay.'¹⁵⁰

It would appear that Garrick's Alfred was received significantly favourably: 'Every thing which does honour to the navy, is a matter universally interesting and solemn to Englishmen [...] The grand occasional scene is not unnaturally introduced.' The same reviewer, however, did question the comparison between the monarchs themselves: 'The application of Alfred to the present King, may be construed (in the light some of the audience imagined) as a piece of gross flattery.' Clearly, Alfred's favourable vindication of the current monarchy had its limits, yet even this complaint does still serve witness to the fact that 'some of the audience' at least was willing to comply with the comparison.¹⁵¹ 'The ideological project at the heart of the celebration', as O'Quinn would term it, is very clearly prompting and

¹⁵⁰ Garrick, *Alfred*, 51.

¹⁵¹ *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, Oct 11, 1773.

successfully receiving a strong degree of support from the audience. In this case the celebration is of Britain's military power, its global role as the champion of liberty and, perhaps most surreptitiously, the righteous and beneficial power of its ruling classes. Alfred is working here as the director of a patriotic extravaganza; an opportunity for audiences to witness and, crucially, both applaud and partake in, support for the state. *Alfred: a Masque* may well proclaim the Saxon king to be the historical 'Father of the State', but the Alfred it portrays to its audience is at the same time put to work supporting its contemporary actions.

'Whatever is of Saxon Establishment, is Truly Constitutional'

The political essence of Obadiah Hulme's *An Historical Essay on the English Constitution* is clear: 'Whatever is of Saxon establishment, is truly constitutional.'¹⁵² From this starting point, he guides the reader through the key political ideas of virtual representation and annual election from a Saxonist perspective. Both of these issues, he claims, are 'of Saxon establishment' and his *Essay* at different moments challenges and supports the current British political establishment through its understanding of these ancient principles. Specifically, Hulme seeks to use virtual representation (the idealistic notion that members of parliament would represent not just those who elected them, but all members of the kingdom) to argue in favour of Britain's taxation of the American colonies without their having a role in parliament. With annual elections, however, he berates the British state for its adoption of a seven-year electoral cycle.

¹⁵² Hulme, *Essay*, 9.

As the great legislator of the Saxon age, Alfred plays a crucial role in Hulme's theoretical framework, and his significance to contemporary Britain is made stark through the essay's arguments. Whereas the masque's implied support for the country's elite and governing classes provides no fuel for opposing views, Hulme's text, although no less certain about its own conclusions, displays an extraordinary malleability in relation to the actions of the current state. What concerns Hulme most of all is not Alfred's military victory, but his constitutional innovations and political management of the nation's governing procedures. Hulme's praise for the Saxon king contrasts therefore with the heroic bombast of Garrick's stage, relying instead upon intellectual argument and considered rhetoric. The most crucial difference, however, is how Hulme uses Alfred to also highlight flaws in the functioning of the British state. The original, ancient principles of Alfred's constitution serve as a litmus test for contemporary arrangements: they either comply with or defy these principles and should be maintained or reformed respectively. It is on this basis that this seemingly radical text also argues fervently in favour of aspects of the status quo. The title page of the *Essay* proudly displays a radical rallying cry of 'Where annual Election ends, there Slavery begins', whilst simultaneously promising that: 'The Right of Parliament, to Tax our Distant Provinces, is explained, and justified.' As the figurehead of Saxon constitutionalism, King Alfred is put to work as both reformer and preserver. For the purposes of this study, the *Essay* works as a counterpart in miniature of the malleability, diversity and contestation of Alfred's appeal in this period. And as I intend to ultimately show in this chapter's conclusion, the apparent universal appeal of texts such as Hulme's would also spark fierce contestation over which groups and political organisations could legitimately claim Alfred as their own.

Before considering Saxon elements in detail, it is worth addressing Hulme's claim of conducting an 'impartial Inquiry.'¹⁵³ The *Essay* presents itself as a text negotiating a path between opposed political points using Alfred's constitution as its infallible compass. 'The motive', Hulme states, 'which induces the Author to lay these papers before the public, is [...] to point out the constitutional means of reconciliation, between Great Britain and her distant provinces.'¹⁵⁴ This 'constitutional means' is, unequivocally, consideration of the original Saxon constitution and copying it as closely as possible in the current day. The idealism of the *Essay* originates in its Saxonism rather than any fixed political position, allowing Hulme to present himself as an impartial negotiator of polarised subjects by asserting the simple claim quoted above: 'Whatever is of Saxon establishment, is truly constitutional.' The identified motivation of 'reconciliation' also distinguishes Hulme's *Essay* from a more overtly politicised pamphlet. On face value at least, he is attempting to draw people together and settle differences. The importance of King Alfred's constitution as the means of this global reconciliation should not be understated.

Through its calm and measured tone, the *Essay* works hard to evidence the impartial wisdom required to negotiate between polarised opinions. Hulme's language is steady and detailed; his arguments meticulous and presented as logical progressions from either principles ('where there is no election, there can be no liberty. And therefore [...]') or historical interpretation presented as fact ('The matter was simply this: one of the seven kings, was always chosen generalissimo over the whole body').¹⁵⁵ Despite appearances, however, the supposed impartiality of the text is intentionally deceptive. Authorial intrusion

¹⁵³ Ibid., ii.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., iii.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 11, 22.

directs and guides not only interpretation of the presented material, but also its application to the contemporary world. Hulme interrupts his description of the Saxon Heptarchy by stating: 'Having advanced thus far, I would make one observation [...].'¹⁵⁶ The pretence that this 'observation' is parenthetical to the text sells the lie that the preceding paragraphs are not themselves interpretations. By drawing attention to some opinions, many others slip by unnoticed. Hulme deploys this technique repeatedly, bolstering his claim to impartiality whilst disguising many of his interpretations. The reader is rarely left to consider the material for themselves, and is continually directed by Hulme's management of the reading experience. Professions of objective perception are common: 'this seems to satisfy what historians observe', 'I will now endeavour to point out', 'another matter, that offers itself to our consideration.'¹⁵⁷

Yet this should not throw into question the sincerity of Hulme's judgements: 'if ever God Almighty did concern himself about forming a government, for mankind to live happily under, it was that which was established, in England, by our Saxon forefathers.'¹⁵⁸ For although careful about maintaining his 'impartial' approach to his subject-matter, Hulme is not afraid to apply hyperbole or firm words once his judgements are made. Far from an 'impartial inquiry', then, the *Essay* is a carefully crafted piece of rhetoric intended to sweep the reader along on a journey of liberties and rights (some maintained, some lost) in an attempt to shape their response to two points of political contention in the early 1770s: annual election and virtual representation.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 14.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 16, 153, 139.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 32.

The first of these political themes, annual elections, is presented as something which the Saxons established in their ancient and 'perfect model of government', but has since been lost and corrupted across the centuries, chiefly in the upheaval of the Norman invasion.¹⁵⁹ Hulme takes the reader through the narrative stages of the Norman yoke, from 'the first establishment of our constitution, by the Saxons' to 'The destruction of the Saxon mode of government'. The rest of British history is played out as a constitutional battle between two sides – the 'people' and their usurpers (variously monarchs, politicians and Catholics), passing through 'the restoration of the constitution, by the great charter' and 'the [Glorious] revolution', right up to 1771. From Chapter VIII, Hulme turns the full force of his persuasive rhetoric onto the issue of 'the elective power of the people' in the current decade, presenting the issue as a continuation of the struggle against the Norman yoke.¹⁶⁰ Current British government, rather than being indicative of the legacy of Alfred (as implied by the 1773 masque), is instead the scarred vestige of this political conflict. Hulme presents reform, in the guise of restoration, as the solution to constitutional disagreements. Alfred's constitutionalism, therefore, sometimes functions as a reformist force, criticising the inadequacies and inequalities of the present. In this context, Alfred is aligned with radical political notions of a far more frequent electoral cycle and works to reform the state he will represent on the Drury Lane stage in 1773.

It is certainly the case that Hulme advocates a significant number of radical positions in the *Essay*. But as much as his radicalism is fired by Saxon constitutionalism, it is similarly

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, vi-viii.

tempered. Hulme is at his most radical when discussing his other major concern, the similarly supposedly ancient principle of virtual representation:

It is of no consequence, who elects them [MPs]; for every man, that is not an elector, may receive the full benefit of our constitutional mode of government, as much as if he were an elector.¹⁶¹

Hulme's understanding of the original Saxon constitution does not lead him to advocate any extension of the suffrage in Britain. In his final chapter, the culmination of much of his historical reasoning, Hulme uses this belief to argue for the right of the British parliament to tax the American colonies. He states that virtual representation has been part of the English constitution since Saxon times, and that the Saxons themselves were members of a vast network of ancient Germanic tribes who championed this form of governance. In contrast to the disruption of annual elections, Hulme paints a picture of constitutional continuity: this principle has been maintained as an inheritance from Saxon times and should therefore be maintained. 'It is the constitution itself', the *Essay* states, 'that refuses our distant provinces to exercise their elective rights.'¹⁶² In pursuing this argument, Hulme actually defends the contemporary functioning of the British government; both are vindicated through the author's Saxonism. In this case, the *Essay* is strongly conservative in nature, representing its tenets as protection of an ancient system against damaging innovations in the present day.

It is important to consider the other possibilities which Hulme offered to his readers thanks to this unyielding belief in the sanctity of the original constitution. One of the downfalls of only recognising Hulme's radical agenda is that it interprets the Saxons and King Alfred as

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 194.

¹⁶² Ibid., 196.

purely reformist elements within the text, where in fact they support multiple positions. Indeed, an overwhelming respect for the Saxon past demonstrates that Alfred's constitution itself is paramount over any contemporary policy or party allegiance. The furtherance of radical and/or conservative ideas is a corollary of Hulme's more profound obsession: the pursuit of the 'ancient purity' of the Saxon constitution.

Hulme sees the true principles of Saxon governance as a means of uniting the English-speaking world. He expresses a desire on his title page to offer 'equal Security to the Colonists, as to their Brethren at home' and states that he 'shall think himself happy, in having contributed his mite, to set the laws and constitution of his country in a clear and proper light.'¹⁶³ In the *Essay's* attempt to reconcile, Alfred becomes a touchstone, a unifying force, for the entire British nation and all English-speaking peoples across the globe.

The principles of virtual representation and annual election are claimed to have existed in Saxon governance long before the ninth century, but Hulme nevertheless credits Alfred's reign as their zenith: 'when the constitution of this country, became finally established, as a great nation.'¹⁶⁴ In the role of ancient Britain's prime constitutional visionary, the Alfred of the *Essay* is the champion of Hulme's political ideology and therefore serves both reformist and conservative political arguments. He is the champion of both the radical call for electoral reform in annual elections and the proof of the right of parliament to tax its colonies under the principal of virtual representation.

¹⁶³ Hulme, *Essay*, v.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

Key to Alfred's prominence is the collapse of the Heptarchy, the seven kingdoms of the British Isles established during the Saxons' early settlement. This is the point at which most popular stories and celebrations of Alfred begin, including the masque. These are stories that invariably celebrate Alfred's unyielding resolve, military skills and patriotic vision as forces which drove the Saxons to victory at Edington as the first step to a rightful reclaiming of the entire British Isles. In these interpretations, the king asserts his right to rule on the battlefield, repelling Viking conquests and uniting all Saxon people under his banner. Alfred leads, inspires, saves and comes to define the proto-British nation. This narrative, including Alfred's personal drive, is conspicuously absent, however, in Hulme's version of events:

[Saxons] began to quarrel amongst themselves which of the seven kingdoms was the greatest. This contest was carried on, with various success, for a number of years, till at last they became happily, and finally united into one, under Alfred the great; a prince of the most exalted merit, that ever graced the English throne. From that day to this.

He was a great warrior, an able statesman, and a person of great learning; he knew and loved the constitution of his country; and above all was an honest man, and the common friend to mankind. It was a singular providence, to this kingdom, that the new modelling of the government, should fall under the management of so great a genius; that was able to reconcile such a variety of interests, as must be affected by the necessary changes, which took place upon that occasion.¹⁶⁵

How Alfred's 'unification' of England came about, in this version of history, ignores swathes of what had previously come to define his reign. Gone is the epic struggle between marauding heathen and pastoral Christian, replaced with destructive internal strife which is resolved, seemingly straightforwardly, by Alfred's sensible and pragmatic reign. The Saxons'

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 23-4.

problems are seen as their own. The way in which they were 'happily [...] united into one' overlooks the scale of Saxon annihilation before the Battle of Edington as well as the struggles of the new kingdom subsequently forged by Alfred. The 'new modelling of the government' is similarly introduced as a considered resolution by the Saxon people, rather than a visionary yet desperate reconstruction of a power vacuum. The king is never presented as at the mercy of events or in desperate need of some personal powerful attributes that could be defined as somehow British. Hulme makes only a passing reference to Alfred's role as a 'great warrior'. The required skills and, indeed, the nature of the challenge itself, are very different to those of the military champion that would lead Drury Lane in a chorus of 'Rule Britannia' just two years later. Hulme gives no indication of the grand vision commonly attributed to Alfred, nor a sense of overwhelming national peril. The passion for nation-building appears instead to reside in the people, the 'variety of interests' which Alfred has to respect and appease. The role of king is framed as that of a steward, who follows the guidance of his people and compassionately manages differences of opinion. Alfred here is a negotiator and a diplomat, not a forceful visionary. His triumph is located in a complex constitutional juggling act concerning extra-parliamentary bodies and their political legitimacy. In this way, Alfred is deployed as a key figure in legitimising Hulme's claim that the will and power of 'the people' was an ancient privilege. He is also perhaps hinting that contemporary disunity in the British Isles and American colonies may well be the result of the lack of a political negotiator on par with Alfred.

Alongside this brief delineation of Alfred's reign, Hulme pursues a fascinating (and somewhat unnecessary) diversion into a description of the king's character and personality.

His detailing of Alfred's personal achievements is out of keeping with the comparatively individual-free content of the majority of the essay, as is the verbatim quote from Hume's assessment of Alfred as: 'a prince of the most exalted merit.' The Saxon king appears frequently throughout the *Essay* as a touchstone for many of the historical ideas under consideration and is the only named person of the Saxon past. Hulme makes space amongst his political arguments to highlight Alfred's personal successes and there is certainly an enthusiasm on Hulme's part to paint a dynamic picture of the king. This makes Alfred unique amongst all Hulme's historical figures and the role of the king is nowhere else celebrated with such enthusiasm. It is Alfred's personal connection with the constitution that leads to such praise. Hulme claims that Alfred 'knew and loved the constitution of his country.'¹⁶⁶ In contrast to the deception of modern leaders, Alfred is able' and 'honest.' He is the 'common friend to mankind'; belonging to, not ruling over, his people.¹⁶⁷ He is remarkable for his ability to love this role of service instead of being corrupted by its power.

One of the reasons why it is so hard to place the Alfred of Hulme's essay as either a conservative or radical is the intertwining of the two positions necessitated by the Anglo-Saxon base of Hulme's political principles. By issuing a call to restore Saxon values, reform is restoration and change is conservation:

to unite, heart and hand, as one man, from the east to the west, and from the north to the south, and recover, by our union, what we have lost, by our divisions. Let us carefully weed, from our constitution, all modern heterogeneous matter, that hath poisoned its principles, and established a tyranny upon the ruin of our ancient laws, and liberties.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 24.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 24.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 152-53.

The balancing act Hulme is attempting in his philosophy is evident in this chaotic mix of metaphors, in which progress and preservation are one and the same. The constitution itself is visualised variously as a garden overgrown with weeds, a liquid which has been poisoned and the ruins of a great structure which have been built upon by corrupt modernisers. Growth and beauty have been stunted, purity contaminated and greatness destroyed. Yet even in the midst of this clear passion, Hulme's solution is to 'carefully weed' the constitution of all inappropriate elements. He advocates an assiduous and targeted reform based upon what he understands as pre-existing purities. He is not calling for a complete overthrow of current establishments, but a style of management that can cultivate original purity and keep out contaminants.

This is the role which Alfred fulfils so spectacularly in Hulme's account. It was a period of deliberate and considerate management of the constitutional garden, not one of dramatic redevelopment. Many of Alfred's innovations are tempered by an insistence on national consensus and ideas of enhancing, but never replacing, previous constitutional elements. For instance, Hulme describes Alfred's supposed establishment of a proto-House of Lords by deploying multiple qualifiers: 'when Alfred the great, united the seven kingdoms into one, he, undoubtedly, with the approbation of his people, incorporated this great council, as a separate branch of the wittena-gemot, or parliament.'¹⁶⁹ The parenthetical and therefore conspicuous pauses to announce the support of the population and the equally important framing of the event as an incorporation, not an innovation, establish Alfred as the ideal cultivator and not a potentially dangerous innovator.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 22.

Hulme makes his opinion on total redesign clear when attacking Britain's current lack of annual elections:

If our house is not bound by this constitutional rule, then we have been in a dream from the foundation of its establishment. And if this be the case, why do we talk of our constitution in general, or of our constitutional rights, privileges, and franchises in particular? they are mere sounds without sense, and words without meaning. Upon this principle, our constitution may be one thing today, and another thing tomorrow.¹⁷⁰

Any constitution not backed up by the original Saxon principles, is merely 'sound without sense [...] words without meaning,' empty of the crucial element which distinguishes noise from speech. All attempts to gain greater freedom or hold government accountable must be first established in the ancient Saxon constitution: 'Without it, they do nothing; all other expedients will prove false, delusive, and of no effect.'¹⁷¹

It is thanks to this preservation and maintenance of these original principles that the *Essay* is able to use the past to *praise* the present. Hulme frequently offers explicit support for Britain's strong Protestantism and opposition to the Catholic Church. Throughout his discussion of English history, the Catholic clergy and the Pope are the chief supporters and benefactors of the corrupting forces attempting to destroy Saxon systems of governance: 'the wicked, tyrannical invaders, of the common rights of mankind, have seldom failed to meet with the protection of the church.' Both the Saxon and post-Saxon past are considered extremely vulnerable to the corrupting influences of Catholicism. Only since the reign of

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 146.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 198.

Henry VIII, in which 'the pontiff of Rome, lost his influence, upon the legislative authority of England', has the nation been largely safe.¹⁷² Hulme's treatment of this Catholic conspiracy is an example of what progress has been made in defending the natural rights of the people of England that go beyond the original Saxon arrangement.

Alfred's reign also demonstrates to Hulme's readers the successful preservation of constitutional principles themselves. In another instance in which Hulme allows himself to indulge in the more sensational elements of Alfred's mythology, he cites the legend that: 'in the reign of Alfred, [law, order and policing] was in so great perfection, that, if a golden bracelet had been exposed upon the high road, no man durst have touched it.'¹⁷³ In one of his typical moments of manipulative authorial intrusion, Hulme follows this invocation of Alfred's mythology to reinforce his stance on unrest in the American colonies: 'I would here just beg leave to observe, that the government, established for the internal police of our American provinces, is founded upon the same principles, as that which our Saxon forefathers established, for the government of a shire.'¹⁷⁴ Very clearly, it is Alfred's own laws which condemn the unrest in the colonies and vindicate the actions of the British parliament. Unrest in America, then, is the fault of the colonists' incorrect interpretation of Saxon principles of government, not unjust laws introduced by parliament. In this direct comparison of Alfred's reign to the eighteenth century, it is the actions of the government that are being supported.

¹⁷² Ibid., 43, 65, 78.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 13.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 18.

The majority of Hulme's praise for the present state of the constitution, however, comes in the form of the continuity of Saxon law into the eighteenth century. Crucially, this is almost exclusively present in his discussions of the British parliament's policies towards the American colonies: 'It is the constitution itself [...] that refuses our distant provinces to exercise their elective rights, for the election of representatives to serve in parliament [...] to say that no Englishman is to be taxed, without his consent, either in person, or by his representatives is merely sound without sense, and not true in fact.'¹⁷⁵ Once again deploying the alliterative phrase, 'sound without sense', Hulme links the colonists' calls for elective rights with his earlier condemnation of unrestrained reform. The Americans are unjustifiably outraged, he claims, because their grievance contravenes the principles upon which the constitution itself is based. 'There is no principle in our constitution', Hulme asserts, 'neither was it ever [...] the ancient practice of England for thirteen hundred years past, that any part of the community had the right to tax themselves, to defray the national expense of government. Let them take it at any point of time they please, even as far back as the Saxon period before the conquest, when the constitution was in its perfection.' Attached to this argument is a direct comparison between the colonies and original Saxon shires: 'had the shire of York, for instance, come to the same resolution THEN, as the province of Massachuset's Bay hath NOW, it would have been a direct violation of the constitution, and an attempt to dissolve the community.'¹⁷⁶

Where Hulme concedes ground to the colonists is crucial for our consideration of Alfred's function as a role model: 'it must be confessed, in justice to them, that we have given them

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 195-96.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 188-89.

some cause to doubt our intention, by the partial mode of the stamp act.’ This is clearly what Hulme was referring to in his preface as ‘modern laws, which [...] have caused a total change in the spirit and temper of our government.’¹⁷⁷ He comes to no firm conclusion as to whether the Stamp Act can be considered unconstitutional, but he clearly believes that the Saxon ‘spirit’ and love of liberty was clearly lacking in this instance. Correcting this spirit can again be considered as part of Alfred’s role in the text and explains why Hulme was so keen to detail the king’s personality. Alfred is not only a role model for the principles of his government, but also for the personality required to successfully conduct it.

A prime example of Alfred’s unquestionably moral undertaking of the exercise of power comes when Hulme finally makes reference to the Viking invasion. Alfred provides a model of how a monarch asks his people for support in military matters:

Alfred, under this real necessity, did not pretend to tax his subjects by virtue of his prerogative; but assembled his parliament, and showed them the inconvenience he laboured under, with such a flying enemy; and pointed out the means of redress. He advised them to grant him a supply of money, to fit out a fleet of ships, and fight the enemy at sea; and so prevent their landing at all.¹⁷⁸

The difference between Hulme’s version of events and that depicted onstage in Garrick’s masque is fascinating in its starkness. At Drury Lane in 1773, Alfred would, in his penultimate lines of the play, be struck with a moment of grand inspiration: ‘These roving Danes / A stricter watch demand, / ’Tis naval strength, that must our peace assure. / Be this the first high object of my care.’ This proposal is met with instant approval from the Hermit: ‘Alfred, go on; the noble task pursue [...] Yes, in her fleets, let England ever seek / Her sure

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 197, iii-iv.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 99-100.

defence.' The idea is further sanctioned by the Hermit's magical vision into the future, in which Britain's forests are seen 'triumphant o'er the main' in the form of the ships of the Royal Navy. It is from this moment that the 'grand occasional scene' of the Portsmouth naval review emerges, accompanied by the climax of 'Rule Britannia.'¹⁷⁹ Contrast this seamless transition between Alfred's revelation, vision, action and legacy with Hulme's account above. Victory over the Danes is achieved not through Alfred's military prowess or his tactical genius, but by his respect for parliamentary procedure and ability to mobilize the powers of the state on his behalf. The legendary founding of the navy becomes a matter of parliamentary negotiation, and the execution of the vision is tense with conscientious respect for the liberties of the people.

When Alfred unified the Heptarchy, Hulme claims, the people of those kingdoms were 'united under one king, or chief magistrate, and one parliament.'¹⁸⁰ The interpretation of a king as a 'chief magistrate' is the dominant conception of monarchy in the *Essay* and its workings are evident in Alfred's political negotiations in founding the navy. Hulme elaborates further: 'The power, vested in our Saxon kings, was circumscribed by the same rule, was of the same genius, spirit and temper, as that vested in the chief magistrate of a city.'¹⁸¹ Hulme uses a post-1688 conception of royal power to redefine the king as an elected official, whose chief responsibility was the management and protection of the constitution. The power is always voluntarily 'vested' in the monarch by the will of the people and the language of administration and management fills Hulme's descriptions of their duties. A king is not a leader, a person who supplies the direction of the state; he is a

¹⁷⁹ Garrick, *Alfred*, 62-3.

¹⁸⁰ Hulme, *Essay*, 23.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 28-9.

facilitator only, 'the hand' of the body politic, not the mind.¹⁸² The monarch is a functional, able and talented part of the national government, but by no means autonomous. Alfred is the hero of Hulme's text because he epitomises the best use of this trust and delegation.

Having made the case for the presence of supportive Saxonism in the *Essay*, it is worth drawing attention to the more obvious reformist elements of the text. Hulme provides plentiful repeated aphorisms derived from his observations of Saxon governance such as 'WHERE ANNUAL ELECTION ENDS, THERE SLAVERY BEGINS' and 'THE POOR MAN'S ANNUAL ELECTIVE RIGHTS, ARE THE RICH MAN'S BEST SECURITY.'¹⁸³ These claims, based upon the loss of Saxon rights, deploy an assumedly supreme Anglo-Saxon constitution to shame the present state of degradation. Alongside its moments of support for the current system, when considered viable, the text also frequently clamours for electoral reform citing Alfred's perfect reign as vindication. For instance, one of Hulme's most evocative passages concerns a Saxon man revived from the dead who witnesses the world in its current state:

Were an old Saxon to rise out of his grave, and be told, that there was an hereditary right, to power, in kings; and that England, was sometimes governed by a child; he would be greatly surprised, and tell you it was the oddest conception that ever entered the mind of man. And yet, as things are now situated, wise men are of opinion that chance, in this case, is better than choosing.¹⁸⁴

This imaginative entry into the essay brings a Saxon individual into the mind of the reader and encourages them to directly compare the political awareness and relative constitutional freedoms between themselves and this reanimated Saxon. As the ordinary man of the past

¹⁸² Ibid., 90.

¹⁸³ Ibid., title page, 115-16, 69.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 31.

is held up against the 'wise men' of the present, the former emerges superior in a clear rhetorical attack on, and humiliation of, the latter. Not only is the modern system inferior in substance, it is also mocked as being somehow ludicrous in the eyes of those who conceived it, robbing it of both legitimacy and dignity. The series of qualifying interruptions, delivered in various parenthetical phrases such as 'as things are now situated' and 'in this case', stress the unnecessary nature of this state of being and amplify its ludicrous prominence in society.

This appeal to a Saxon individual reveals not only the high regard in which Hulme holds the pre-Norman period, but also serves as a prime example of how even the ordinary people of that era had a more sensible approach to governance than modern times. In fact, the term 'wise men' holds a lot of weight in the *Essay* as the translation of 'Wittena-gemot', what Hulme identifies as the Saxon parliament, as 'an assembly of wise men.'¹⁸⁵ He describes how 'Our ancient parliaments were composed of THE WISE MEN OF ENGLAND but [...] they have been changed into THE RICH MEN OF ENGLAND.'¹⁸⁶ Once again employing a favourite literary tactic of parallelism, Hulme places the two parliaments directly beside each other in the text. Elsewhere, Hulme pointedly equates the origins of the British parliament, the Saxon 'wittena-gemot' to 'an assembly of the wise men of the nation.'¹⁸⁷ Believing wholeheartedly that the wittena-gemot was the precursor to Britain's current parliament, Hulme's assertion that parliament no longer contains wise men is in effect an accusation of etymological betrayal: parliament's very name no longer reflects its origins. With wisdom

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 33.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 126.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 19.

no longer the chief criterion for the legislative body of the state, the degeneration in England's parliament could not be clearer.

In a crucial parallel with the militaristic and patriotic Alfred of the masque, Hulme deploys the powerful rhetoric of national identity to justify change. In abandoning the Saxon constitution, he claims, something inherently national has also been lost. In a highly emotional paragraph he lambasts what has been removed from the people of the country by the introduction of a seven-year electoral cycle:

They have lost the distinguishing character, of Englishmen! They have lost, what the most tyrannical kings of England, could not force from them! They have lost, what their forefathers had been spending their blood, and treasure to defend, for these thousand years! They have lost the greatest jewel, that ever any people possessed! They have lost their constitutional, and natural liberty; their birthright, and inheritance, derived from God and nature! They have lost their constitutional means of redress, for all their grievances! They have lost their all, their every thing, by that damnable septenniall law; which has fettered down, the elective power of the people, like a dog to a manger, which is only suffered to go abroad, ONCE IN SEVEN YEARS, for an airing!¹⁸⁸

Hulme's outrage is clear through the aggressively punctuated nature of this paragraph; every one of its eight sentences concludes in an exclamation mark. A sustained barrage of commas similarly serves to break up the clauses and make each one its own harsh addition to the growing list of tragic loss. The repetition of the syntactical formula of subject-verb-object in 'They have lost...' enables Hulme to create a continuously growing record of seemingly unending tragedy. These moments show Hulme at his most creative and serve as examples of his accomplished rhetorical style; his enumeration of these losses incorporates

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 152.

a metaphorical jewel, a canine simile and multiple attempts to provoke guilt and anger amongst his readers. Hulme nevertheless makes his point clear: the unification of all English-speaking peoples under the principles of the Saxon constitution is the only way in which the 'distinguishing character of Englishmen' can be restored. For the purposes of this study, it is additionally crucial to note the tendency to make Alfred and the Saxons a defining element of national identity. Both the celebratory masque and Hulme's radicalism share this common factor.

In this respect, Hulme's claims for his own essay are modelled upon his interpretation of Alfred's historical role: the keeper of principles and truths in the form of a robust constitution, whose task is to line up political demands with this constitution and support or dismiss them according to their syncopation. This approach, therefore, is what allows a politically divergent Alfred to emerge from the *Essay*. The king and his constitution are placed at the heart of all debates; notions such as liberty, freedom, even constitutionalism itself, are not merely consequences of Alfred's reign: they are *defined* by it. For Hulme, Alfred provides a convenient personification of lost origins.

Atlantic Alfreds

Hulme's *Essay* does not present a clear agenda for domestic reform. Multiple narratives, multiple political languages and multiple pathways of interpretation are all wrapped up in the primary message of Anglo-Saxon constitutional purity. This chapter has compared the Alfred of the *Essay* with that of the revived masque of 1773 in order to demonstrate the extraordinary flexibility of the figure of the Saxon king in facilitating different political and

nationalistic points of view. His figure could be evoked in order to both celebrate and condemn the present - sometimes, in the case of Hulme's *Essay*, within the same text. In this final section I wish to draw the issues discussed above into a wider and more interdisciplinary overview of Alfred's position during the American crisis and conflict. I shall do this by considering one remarkable afterlife of Hulme's *Essay* alongside the ships of both the Royal and colonial navies named after King Alfred.

Shortly after the American Declaration of Independence in 1776, an essay entitled *The Genuine Principles of the Ancient English or Saxon Constitution* was published in Philadelphia by 'Demophilus.' Hulme's essay formed the basis of this new text, and the principles of the Saxon Constitution that he used explicitly to argue for taxation of the colonies now served almost the fundamentally opposite function: they were put to use arguing for a new American nation, which repulsed British corruption and restored old Saxonism in the New World. 'Demophilus' demonstrates perfectly that, with barely any material change to the text of Alfredian Saxonism, the espoused principles and ideologies could be effective in challenging British dominance in America as well as supporting it.

As erstwhile Britons, the colonists in America - not least the key figures of the Revolution itself - shared the British perspective on King Alfred. George Washington had a print of King Alfred on display in his home at Mount Vernon and Thomas Jefferson 'suggested that the Great Seal of the United States should carry images of Hengist and Horsa.'¹⁸⁹ Jefferson, additionally, 'later advocated the division of the West into what he fondly imagined would

¹⁸⁹ David Horspool, *Why Alfred Burned the Cakes: A King and His Eleven-Hundred Year Afterlife* (London: Profile Books, 2006), 92, also see 170.

be the equivalent of Alfred's hundreds.'¹⁹⁰ To many of these revolutionaries fighting against the perceived tyrannies of George III, King Alfred provided the image of an ideal, benevolent king. Even after declaring independence, many Americans celebrated Alfred as an ideal monarch against whom they could negatively contrast George III.

One of Alfred's greatest appeals was the claim that he had founded the English constitution. Many Americans believed that the system Alfred had put in place had been corrupted and distorted by George III and Lord North. A movement began to restore the original values of Alfred's Witenagemot. Despite rejecting monarchy, some American colonists still embraced the values of Alfred's Saxon constitution. Demophilus was one such colonist and he used the values he found in Hulme's *Essay* to argue for 'the peculiar fitness for the United Colonies' of 'Alfred's constitution [...] that great deliverer and his sublime council.'¹⁹¹ The new constitution, Demophilus argued, should mirror Alfred's original as closely as possible and create in America an uncorrupted version of Saxon England. The 'tyranny of George the Third' is blamed for degrading Alfred's ideals, and the author's eagerness to promote 'genuine principles' evidences an attempt to reclaim the true state of Saxon freedom.¹⁹² He praises the institution of monarchy, but only if a genius such as Alfred is on the throne.

In addition to constitutional arguments, the colonists also mobilized Alfred's name in war. During the revolutionary conflict, a naval committee including John Adams decided on a name for their largest warship: they chose *Alfred*. This meant that 'the flagship of the first

¹⁹⁰ Keynes, 'Alfred', 288.

¹⁹¹ 'Demophilus', *The Genuine Principles of the Ancient Saxon, or English Constitution* (Philadelphia: Robert Bell, 1776), title page and 16.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 3.

American fleet' - newly independent and republican - was named after an English king.¹⁹³ 'What *Alfred* [the ship] represented,' argues Cox, 'was one of the intermediary phases in the movement from resistance to revolution, as Americans appropriated, rather than destroyed, the image of British monarchy.'¹⁹⁴ Claiming a profound connection to King Alfred enabled the colonists to present themselves as genuine Saxons and on the side of original liberty – their enemy was the corruption of modern Britain. The part played by the American *Alfred* in the conflict was significant: 'as one of the first ships of the Continental Navy of the United Colonies, as the flagship of the first American fleet, as the first ship to hoist the Grand Union flag of the United Colonies, and the first command ship of an American amphibious invasion of enemy territory, the Continental Ship Alfred played no small role in the winning of independence for the United States.'¹⁹⁵ This instance of the figure of Alfred being used to fight against those who championed him is an excellent symbol of the contestation surrounding the Saxon king in this period.

Furthermore, whether as a direct consequence or not, the British would respond with a ship of their own. On January 13th 1778, the *Morning Post and Daily Advertiser* carried a letter to the editor from 'Alfred' regarding the state of the British navy. 'Britain has for some years slumber'd over the faults and failures of her maritime affairs,' he writes, 'and I am apt to think that without an active, and a speedy attention, the invincible wooden walls which have heretofore defended her from the assaults of the enemy, will afford but feeble vestiges of her former importance.' Whether 'Alfred' saw the improvement he wished for is

¹⁹³ John J. McCusker, 'Alfred, the First Continental Flagship 1775-1778', *Smithsonian Studies in History and Technology* 20, (1973), 1.

¹⁹⁴ Cox, 'King Alfred', 245.

¹⁹⁵ McCusker, 'Alfred', 14-5.

unknown, but later that year a British ship under the name of *Alfred* would be launched and 'put into commission immediately.'¹⁹⁶ By the end of 1778, the period under scrutiny in the following chapter, both Britons and Americans had had an *Alfred* on their side.

¹⁹⁶ *General Evening Post*, 29 Sep - 1 Oct, 1778.

CHAPTER TWO

'Not thus did I expect to see the king': Alfred the Great and the American Revolution on the London Stage

In the beginning of the year 1778, the tragedy of Alfred was performed at Drury-Lane, but did not succeed. I do not mean in this place to enter into any critical discussion of Mr Home's works; but I may just say, that this tragedy is undoubtedly the weakest of his productions, and it was not surprising that it did not please the public. Indeed, had it possessed more merit than it did, an English audience could hardly have been pleased to see their Alfred, the pride of their country in its earliest age, the patriot and the lawgiver, melted down to the weakness of love, like the commonplace hero of an ordinary drama.¹⁹⁷

I can conceive that the substitution of a love-interest for an interest of state, which the audience expected from the name of Alfred, may have balked them.¹⁹⁸

It is so contemptible, that I should not have thought the author of 'Douglas' would have tarnished his fame by suffering it to appear (a few passages excepted).¹⁹⁹

'By January 1778', O'Quinn writes, 'the news of the British loss at the Battle of Saratoga had rocked the ministry, and the entire strategic plan for reconquering America was being hastily rejected [...] The patent theatres attempted to mobilize British history to bolster the war effort in plays such as John Home's *Alfred* and Richard Cumberland's *The Battle of Hastings*.'²⁰⁰ Jones agrees: 'These plays represented war with France or ancient invasions in ways calculated to reassure, even inspire modern audiences.' These London audiences were seeking 'a form of patriotic reassurance' from these performances of past heroic deeds.

¹⁹⁷ Henry Mackenzie, *An Account of the Life and Writings of John Home*, (Edinburgh: Archibald Constable, 1822), 65-6.

¹⁹⁸ Letter from Adam Ferguson to John Home. *Ibid.*, 117.

¹⁹⁹ Letter from R. Jephson to David Garrick. Garrick, *Correspondence*, 528.

²⁰⁰ O'Quinn, *Entertaining Crisis*, 141.

Jones brings our attention to the problematic complexity of some of these supposedly straightforward patriotic performances:

Other plays hinted at anxieties even as they endorsed the patriotic theatre's insistence on the heroic and spectacular. When John Home's *Alfred* appeared at Covent Garden, although its story of Saxon resistance to the Danes promised a compelling image of ancient valour, it did not quite deliver. Saxon efforts are clumsy and muddled; Saxon men are never quite up to the task.²⁰¹

The 'anxiety' which Home's play hinted at was that British men were indeed incapable of replicating the 'heroic hardness' of past ages – whether on the battlefield or on the stage. So when Home's *Alfred* failed to live up to expectations, it also failed to deliver for its audience the crucial sense of 'reassurance' that they were seeking. But this was not simply a play which fell short of its expectations; rather it attempted to win over its audiences with an entirely different set of values: those of sensibility. The extent of the challenge which Home faced in introducing the language of sensibility to the Alfred myth should not be underestimated. In this chapter, I intend to demonstrate the strength of Alfred's pre-existing image through a consideration of the Anglo-Saxon play which followed Home's *Alfred* later in 1778: *The Battle of Hastings* by Richard Cumberland. In this latter play, Alfred's 'expected' role in the national story is presented reassuringly to its audience. By considering the popularity of Cumberland's play alongside the criticisms of Home's, this chapter will demonstrate both the variety of and the potential limitations upon representations of Alfred in the late 1770s.

²⁰¹ Jones, *Literature, Gender and Politics*, 159-63.

As Jones has shown, the crisis of the American conflict created a concern in the late 1770s regarding masculine behaviour. It was thought that the 'traditionally male attributes of honour, candour and independence' were in decline, creating a call to reassert these behaviours and an increased fear of effeminacy, which was seen as a critical threat to the country's safety.²⁰² Commentators claimed that this effeminacy had already destroyed Britain's military capabilities:

Our men of rank and fortune [...] have exchanged sexes with the soft and fair. They are frubbles and maccaronies, and not soldiers and heroes. A year or two of encampments and rigid discipline, may restore them to virility and heroic hardness; but alas! The constitution and power of England, (which God forbid) may in the meantime be extinct.²⁰³

'Discipline', 'virility' and 'hardness' were attributes the leaders and soldiers of Britain needed to display if the nation had any hope of surviving the conflict. Cries for more masculine heroism amongst the nation's fighting men were frequently made in support of the North ministry's policy of coercion in the colonies; an aggressive stance towards the American uprising, it was claimed, was the manly and correct course of action. The parliamentary opposition and sympathisers with the colonists, however, chose to rely upon a different set of values: a compassionate consideration of fraternity and the feelings of individuals. In regards to validating this type of manliness, however, they largely struggled to construct an acceptably masculine lexicon through which their arguments could be taken seriously and as a result, 'there was a shift towards the language of contemplation, even sensibility, on the part of the Opposition.'²⁰⁴ Banister has recently shown how 'the military man was used within the culture of sensibility to centralize essentialist conceptualizations of gender,' but

²⁰² Ibid., 3-4.

²⁰³ *London Evening Post*, Jun 9-11, 1778.

²⁰⁴ Jones, *Literature, Gender and Politics*, 42-3, 44-5.

also that militaristic sensibility was particularly versatile in accommodating the tensions and contradictions of sensibility as a whole.²⁰⁵ Edmund Burke among others argued against the belligerence of North's actions and language, instead basing his pleas on appeals to fellowship and fellow feeling. The opposition argument was that it was the unfeeling violence of coercion that was tearing the country apart in a vicious civil war, and that it was compassion, not further antagonism, which would produce a solution.

It was this 'sensible' masculinity which Home's *Alfred* attempted to champion. The famed creator of *Douglas* established in his version of Alfred a battle-weary monarch, struggling through the uncaring demands of military and political life. His character is tortured by the demands of public duty and the costs of war; he frequently wishes that another life entirely was his to lead. The historical setting is a familiar one; like Thomson and Mallet's *Masque*, Home's play finds Alfred in exile and pays homage to his signature victory at the Battle of Edington in 878 – this being the 900th anniversary year of the event. Rather than being located on Athelney, however, Home's plot mostly takes place within the Danish warrior's camp, which Alfred has infiltrated in his disguise first as a harpist, then as one of his own noblemen, before finally revealing his true self. In the final act, Alfred confronts the Danish

²⁰⁵ Julia Banister, *Masculinity, Militarism and Eighteenth-Century Culture, 1689-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 123-5. Banister's book is particularly useful for exploring further all issues of military masculinity raised in this chapter, especially in relation to the Gothic past and military heroism. For a thorough consideration of masculinity and sensibility during the century, see Philip Carter, *Men and the Emergence of Polite Society, Britain 1660-1800* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2001). For sensibility on the stage see Paul Goring, *The Rhetoric of Sensibility in Eighteenth-Century Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), especially pp. 114-141. For the lacklustre effects of sensibility in reforming society, see Markman Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility: Race, gender and commerce in the sentimental novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), especially chapter six on the controversy of sentimentalism. For the national and global implications and influences on sentimentality, see Lynn Festa, *Sentimental Figures of Empire in Eighteenth-Century Britain and France* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2006) and Sarah Knott, *Sensibility and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

leader, Hinguar, and defeats him in combat, thus winning the kingdom. Parallels with contemporary fears of invasion from France are not as strong here as in a number of other plays of the period. However, the majority of the dialogue, and the most profound moments of emotional drama, are not concerned with invasion, but Alfred's wife Ethelswida who has been captured by Hinguar. Alfred is in a state of constant anxiety regarding her welfare, and with Hinguar falling in love with her himself, the fates of Alfred's wife and sovereignty become entwined. Alfred's passion for his wife is in danger of overwhelming concern for his country, and it is here that Home generates the painful conflict which Alfred so acutely feels between his private and public duties. The 'tragedy' of the king's story becomes the personal cost of war. Home makes Alfred's primary motivation, whether the love of his wife or of England, deliberately ambiguous throughout the play, thereby throwing into question the king's 'rigid discipline' and 'heroic hardness.'

In doing so, Home was still attempting to comply with the trend of the playhouses at the time, which tried to 'mobilise British history to bolster the war effort.'²⁰⁶ Yet he was doing so in a way that was more sympathetic with the sentimental language of the parliamentary opposition than the seeming belligerence of the government. His tragedy attempted to open audiences' eyes to the potential for compassion in the conflict, and encouraged those in attendance to develop a concern for the physical and mental welfare of the men involved in fighting the war in the colonies. As a fellow believer in the importance of sensibility, Vicesimus Knox, wrote:

There seems to me to be no method more effectual of softening the ferocity, and improving the minds of the lower classes of a great capital, than the frequent exhibition of tragical

²⁰⁶ O'Quinn, *Entertaining Crisis*, 141.

pieces, in which the distress is carried to the highest extreme, and the more at once self-evident, affecting, and instructive.²⁰⁷

This was the intention of Home's own tragedy, and Alfred played the vital role in this 'softening' mission. For this reason he was termed in the preface as 'The darling hero of his native land', rather than a more forceful epithet.²⁰⁸ Through Alfred's example, Home was attempting to establish historical precedent for the virtues and achievements of sensibility within the military and political realms. The primary aim of *Alfred: a Tragedy*, was to build public faith in masculine sensibility as a necessary form of manliness. Again, to quote Knox:

that decency and regularity, that temperance and industry, that religion and fortitude [...] constitute a better bulwark against attacks upon our liberty, than our boasted fleets and armies.²⁰⁹

In his attempt to 'bolster the war effort', Home was not overly concerned with representing military domination and triumph; he was far more interested in instructing the minds of his audience in the values of compassion and fortitude.

In the tragedy's epilogue – written by David Garrick – the play's vindication of these ideas is made clear:

Tho' from his eyes the drop of pity falls,
He fights like *Caesar*, when his country calls:
In spite of critic laws, our bard takes part,
And joins in concert with the soldier's heart.²¹⁰

²⁰⁷ Vicesimus Knox, *Essays, Moral and Literary* 12th edition, 2 vols, (London: Charles Dilly, 1791), 2.162.

²⁰⁸ Home, *Alfred*, xii.

²⁰⁹ Knox, *Essays*, 1.53.

This is an Alfred who was subject to profound suffering in the midst of conflict, but who eventually achieved victory. His performance through these trials was intended to demonstrate that a resolute predilection for compassion amongst the nation's leading men could still deliver a military victory in the conflict. These lines stress the compatibility of the dual characteristics of emotional sympathy and martial skill. They argue that the notion of the 'soldier's heart' was in no way oxymoronic and that a man of feeling and a 'Caesar' could be one and the same.

Guest, summarising Fliegelman, explains how 'discussion of the American war in the mid- to late-1770s as a conflict between an oppressive, anachronistic patriarchy and its offspring [...] intertwined that political struggle with the languages of novels and other genres which were more obviously concerned with private and familial relations.'²¹¹ This is what we witness in Home's attempt to translate the Saxon-Viking conflict of Alfred's reign into a story of domestic tragedy. Whereas the 1773 masque can be considered a product of triumphalism, this is a play in which the private costs of war are said to be too sharp to be ignored. In short, Home's reimagined Alfred was an attempt to redefine the public conception of a masculine hero to include and encompass strong emotions from the domestic sphere. It was not, however, an anti-war play.

William Russell defined patriotism as 'that enthusiasm, which makes a man prefer the state to his family, and the collective body of his fellow citizens to himself.' Women are incapable

²¹⁰ Home, *Alfred*, xiii.

²¹¹ Harriet Guest, *Small Change: Women, Learning, Patriotism, 1750-1810* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 177.

of patriotism, he said, because they are 'so susceptible of friendship, of love, of pity, of benevolence to individuals.' Alfred's questionable masculinity in Home's tragedy, therefore, not only undermines him by failing to adhere to standards of toughness, but it also potentially robs him of claims to patriotism. He cannot possibly 'embrace all [...] citizens' when he is so 'susceptible of friendship, of love.'²¹²

Cumberland's *Battle of Hastings* depicts a Saxon force of similarly questionable military merit, but differs significantly from Home's plot in the inevitable capitulation of Saxon England to the Norman invasion force. Reliving this historic defeat serves as a clear warning to contemporary Britons of the apparent enervation of the nation's forces and the potential for a forthcoming invasion from France. The play functions to 'bolster the war effort' by providing a brutal prophecy of demise unless the nation's men start to put their public duty above their private concerns. The role of Alfred in *The Battle of Hastings*, consequently, is to demonstrate just how far the Saxons who fell in 1066 have degenerated from his age of excellence. In Cumberland's play, emotional sensitivity, self-reflection and mental distraction are corrupting influences found amongst the squabbling, ineffective and ultimately annihilated Saxons. The moral lesson concerning heroic masculinity is stark and the legacy of Alfred towers over ancient Saxon and modern Britain alike as a reminder of the personal and societal degradation. This chapter considers the Alfred of Cumberland's *Hastings* as an example of the Alfred audiences expected to see; the kind of figure which Home's *Tragedy* signally failed to deliver.

²¹² William Russell, *Essay on the Character, Manners and Genius of Women in Different Ages* vol.2 (London: G. Robinson, 1773), 50-1, 48.

The public reaction to these approaches to Alfred could not have been more distinct. Home's play was only performed at Covent Garden on 21st, 22nd and 23rd January, and at Drury Lane on 30th March 1778. It received a lukewarm reaction in the metropolitan press and the author himself faced scathing criticism over his characterisation. Cumberland, on the other hand, saw his play outshine *Alfred* and maintain a two-month run, holding its place against giant rivals such as *The School for Scandal* and *Percy*. The depiction of victory, it would appear, was by no means a guarantor of a play's popularity or effectiveness onstage. Nothing as straightforward as historical narrative determined the effectiveness of these plays in holding the attention of the capital. Rather, it was the military, political and social values they espoused, the values embodied by Alfred, that provoked their contrasting receptions.

*

The fact that Home's Alfred is a reluctant warrior may at first seem puzzling, given the Scot's own military enthusiasm and participation. Home enlisted as a volunteer during the Jacobite invasion of 1745, and fought in a number of battles to defend Edinburgh.²¹³ Scott describes Home as 'one of the most active and eager members' of his company,²¹⁴ whilst Mackenzie delineates Home's 'passion for the military character' when he signed up for the Midlothian Fencibles in the same year *Alfred* was performed, stating that he 'attended the duties with

²¹³ Kenneth Simpson, 'Home, John (1722-1808), Church of Scotland minister and playwright,' *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 23 Sep 2004; Accessed 4 Jan. 2021, <https://www-oxforddnb-com.libproxy.york.ac.uk/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-13646>

²¹⁴ Sir Walter Scott, *The Miscellaneous Prose Works of Sir Walter Scott, Bart* vol.19 (Edinburgh: Ballantyne and Co., 1835), 290.

all the ardour of a young soldier.’ It was only a fall from his horse a year later that put an end to the playwright’s military activities.²¹⁵ In addition to his military passions, however, Mackenzie also makes a point of the playwright’s naturally sentimental nature: ‘His temper was of that warm susceptible kind which is caught with the heroic and the tender and which is more fitted to delight in the world of sentiment than to succeed in the bustle of ordinary life.’²¹⁶ Home’s militarism was melded with this clear susceptibility to emotions of sympathy and a flair for the heroic. Just like his version of Alfred, Home too was taken prisoner during wartime. After the Battle of Falkirk in 1746, he was held in Doune Castle but led a successful escape attempt, achieved by climbing down ropes made of the prisoners’ blankets.²¹⁷ Conflict also took its emotional toll on Home: ‘although mortally engaged against them, Mr Home could not, in the latter part of his life, refrain from tears when mentioning the gallantry and misfortunes of some of the unfortunate leaders in the highland army; and we have ourselves seen his feelings and principles divide him strangely when he came to speak upon such topics.’²¹⁸

Home’s version of the Saxon king demonstrates similar personality traits to his author. The king’s preoccupation with family and romantic love clashes with his military duties, and his lamentation over conflict and its demands upon him and his men reflects the same kind of suffering present in Home’s own reflections. This sentimental version of Alfred, therefore, is a deeply personal one, reflecting the values and experiences of his creator. *Alfred* is not just an attempt to open an audience’s mind to the potential sufferings of a real, young, Saxon

²¹⁵ Mackenzie, *Home*, 66-7.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

²¹⁷ Simpson, ‘Home.’

²¹⁸ Scott, *Prose*, 291.

monarch, it is also a text in which an emotional and conflicted soldier replicates the traumas of his own military experiences. This consideration of Home's background goes some way to explaining the tension at the heart of this play between the complete conviction behind Alfred's military struggle and the seeming reluctance and deep suffering which threatens to hold him back.

Home was a proud Scot, forming part of a critical network of Scottish Enlightenment authors, philosophers and historians. Mackenzie described them as the 'literary party who were the constant companions of the author, and then the chief arbiters of taste and literature in Edinburgh: Lord Elibank, David Hume, Mr Wedderburn, Dr Adam Ferguson, and others.'²¹⁹ This proud connection to Scotland influences a number of Home's previous plays, especially *Douglas* which 'offers itself as nationalist tragedy, and Home as nationalist tragedian.'²²⁰ Home was no stranger to writing tragedies about non-Scottish subjects, however, setting previous tragedies in Greece, Spain and Italy, but *Alfred* is his first foray into the English past. It is worth noting that, despite attracting criticism for a number of his literary choices when writing about Alfred, nowhere is Home criticised for being a Scot writing about an English subject. However, Mackenzie did suggest that Home may not have fully grasped the passion an English audience felt towards their Saxon hero, as seen in this chapter's opening quote. Mackenzie also seems at pains to stress the otherness of Home's English audience, referring to 'their Alfred' and 'their country', suggesting that Mackenzie at

²¹⁹ Mackenzie, *Home*, 37. Closest of all these companions was David Hume; their relationship was 'of the closest kind and suffered no interruption' (Scott, *Prose*, 327-8). It is also worth remembering Hume's request that Alfred be 'delineated in more lively colours' by contemporary writers, including 'specks and blemishes.' It is possible that Home's tragedy is in part a response to his friend's request.

²²⁰ Yoon Sun Lee, 'Giants in the North: Douglas, the Scottish Enlightenment, and Scott's Redgauntlet', *Studies in Romanticism* 40, no.1 (2001), 113.

least considered Alfred to still be under the ownership of the English. Despite the difficulties Home faced, however, it is possible to trace in this tragedy the beginnings of Alfred's transition into a British literary figure.

Home had strong connections with aristocracy and royalty through his patronage with the Earl of Bute. Ferguson wrote to Mackenzie on 3rd June 1812 to say: 'Lord Bute generally treated him with an uncommon degree of affection; their minds were much at unison in all the sentiments of admiration or contempt.'²²¹ Through Bute, Home also had a close relationship with his pupil, the future George III, who 'loved the person and conversation of Home, of whom he naturally saw much.'²²² These close connections go some way to explaining the sympathetic approach to monarchy and aristocratic leadership of armed forces that is tangible in Home's tragedy, in addition to the consideration of personal sacrifices that such offices hold.

It is important to note that when it came to writing his version of the Alfred story, Home was not making a significant diversion from his previous works. *Agis. A Tragedy* and *The Siege of Aquilia* were written and first performed in the 1750s, and offer clear parallels with Alfred's own situation in Home's later tragedy. These two plays demonstrate the conflict that can be generated between military and political leaders and their romantic and domestic lives. In the latter, the city's governor, Æmilius, laments how his own position has robbed him of his family: 'O had Æmilius been a poor Centurion / He might unheeded have

²²¹ Mackenzie, *Home*, 129.

²²² Scott, *Prose*, 318.

forsook his station, / And perish'd with his children.' Later in the play he has to choose between saving his sons' lives and surrender of the city. 'Let not my duty yield,' he cries, 'To the strong yearning of a father's heart.'²²³ In both situations Home is adept in creating tragedy out of the domestic responsibilities of military men. However, criticisms were levelled at these earlier plays too. Scott criticises *Agis* for the way in which 'the ordinary receipt of a love-intrigue, [is] awkwardly dovetailed into the general plot.'²²⁴ In many ways, then, *Alfred* represented nothing new for Home as a playwright – he already had experience in depicting conflicted military heroes, for which he had prompted both praise and criticism.

As can be seen from the quotations that opened this chapter, criticism for Home's *Alfred* came from friends as well as critical reviewers. Mackenzie offered the following summary: 'There was an uniform mediocrity in the language, an uniform tameness and want of discrimination in the characters, sufficient, without the national feeling of the debasement of the great Alfred into the hero of a love-plot, to tire, if not to disgust an audience.'²²⁵ Despite going into detailed appraisals of Home's other works, Scott offers only a single line on *Alfred*: 'In 1778, Mr Home's last dramatic attempt, the tragedy of *Alfred*, was represented and completely failed.'²²⁶ No more is said. 'C.', however, writing in the *Monthly Review*, had a comparatively positive response to Home's tragedy, recognising both the limitations and potential of the work. After praising a scene including Ethelswida's feigned madness as 'a specimen not unworthy the Author of Douglas', the reviewers claim that 'His taste however may be censured as faulty, or inelegant; and his fancy may be too incorrect

²²³ John Home, *The Siege of Aquilia* (London: A. Millar, 1755), 16; 43.

²²⁴ Scott, *Prose*, 308.

²²⁵ Mackenzie, *Home*, 117-8.

²²⁶ Scott, *Prose*, 350.

or eccentric.’ This censure notwithstanding, the reviewer ends their piece by calling for a re-write: ‘the story is so well calculated to receive further embellishment, and the Poet so capable of bestowing it, that we should rejoice to see a drama on the subject of Alfred, built by the same hand, on a more correct plan, and formed of materials more durable.’²²⁷

‘True Dignity’

In order to demonstrate that many aspects of Home’s *Alfred* could have been interpreted as flying in the face of Alfred’s historical legacy, it is worth taking some time to consider how the king was represented in a near-synchronous historical publication: *The Life of Alfred the Great*, published in 1777 by Alexander Bicknell. Bicknell was a dedicated Tory and supporter of Lord North’s firm suppression of dissent in the colonies. In order to demonstrate his loyalty towards the Prime Minister and government, he used his publication of Alfred’s biography to communicate many of his political opinions on the conflict. As a result, Alfred’s life and example becomes a vehicle for a contemporary viewpoint on strength of will and the necessity for military action. Transferred into the gender debate, Alfred becomes an example of unyielding, forceful masculinity.

Bicknell begins his *Life* with a dedication to Earl Mansfield, the current Lord Chief Justice of the King’s Bench. The reason behind the dedication is the expertise in the law that Mansfield and Alfred shared; this is ‘not a servile Dedication, but a Tribute due to your great Abilities.’ Such an opening immediately makes Alfred’s legal and constitutional legacy the chief identifier of his genius: ‘the Life of the most judicious Lawgiver that ever flourished on

²²⁷ ‘C.’, ‘Alfred’, 144-9.

this Island.’ Mansfield is praised for the ‘penetration’ and ‘firmness’ with which he upholds ‘the Laws at present in force’, in a comparison that praises both men for their strength of will.²²⁸ Alfred is being deployed as a symbol of the continuation of ancient values and a modern-day member of government is positively compared with the king to argue for the embodiment of those values in the current generation.

One similarity between Bicknell and Home is that both writers are concerned with the literary representation of Alfred and include prefatory material to justify their authorial decisions. As shall be seen shortly, Home attempted to justify his dramatization of Alfred in distinct contrast with the historical genre. In his *Life*, Bicknell is concerned with a related issue of popularising the king for a new, public audience. He describes the text as an ‘attempt to render the life of King Alfred more intelligible and entertaining to the generality of Readers [...] putting him on a more modern dress.’ ‘Though it adds not to the intrinsic value of the man’, Bicknell goes on to say, this biography ‘will probably gain [Alfred] a more ready admittance into the libraries of this politer age.’²²⁹ This project is the first historical account of the king which deliberately sets itself to educate the mass population; to open up Alfred’s life and legacy to Britons beyond the elite ranks. At the same time, it also promises entertainment; Bicknell attempts to ‘render [the events of the king’s life] at once pleasing and instructive.’²³⁰ To Bicknell, Alfred isn’t merely a source of inspiration and information; he can also be considered an appropriate vehicle of entertainment. In his reworking of Sir John Spelman, he pledges to do away with an ‘antique style and

²²⁸ Alexander Bicknell, *The Life of Alfred the Great* (London: J. Bew, 1777), iii-iv.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, vi.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, v.

circumlocution' and modernise, even popularise, the Saxon king.²³¹ Bicknell recognises a public demand for information about Alfred but believes that existing sources are not accessible. His mission is to create this accessible version.

According to Merrett, 'Bicknell writes as a loyal Hanoverian and protestant' in his early works, 'promoting rank-conscious education for tradesmen's daughters.' Other than his works, however, 'little is known' about Bicknell's life and networks, although 'his title-pages imply ongoing relations with publishers and booksellers.' Merrett also surmises that the 'gaps between dates of composition and publication imply that his writerly trajectory followed the typical career of a hack.'²³² Before writing about Alfred, Bicknell had shown an interest in other historical biography, anonymously publishing *The History of Edward Prince of Wales* (1776) and *The History of Lady Anne Neville* (1776). He would follow Alfred with *Prince Arthur* in 1779.

Bicknell's biography was not favourably reviewed. Writing in the *Monthly Review*, 'L' attacks Bicknell's writing style as being unworthy of his topic: 'A subject that might have claimed the pen of a Robertson or a Hume, a subject truly great, and in every respect, adapted to the times, is here occupied by a writer who is not even an Oldmixon or a Guthrie.'²³³ For this reviewer, at least, Bicknell is deemed unworthy of writing about the noble Alfred, a criticism

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Robert James Merrett, 'Bicknell, Alexander (d. 1796), writer', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 23 Sep 2004, accessed 12 Apr. 2021. <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-2355>.

²³³ 'L', 'Art. 62. the Life of Alfred the Great, King of the Anglo-Saxons', *Monthly Review, Or, Literary Journal*, 1752-1825 58 (1778): 402.

perhaps based upon Bicknell's accessible language. There is an important parallel in this response with reviews of Samuel Reddish's performance as Alfred in 1773. Both men were criticised for being below their subject material. Despite taking part in self-consciously 'public' works (Garrick's popular spectacular and Bicknell's vernacular biography) there were still some defending Alfred's position as an elite subject. So although writers with more popular intentions were bringing Alfred into the public spotlight, there was significant friction in this process.

The admiration with which Bicknell regards Alfred is nonetheless evident: 'we may with great justice place him in the foremost rank (if not the very first) of those few Worthies that have filled the English throne with true dignity, and are remembered by posterity with respect.'²³⁴ In another parallel with Home, Bicknell questions the possibility of doing justice to Alfred through a textual medium: 'the indefatigable exertion of all his powers to promote the happiness of his subjects, claim the Historian's warmest celebration – But his actions will more fully speak his worth than it is in the power of words, however nervous and comprehensive, to do.'²³⁵ In short, Bicknell fears that the limitations of the written word will prevent him from presenting anything more than a pale imitation of Alfred's true achievements.

The remainder of Bicknell's introduction is of interest to this study for another reason beyond its consideration of genre and mediation. Bicknell goes to great lengths to convince

²³⁴ Bicknell, *Life*, xi.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, xv.

his reader that Alfred demonstrated excellence as ‘a Man’, ‘a Warrior’ and ‘a Sovereign.’²³⁶ This triad of exemplary performances is the framework of Bicknell’s appraisal of the Saxon king and this appraisal is crucially developed into a commentary on Britain’s war in America. Discussions of manhood and military skill produce a consideration of power dynamics. For this chapter’s interest in how Alfred was used to frame and think through the crises of the American Revolution, an analysis of Bicknell’s approach is invaluable.

After reflecting that Alfred ‘inherited from his Progenitors a large share of bravery, and early acquired experience in the art of war’, Bicknell concludes that ‘his courage was confined to the defence of his dominions, and the preservation of the lives and property of his subjects.’²³⁷ Alfred is praised not only for his bravery and skill, but also his restraint in using military force only in defence of his own people. War is shameful, Bicknell continues, but Alfred’s example demonstrates when and how it can be used effectively as a necessary last resort. From this conclusion, Bicknell addresses ‘the present depraved state of the world.’ Alfred’s life and actions in repelling Danish invaders show that ‘the evils on society call for an exertion of the ruder passions; the necessaries and conveniences of life must be secured from the hand of the spoiler, and force must be repelled by force.’²³⁸ Writing these words in 1777, Bicknell can only be referring to the colonial rebellion and encouraging his readers to see Alfred’s example as vindication of the North government’s policy of coercion.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, x.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, xii-xiii.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, xiv-xv.

Bicknell's stance is significant. Playwrights like Home attempted to deploy theatrical Alfreds to temper military belligerence, but here we see the king performing precisely the opposite function. Through Bicknell's framing, Alfred provides a blessing to contemporary political actions and demonstrates no evidence of a 'man of feeling' in conflict with his own conscience and emotions. Alfred's outstanding role as 'Man [...] Warrior [...] Sovereign' shows that the figure of the Saxon king is being deployed to address not only the specific crisis across the Atlantic, but also the cultural and societal values that were in a state of upheaval in Britain as a result.

In the main body of the *Life*, this preoccupation with Alfred's means of conducting war and gaining glory continues. Bicknell stresses the forcefulness of Alfred's actions but claims that Alfred only acted in defence, falling short of 'needless exertions of severity' and earning him the reward of 'unblasted laurels.'²³⁹ The *Life* provides its readers with a short Saxon history before delineating the main events of Alfred's reign, focusing on war, his civic achievements and his private life in turn. It concludes with a short consideration of Alfred's legacy and children and some more general comments on Saxon culture. The king's resolute determination to put his people's cares first is evident throughout the text. Alfred's courage, the biography asserts, 'was inexhaustible, and his thoughts were continually employed in devising means to annoy his enemies.'²⁴⁰ 'In every situation', Bicknell continues to assert, 'an unabating ardour for the good of his subjects and the establishment of that religion to which he lived an ornament, actuated every thought.'²⁴¹ This constant reassertion that Alfred's 'every thought' was on his people sets an important precedent. The expectations of

²³⁹ Ibid., 290.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 146.

²⁴¹ Ibid., 188.

the character of Alfred were monumental, and some might say unreasonable. But Bicknell's text states Alfred's complete dedication to his subjects, at the expense of his own happiness, as the most vital aspect of his reign and personality.

The Battle of Hastings

As Earl Edwin is left alone onstage in the opening act of *The Battle of Hastings*, he stands and observes the grand Saxon castle in front of him:

Venerable pile,
Whose plain rough features shew like honesty;
Cradle of loyalty from earliest time;
Ye antique towers, courts, banner-bearing halls,
Trophies and tomb of my renown'd forefathers;
And you, surrounding oaks, fathers and sons,
And old old grandsires, chroniclers of time,
By which the forest woodman marks his tale,
If fate will doom you to a Norman master,
Farewell, ye perish in your country's fall.²⁴²

The values present in this powerful and emotive speech are representative of the Saxon society soon to be lost in the Norman invasion. The structure is a representation of the solid, flourishing but historically-located society that is in danger of being eradicated. The nature of the adjectives which scatter this speech depict the Saxon age as a simple, straightforward, uncorrupted time when men cared for each other and relationships were

²⁴² Richard Cumberland, *The Battle of Hastings, a Tragedy* (London: Edward and Charles Dilly, 1778), 2.

upheld with honour. 'Cradle of loyalty from earliest time', depicts the fortress as a sympathetic and nurturing place and establishes the ancient Saxons as progenitors of a 'venerable', 'plain', 'honest' and 'loyal' national consciousness. They were the nurturers of masculine loyalty, associated with both the birth and earliest maturation of honesty and comradeship.

The imagery used to describe the castle is indicative of the venerated, ancient Saxon society which Cumberland depicts in the play. It is also an entirely defined in masculine terms; key to its success are the presence of and relationships between great men. The fact that 'Trophies and tombs of my renown'd forefathers' stand in the castle, instils a sense of the established and settled period of history where achievements were catalogued and protected within the safety of the national fortress. The castle stands as testament to the past and provides a record of a celebrated line of male inheritance. The castle's 'surrounding oaks' parallel its human inhabitants. They are depicted as a single family thriving through primogeniture, as 'fathers and sons, And old old grandsires' reflect harmoniously the glories of the past. The exclusive male configuration of this society locates greatness in masculinity. Trees and human men stand tall and proud, the generations allowed to age in both safety and veneration; the 'chroniclers of time' who curate and evidence continued centuries of Saxon greatness. The 'plain rough features' of the stone edifice echo the notions of 'heroic hardness' which defined the dominant form of ideal masculinity in the 1770s. The castle is used by Cumberland not only to represent the ancient society of the Saxons, but also the values of manhood which created and preserved it. The defeatist leave-taking with which Edwin concludes his lament acknowledges the degeneration of the current age, simply by its

acceptance of defeat. There is no promise of sacrificial effort to attempt to salvage these past glories, Edwin simply sighs and accepts the inevitable.

The importance of this castle and its depiction to Alfred is demonstrated when the fortress is associated directly with the legendary monarch. Alfred, whose presence amongst the 'renown'd forefathers' is of course already implied, is additionally incorporated into the physical edifice of the grand castle itself. The same building which Cumberland established as a crucial metaphor for lost Saxon strength includes Alfred as one of its buttresses: 'king Alfred's tower.' Like the 'banner-bearing halls' present in Edwin's initial description, this Saxon fortress preserves and proclaims the achievements of the past and this 'antique tower' with Alfred's name enshrines his figure and provides inspiration.²⁴³ He is recognised as a vital part of this valuable symbol of the past – the tower representing both defence and grandeur. In relinquishing this fortification to an invading enemy, the Saxons of 1066 are similarly abandoning claims to King Alfred and are seen to be betraying his legacy.

Additionally, although it may at first glance appear deliberately anachronistic that the Saxons are in possession of a stone castle, Bicknell actually provides contemporary historical precedent for stone Saxon 'castles.' Crucially, he identifies them as a particular innovation of Alfred's:

²⁴³ Ibid., 5-7.

Alfred directed his subjects how to build them with stone, in a stronger and more regular manner, and having raised his palaces with stone or brick, the Nobility by degrees began to imitate his example.²⁴⁴

Dependent upon the currency of this idea, it is feasible that at least some of Cumberland's audience may well have associated the very presence of a castle with Alfred himself, and that the king becomes not just notionally, but intrinsically linked with this construction. Its inevitable *destruction*, therefore, takes on even more emotive significance.

In *The Battle of Hastings*, The name of Alfred is not merely invoked in the architecture of the Saxon state, the figure of the king is littered throughout the text, providing a precedent of benevolence and respectability against which the current corrupted age (whether 1066 or 1778) can be continually found wanting. Alfred's name is first spoken by Edwin who reveals to his servant the true identity of the mysterious 'Edmund': 'Mine and thy king; of Alfred's line a king; / Edgar, call'd Atheling; the rightful lord / Of this ingrateful realm, which Kentish Harold / Audaciously usurps.'²⁴⁵ Not only is Alfred used as the vindication of Edmund/Edgar's right to the throne, but also as the symbol of a truly noble and praiseworthy heritage (Wessex, as opposed to Harold's 'Kentish'). It similarly identifies Harold as wielding a provincial identity and localised power, in contrast to Alfred's pan-English (and, indeed, for some, pan-British) figure of unity. The 'ingrateful realm' over which Harold rules unfairly is a betrayal of Alfred's kingdom in more ways than one. Cumberland attributes the downfall of the Saxons to this usurpation, the abandoning of old virtues and the self-interest of the current male leaders. The men of 1066 inherited a 'venerable [...]

²⁴⁴ Bicknell, *Life*, 244-45.

²⁴⁵ Cumberland, *Hastings*, 5-6.

cradle of loyalty', nourished and embodied by Alfred, but their recalcitrant behaviour left them unworthy of their inheritance and doomed to relinquish it. The parallels with the fears of French invasion in 1778 are clear, and the message of moral degradation is conveyed through the fall from the values of Alfred's proto-England.

As Cumberland's drama develops, love-rivalries between two princesses for Edgar's hand threaten to tear apart the Saxon allies, whilst the Machiavellian courtier Waltheof seeks to manipulate the divisions for his own ends. It is later revealed that this 'veering traitor, / Went over to the foe.'²⁴⁶ The only man who can save the kingdom, Alfred's 'true' heir Edgar, is too distracted by his love of Edwina to focus upon the battle. His heart is accused of being 'not with England's cause' in a disagreement with the Earl of Northumberland.²⁴⁷ There is a chance that, by marrying King Harold's daughter Matilda, Edgar can unite all the Saxon factions. His refusal to do so earns Edgar a frustrated curse from Earl Edwin: 'Death to my hopes, he has no soul for empire. / Heav'ns! that a man born for a nation's glory. / Can fell his birthright at so vile a price, / For such a toy as beauty.'²⁴⁸ Edwin's language is bitter and makes it patently clear to the audience that it is Edgar's selfishness that is leading the Saxons to destruction. Edwina, the woman whom Edgar truly loves, is presented as a corrupting influence, later telling Matilda to 'live for you [Matilda herself], / And you alone', showing disregard for the political implications of her actions. 'Are there no hours / Amidst a soldier's life', Edgar cries, 'sacred to love, / To friendship, to repose?' The answer appears to be a firm 'no', as defeat comes as a result of Saxon selfishness and other internal divisions amongst the 'factious lords': 'turn upon the foe', King Harold cries in vain, 'Those eyes that

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 82.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 25.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 49.

interchange their angry fires.'²⁴⁹ Even the king, however, fails to provide a rallying position to unify his errant subjects. He fails to amend his own comparable errors: 'Man of sin', the seer Duncan addresses him, 'Conquer thyself, take arms against ambition, / Drive that invader from thy heart, then talk / Of setting England free.'²⁵⁰ With the entire cast of Saxons neglecting to abandon their personal hopes of political power or love, the 'invader[s]' in their hearts are never banished and there is no hope of 'setting England free.' It is much too late that Edgar decides to 'save my country at my soul's expence.'²⁵¹

To remind the audience of the Saxons' dishonoured state, references to Alfred are inserted throughout the play to continually emphasise the absence of his virtues. These are chiefly concerned with the purity of the king's lineage. Edwina claims that Edgar holds 'the best blood which England's Isle cou'd boast', whilst Edgar himself acknowledges that in his veins 'runs the last hallow'd stream / Of royal Alfred's blood.'²⁵² The ancient king's legacy has not been fostered or allowed to flourish. It has been replaced on the throne by Harold's Kentish line and now sits alone in the fragile figure of Edgar, whose erratic and self-centred behaviour threatens to ignominiously end Alfred's legacy. Disturbingly, Edgar threatens to 'sluice these veins / And let out Alfred's blood' rather than serve under the usurping Harold.²⁵³ Precious, inherited greatness is almost cast aside as a result of petty personal concerns and internal unrest. This conflict between personal and public cares is at the very heart of this chapter's discussion of Alfred's theatrical presence. In *The Battle of Hastings*, Alfred is overwhelmingly associated with the latter, and is ultimately betrayed by his

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 53; 26; 44; 26.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 38.

²⁵¹ Ibid., 76.

²⁵² Ibid., 19; 37.

²⁵³ Ibid., 22.

successors' selfish obsession with the former. References continually emphasise Alfred's reliability and steady loyalty, highlighting the divisions between the Saxons in 1066 and alluding to the behaviour of leading British men in 1778.

The Norman invasion, which punishes the delinquent Anglo-Saxons, sets a very disturbing precedent for those Britons who were concerned with the failings of their contemporaries in 1778. Yet, as Jones has argued: 'catastrophic Saxon defeat is transformed into a demand, not for protest and opposition, but for loyalty and sacrifice.'²⁵⁴ Although recognising their failure to live up to the standards of the past, the best course of action for the Saxons becomes clearer as defeat looms. Edgar pleads with his companions that 'It is not now a time / For English hands to strike at English hearts.'²⁵⁵ Personal sacrifice on the battlefield, they realise at the very end, is the only way in which they can honour values of the past:

Unfurl the Saxon standard! See, my lords
Twice taken in the fight and twice recover'd,
The hereditary glory lives with Edgar.
Beneath that banner godlike Alfred conquer'd;
Beneath that banner, drench'd in Danish blood,
My grandsire *Iron-sided* Edmund fought
[...] So turn; so stand!
And from this height, ennobled by your valour
Hurl bold defiance to the foe beneath.²⁵⁶

²⁵⁴ Jones, *Literature, Gender and Politics*, 165.

²⁵⁵ Cumberland, *Hastings*, 88.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 92.

These lines, which conclude the play, once again invoke Alfred's name and implore men to live up to his name and his heroic actions of self-sacrifice. A degree of faith in the continuation of the past is shown: still, it is claimed, 'the hereditary glory lives.' In a final act of defiance, in which the public good is put ahead of all personal concerns, there is hope of moral redemption, if not victory. Rather than Edwin's hopeless farewell to Alfred's castle at the play's opening, he closes at the end with 'bold defiance.' Even as defeat and death approach, men can still fight in Alfred's name and be worthy of the association. Ultimate betrayal only comes with surrender and refusal to fight.

Alfred's Sentimental Victory

Alfred: A Tragedy comes dangerously close to flying in the face of this 'demand [...] for loyalty and sacrifice.' Cumberland's play worked because of the inevitable defeat of the Saxons. Only in destruction could their wayward behaviour be effectively condemned as terminally catastrophic. The seriousness of their errors and the effectiveness of the message of sacrificial loyalty is upheld primarily by their destruction. Were the circumstances different, the question would still remain unanswered: was troubled self-interest amongst military men really going to harm the nation? *The Battle of Hastings* answered in the affirmative; Home's play suggests the opposite. *Alfred* attempted to demonstrate that giving heed to personal cares and personal suffering during the demands of warfare was by no means unnatural. Moreover, military victory could be achieved by adherence to the values of sensibility and a man's trust in the union of his emotions and physical skill. Far from the stoicism of Cumberland, in which Alfred's exceptional character was relegated to the symbolic past in the form of unyielding stone towers, Home's Alfred is painfully present and

painfully human. His thoughts and feelings are brutally exposed onstage and the audience asked to simultaneously respect and pity the king. It was an ambitious task and, unfortunately for Home, a largely unsuccessful one.

Recognising in his prologue the enormity of the task he had set himself, Home presents his depiction of Alfred as a bold and potentially controversial move:

[Home's muse] dares to trace the workings of a mind,
The greatest and the best of human kind;
Adjust its movements to dramatic plan,
And blend the god-like hero with the man.
The greater Alfred's fame, our bard risks more;
Such weight the flying courser never bore.
Alfred! whose life such strange events adorn,
That history beholds romance with scorn;
Him to present, here in his native land,
Where still his genius, and his laws command,
Is an attempt like his, who rashly tried,
The burning chariot of the sun to guide!²⁵⁷

This prologue pitches the play to follow as taking part in a battle between 'history' and 'romance' – two forms of representation which, in Home's eyes, are profoundly at odds. He says that history 'beholds romance with scorn' and promises to humanise the 'god-like' Alfred. He presents his task as monumental; in his attempt to present a truly human Alfred he 'dares', he 'risks', he 'rashly trie[s].' Home tells his audience that the mind of Alfred the

²⁵⁷ Home, *Alfred*, xii.

Great is not initially suitable for drama. He must change Alfred's character, 'adjust its movements to dramatic plan', and in the process 'blend the god-like hero with the man.' Indeed, to witness Alfred portrayed by an actor accomplishes this meld of apparent divinity and humanity. It is a point which the *London Chronicle* commented upon negatively on the morning after the first performance: 'Mr. Lewis's Alfred originally gave no impression of our great lawgiver and hero; and in his hands it still came out a fainter copy.'²⁵⁸ This 'fainter copy', a diluted representation of a revered presence, is seen by the *Chronicle* as a fatal flaw in the production. Perhaps it is simply the case that the myth is too large for a solitary theatrical figure to encapsulate. Knox reflected:

Various indeed are the characters when they appear on the public stage; but when they retire behind the scenes, and put off the glittering outside which fascinated beholders, the monarch, the hero, the philosopher, are found, in those common weaknesses which humiliate their aspiring nature, to be more nearly on a level with the peasant than their pride is willing to allow.²⁵⁹

Alfred is such a powerful figure, and the distinction between 'historical reality' and theatrical representation so great, that attempts to depict the man himself evidence this performative lie.

As was suggested in the previous chapter, Alfred was still not yet a popular literary 'character.' He was primarily a political figurehead, a wise and benevolent monarch responsible for saving and reforming ancient English society. The dominance of this interest in Alfred's civic role, and the political interpretations it facilitated, proved, as in this case, a hindrance to more literary explorations of his character. One such example of this clash

²⁵⁸ *London Chronicle*, Jan 20-22, 1778.

²⁵⁹ Knox, *Essays*, 1.147.

between 'history' and 'romance', setting a helpful precedent for Home's claims, can be found in James Beattie's poem *The Minstrel* (1771). The poem concerns a wandering poet named Edwin in an undefined English gothic past and the figure of Alfred transforms the direction of Edwin's life. As identified by Watt, a sage's invocation of Alfred encourages Edwin to temper his imagination and prompts a change in his philosophy: 'While his heart is still said to be fired by the Muse which claimed his "fond and first regard", his developing poetical genius, the ostensible subject of the work, is now presented as something which is subordinated to a progressive social genius [...] Edwin goes on to conceive of "new arts on nature's plan", and thus imagines a form of social advancement.'²⁶⁰ In *The Minstrel*, then, the figure of Alfred is connected to sober, grounded, civic thoughts; reason, law, social good and progress. Alfred's example serves as an antidote to fancy, fantasy and romantic idealism – he is an anti-poetical, 'social genius.' Edwin leaves behind his idealism to instead pursue the 'path of Science' through 'the beams of Truth', allowing the self-absorption of unrestrained nature to be tempered by the civic logic associated with Alfred.²⁶¹ This transformation to 'Science' and 'Truth' over romance presents Alfred as a wise sage in his own right; comprehensively concerned with social advancement, sound government and wise state-building. But once the idea of civic virtue is instilled in Edwin, his status as wandering poet becomes incongruous with his new-held beliefs. Watt claims that Beattie 'found it all but impossible to describe the later emergence of Edwin as a socially responsible poet' and Sutherland believes that 'Beattie does not know what to do with the Minstrel once he has made him.'²⁶² It appears that these Alfredian values prove to be

²⁶⁰ James Watt, 'Eighteenth-Century Gothic: Nation, History, Gender', *Gothic Studies* 14, no.1 (2012), 9.

²⁶¹ James Beattie, *The Minstrel* (London: Edward and Charles Dilly, 1771), 60.

²⁶² Watt, 'Eighteenth-Century Gothic', 9; Kathryn Sutherland, "The Native Poet': The Influence of Percy's *Minstrel* from Beattie to Wordsworth', *The Review of English Studies* 33, no.132 (1982), 422.

incompatible with the figure of a minstrel and a poet. So when Home draws a distinction between 'history' and 'romance', he does so with the knowledge that there is a significant precedent suggesting that Alfred's natural home is within the former.

The Minstrel reveals that, for some, Alfred's chief virtues lay in his role as legislator and wise political visionary. This view was, by far, not uncommon. Many scholars of Alfred have identified the recurring pattern present in visual representations of the Saxon king, which almost exclusively depict him as a mature, bearded statesman. Parker, for instance, describes how George Vertue's 1722 image of Alfred influenced almost all future artistic representations. 'Its firm, bearded visage became the dominant image of Alfred in the eighteenth century, while its tableau [which represented the key moments of the Alfredian myth] anticipated, and fed into the development of, Alfredian historical painting.'²⁶³ So when Home claims in his Preface that 'an imaginary idea has been formed of the character of Alfred as an old mortified, ascetic sage, of spirit too sublime and aetherial to descend to human passions or human actions', it is indeed the case that a common image to that effect dominated public perceptions of the Saxon king.²⁶⁴ As already seen in Bicknell's *Life*, this was an image which was also true in factual histories. The hyperbolic nature of some of the descriptions of the king demonstrate the difficulties that must have been faced when bringing such a figure to life:

His form was unexceptionable; his mien graceful; and his address easy and genteel. Some paintings which remain of him, and his coins, give us a pleasing idea of his face, in which there appears to be a calm yet lively aspect mingled with dignity, and on which are strongly

²⁶³ Parker, *England's Darling*, 72.

²⁶⁴ Home, *Alfred*, ix-x.

depicted the noble endowments of his mind. He was of that happy disposition that none of the crosses and vexations he met with (and no Monarch had ever a greater share of them) could ruffle his temper, or rob him of his equanimity [...] in his adversity he shewed not any signs of dejection or melancholy.²⁶⁵

Home recognised the impossibility of representing such a figure onstage, and also the impossibility of such a man existing. But the point was that written representations of the Saxon king in this strain were both dominant and plentiful. This *was* the man that Britons had come to expect Alfred to be.

In Home's eyes *Alfred* is not just a representation of the Saxon king's story: it is a translation from one genre to another on a scale which throws both the success of its execution and public reception into serious doubt. The classical metaphor alluded to near the end of the prologue compares the task of dramatizing Alfred to the attempt by Phaethon in Greek myth to control the sun. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the strength of the horses pulling the sun across the sky is too much for Phaethon to handle and, as his reckless attempt to control forces beyond his power threatens to burn up the planet, he is killed by a thunderbolt from Zeus.²⁶⁶ After receiving much criticism in the newspapers for degrading a hero to a lover, Home never again wrote for the stage.

Later in 1778 and despite this criticism, Home published the script of his tragedy with a resolute and unrepentant new preface. It is his 'reply to some hostile criticisms [...] founded

²⁶⁵ Bicknell, *Life*, 266.

²⁶⁶ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, ed. E.J. Kenney, trans. A.D. Melville (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 23-36.

upon prejudice and opinion, rather than reason and argument.²⁶⁷ Chief amongst these criticisms was the claim that the Alfred of the play abandons his duty as monarch and sneaks into the Danish camp to rescue his wife. In Bicknell's 'historical' account, Alfred 'resolved to venture into the camp of his enemies, that he might be informed with certainty of their position and strength.'²⁶⁸ To have this motivation questioned prompted some to claim that: 'the character of Alfred, in the Tragedy, does not agree with the character of Alfred in History: 'That the Hero, the Legislator, is degraded to a Lover, who enters the Danish camp, from a private, not a public, motive'.²⁶⁹ Home counters this criticism, which he quotes in his own Preface, by using an architectural metaphor to describe how his tragedy fits into the wider edifice of history:

an author is not permitted to introduce events, contrary to the great established facts of History [...] but preserving those ancient foundations, as the piers of his bridge, the Author may bend his arches, and finish the fabrick, according to his taste and fancy, for the poet is at liberty, and it is the essence of his art, to invent such intermediate circumstances, and incidents, as he thinks will produce the most affecting situations²⁷⁰

Home's theory of characterisation suggests that an author approaches a historical subject with only 'ancient foundations' in place, what he calls 'the great established facts of History.' They are emphasised, restored, elaborated or cast into shadow by imaginative literary architects who choose which aspects of Alfred's character, which pillars of the foundations, are to be built upon and extended. Home claims that the characterisation of historical figures is extremely personal and indicative of the author, not their subject.

²⁶⁷ Home, *Alfred*, v.

²⁶⁸ Bicknell, *Life*, 158.

²⁶⁹ Home, *Alfred*, vi.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

Home's justification of historical tinkering is extremely similar to that of Puff, the foolish literary visionary of Sheridan's *The Critic*. Sheridan has Puff describe how: 'It is a received point among poets that where history gives you a good heroic outline for a play, you may fill up with a little love at your own discretion; in doing which, nine times out of ten, you only make up a deficiency in the private history of the times.'²⁷¹ In both argument and expression, Puff and Home are similar and they begin from the same assumptions: that history provides writers with a basic framework for narrative. Puff has his 'good heroic outline', Home his 'ancient foundations.' Both claim that they can then 'fill up' (Puff) or 'finish the fabrick' (Home) to render the story complete. Each man is similarly defending the presence of a distracting frivolous love story in amongst the serious business of national history. O'Quinn suggests that Sheridan is mocking Cumberland's *Battle of Hastings* through Puff's speech, but I believe that Sheridan is addressing Home's play as well. The latter clearly thinks of his contribution to Alfred's story as 'intermediate', filling in the gaps left by history itself with his own imagination. His expressed aim throughout is to create emotion in the audience through his 'affecting situations.' For Home, this play about Alfred is not concerned with the reverence of an ancient genius, a lofty tower of the past like in Cumberland's play, but instead makes its hero unashamedly human.

Home's Alfred is a most reluctant hero and spends a great deal of time wishing he was somebody else. He continually talks in the third person, which has the effect of distancing his personality and character from his constitutional and military position as king. In a similar fashion, Alfred's third-person dialogue isolates him from his closest companions,

²⁷¹ Richard Brinsley Sheridan, *The Critic, or a Tragedy Rehearsed* (London: T. Becket, 1781), 48.

including his wife: 'She call'd on Alfred [...] Why was not Alfred near?'²⁷² These instances of illeism serve to elevate Alfred's status by emulating the objective partiality of Shakespearean tragic heroes such as Caesar or Hamlet, in addition to replicating their propensity for mournful introspection. By distancing himself from both his preeminent roles as king and husband, the play establishes Alfred as a man stuck between these private and public positions, unable to satisfy the demands of either. Ethelswida's offer to sacrifice herself for England later in the play highlights the conflict between love and country that is tearing Alfred in two: 'let my hand restore / The king of England to his injur'd people, / Robb'd of their hero, by my luckless love.'²⁷³

The Earl of Devonshire's description of Alfred's actions raise concerns about the king's tactical abilities before the king even appears onstage. The audience is told how Alfred, 'distracted for his lovely bride, / Sent off a hundred knights' to protect her, leaving the king 'with odds opprest [...] his faithful nobles fell.'²⁷⁴ Immediately, the tragedy is in danger of dividing its audience between those who appreciate the sentiment of this sacrifice and those who question the monarch's choice to put his family above the interest of the nation. It is an interesting, but clearly deliberate choice on Home's part to present the audience with a discussion *about* the king (where he is identified as 'much-enduring Alfred') before he actually appears on stage (referring to himself as 'wretched Alfred').²⁷⁵ Home introduces Alfred to the audience in stages, almost peeling away the layers of his legendary reputation until his troubled soul, the real concern of the drama, is revealed. First, the prologue works

²⁷² Home, *Alfred*, 10.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 53.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 2; 8.

as a disclaimer, making no promises about the effectiveness of the play to replicate the legend. Secondly, Alfred is the subject of a discussion between the Devonshire and an officer, who establish the king as a sentimental hero, recently 'issued from his lonely isle.'²⁷⁶ This conversation continues for some time until Alfred finally enters; his very first lines, which complain about the nightmares which have been plaguing him, confirm the play's attention to mental suffering.

One continual theme that permeates the play is Alfred's desire to be somebody else, or, more to the point, for somebody else to be him and take the burden of kingship from his shoulders.²⁷⁷ The demands of the position are too much and he wishes continually to be free of them. The impossibility of the situation echoes Home's preface in which he recognises the difficulties of reconciling the 'god-like' legend with actual human emotions and reflections. Home has taken the troubles of Alfred's reign and imagined how a sensitive man would respond to them. The first example of Alfred's reluctance comes just minutes after he appears on stage, when he laments to the Earl of Surrey how much the latest bad news has affected him: 'O, Surrey! / Had I been Surrey, and hadst thou been Alfred, / I ne'er had brought such tidings to my friend!' Alfred entertains the idea of being a king's servant rather than the king himself and demonstrates a willingness to avoid bad news rather than

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 4.

²⁷⁷ Parallels can be found here between Home's *Alfred* and other depictions of traumatised officers during the American war. For instance: 'oh! there is a fear / Pants with quick throb, while yearning sorrows dart / Thro' all his senses to his trembling heart.' Anna Seward, *Monody on Major Andre* (Lichfield: J. Jackson, 1781), 16. For Major Andre as a symbol of the damage inflicted to British national self-confidence, see Daniel O'Quinn, 'Invalid Elegy and Gothic Pageantry: Andre, Seward and the Loss of the American War,' in *Tracing War in British Enlightenment and Romantic Culture*, eds. Neil Ramsay and Gillian Russell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

face up to it. Alfred himself admits that his 'manhood and patience yield to this.'²⁷⁸ Home makes it clear that Alfred's trauma in deciding whether to maintain or relinquish his masculine strength is indeed a key issue for the tragedy. Later in the play, Alfred actually impersonates Surrey as a backup disguise in the Danish camp once the ruse of musician fails. In preparation for this, he briefs his wife on his plan to hide behind another identity: 'let me warn thee, shou'd it be suspected, / That I am not the person I pretend [...] I am thy brother; Surrey is my name.'²⁷⁹ Although Alfred has some very powerful contextual reasons for not revealing his true identity (namely the threat of death), this episode presents the audience with complex layers of pretence – Mr Lewis the actor impersonating Alfred impersonating Surrey impersonating a musician. In amongst these complicated deceptions, the audience very rarely get to experience Alfred as *King* Alfred.

In many places, Home allows these personal fantasies of Alfred to be voiced in great detail. The first line delivered by Alfred states how his 'sleep is haunted with my waking thoughts', before he proceeds to delineate the events of a specific dream:

This very night, in dreams, I thought myself
 [...] Beset, on every side, with Danish spears;
 When, to preserve my life, a noble youth,
 [...] Unknown to me, my personage assum'd,
 And stopp'd the hounds, that bay's for Alfred's blood.
 [...] Full in the gate he stood;
 And brandishing his sword, aloud proclaim'd,
 That England's King alive should ne'er be taken.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 8.

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 26.

Headlong the foes rush'd on: Numbers he slew:
At last, unshrinking, in his place he fell;
And still the Danes believe that youth was Alfred.²⁸⁰

This youth is more like the hero an eighteenth-century audience would expect to see. An example of loyalty and sacrifice for one's country, undertaken in the name of the king and demonstrating masculine military vigour. And yet this is only a dream; related but not actually performed. Crucially, Alfred sees another playing the part expected of him. Although this has the potential to undermine the king's character, Home is deliberately allowing this moment of weakness to be displayed in order to make the audience realise the unrealistic nature of expectation. He is demonstrating the inevitable burden of undertaking the role of the 'sacrificial warrior' and asking the audience to consider the personal cost paid by the man upon whom this is placed. This dream is the most powerful example of Alfred's wish to be somebody else, as his name, reputation and military duty is transposed onto a figure who *does* live up to the demands made of him. Home is presenting a complex and conflicted man, revealing the deep internal struggle at the heart of someone who is troubled, persecuted and desperate to escape unrealistic and unfair expectations: 'it was human weakness, / And no disgraceful fault, that ruin'd Alfred.'²⁸¹ This is the play's tragedy.

For the audience, the play itself would add another dimension of 'expectation' beyond that of a Saxon king dying for his people. They have a historical expectation: the demands of legend and legacy that state Alfred must be a certain kind of person. Far from the wise statesman or the unthinkingly heroic warrior, this is a young, turbulent, uncertain Alfred

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 6.

²⁸¹ Ibid., 45.

uncomfortable with his own identity. In his attempt to encourage the eighteenth-century public to rethink their perceptions of Alfred, Home is directly challenging the reality of the 'imaginary idea [which] has been formed of the character of Alfred as an old mortified, ascetic sage, of spirit too sublime and aetherial to descend to human passions or human actions.'²⁸² This Alfred certainly doesn't live up to Bicknell's claim that 'in his adversity he shewed not any signs of dejection or melancholy'²⁸³ and in his defence of his characterisation, Home attempts to highlight these ridiculous expectations. Alfred isn't only struggling with the in-text demands of his subjects, Home is more ambitiously attempting to depict an Alfred struggling with the unrealistic expectations of his eighteenth-century audience. He is trying to put to bed the supposed lie that 'Alfred was one of those happy geniuses to whom every thing they do seem natural.'²⁸⁴

When we consider the events of the American conflict and the fears that men were simply not tough enough anymore, the motivations for Home's characterisation become clear: demands upon contemporary men to replicate Alfred's 'historical' behaviour are dangerously unfair and will cause huge personal suffering. The Alfred of Home's tragedy was not simply created as an exercise with which to criticise an unrealistic historical image of the king, but to also challenge those who demanded too much of the nation's men. This isn't a play that transfers especially easily into any set political 'position' (i.e. pro- or anti-war), but its attempt to vindicate the military 'man of feeling' certainly has more in common with opposition rhetoric of compassion than the government's supposed bellicosity.

²⁸² Ibid., ix-x.

²⁸³ Bicknell, *Life*, 266.

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 285.

The most important argument in favour of this vindicating mission is Alfred's ultimate military success. He defeats his enemies and achieves a complete victory over the Danish king Hinguar. So although Alfred struggles with his own internal wrangling, his victory demonstrates that emotional and compassionate men can still prevail in war. The Battle of Edington itself, however, is absent from Home's play and replaced with a different form of contest. The battle is supplanted by a one-on-one duel between the two kings, Alfred and Hinguar, with the outcome determining the fate of both countries and their people. Instead of a national endeavour, Home makes the final confrontation a personal one, and transforms it into an exclusive victory for Alfred. It is the king's fighting ability, augmented, essentially so, with his sensibility, that produces his eventual triumph. This further emphasises the tragedy's function as a personal, not a national, drama. It is not a representation of a shared social endeavour, such as *The Battle of Hastings*, but an exposition of personal tragedy focused upon Alfred's own struggle with the demands of war and kingship.

Single combat is first suggested, then arranged, by Alfred in Act III, through typical use of the third person:

Alfred, whose fathers have in battle fallen,
Whose valour ne'er could fix inconstant fortune,
Offers to meet thee, in the listed field;
And, by his single arm, to thine oppos'd,
Decide the sovereignty of England's realm,
By the award of heaven. In this encounter,

My nobles and my people will abide;

And, if thou conquer'st, Ethelswida's thine.²⁸⁵

When the time comes for the fight itself in Act V, Alfred justifies this mode of combat through emotional concern for the lives of the men which the two kings command: 'Spare thy people, King! Let us, alone, in mortal strife engage.'²⁸⁶ Alfred's primary concern, to prevent suffering, is presumably intended to be celebrated as an act of self-sacrifice. In the duel itself, Alfred's fighting prowess (and, of course, heaven's favour) proves vastly superior and with Hinguar's defeat England is saved in the play's most crucial episode. The successful outcome vindicates Alfred's military strength and dismisses any potential accusations of weak effeminacy. Alfred proves that men of feeling can display exceptional 'valour' in defence of the nation, not despite their emotion but because of the way in which it drives their determination. There is more than one way to make a sacrifice, and Alfred's example is deeply personal, tortuous even, but nonetheless effective.

Alfred's victory did not prevent Home's version of events coming under attack from a different angle. There is far more than 'the sovereignty of England's realm' at stake in this final confrontation: 'if thou conquer'st, Ethelswida's thine.' Ethelswida is the name of Alfred's wife in Home's version, and her fate becomes tied with that of England; the victor of the fight wins them both. During her capture, Hinguar has fallen in love with Ethelswida and the ferocious antagonism between him and Alfred is as personal as it is political. In the eyes of a number of contemporaries, this complication resulted in the dilution of Alfred's heroism. His public motives come into question and the battle-replacing duel, the historical

²⁸⁵ Home, *Alfred*, 46.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 75.

moment which determined the future of the nation, appears to be as much a culmination of a love-rivalry as a struggle for sovereignty. The victor will: 'reign supreme in England, and possess / With honour gain'd, fair Ethelswida's charms.'²⁸⁷ The fates of England and Ethelswida are united in this single sentence, and at many times throughout the play it becomes impossible to discern which is Alfred's given priority. Hinguar exclaims how: 'The prize of love and conquest anchors here', whilst the Viking queen Ronex (herself in love with Alfred) certainly understands the approaching combat in terms of a duel over love: 'On one side Alfred, on the other Hinguar. / Here let them meet, and fight for Ethelswida.'²⁸⁸ For the critics in the audience who were uncomfortable with Alfred's seemingly self-interested motivations, this triumph over Hinguar can easily be interpreted as prioritising personal concerns over devotion to the country. Hence criticism that: 'the Hero, the Legislator is degraded to a Lover.'

In some ways, it is easy to see why Home thought Alfred a suitable subject for a tragedy highlighting the personal costs of wartime leadership. Thomson and Mallet's original masque was designed to create in Alfred a man under siege in order to provide Prince Frederick with inspiration regarding his own embattled position. This incarnation of Alfred was initially an oppressed, inactive and mournful figure who required divine inspiration to motivate him to save his country. Garrick's restaged *Alfred* in 1773 still offered an emotional foundation upon which a more intense sensibility could be built. It is also true that the events of Alfred's life suggested a story favourable to many of the tropes of sentimental literature established in previous decades. As Mullan argues, 'Time and time again, after

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 46.

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 72.

Richardson, abduction or the threat of abduction is crucial to the plots of novels of sentiment.²⁸⁹ The uncertain fate of Alfred's wife, Ethelswida, during the king's exile in Athelney provided the perfect opportunity for engaging with the well-established sentimental trope of kidnap. Alfred's situation whilst hiding in the marshes additionally granted a ready-made story of isolation from which affecting scenes of distress could be teased.

Home was not alone in attempting to legitimise military and political sensibility through historical precedent. As Carter has shown, writers appealing to the role of emotions in manly behaviour such as Vicesimus Knox, Stephen Fovargue and Hugh Blair, often attempted to interpret classical figures through sentimental language. These included Jesus, Ulysses, Achilles and Hector. 'Suggestions that classical authors had always appreciated the valour of sensibility', Carter argues, 'or depictions of Hector as a complex weave of bravery and compassion, were clear attempts to identify and validate the manliness of feeling as a historical commonplace exemplified by legendary male heroes.'²⁹⁰ Home's reimagining of Alfred as a sentimental hero, therefore, can be understood as part of a much wider movement to 'validate the manliness of feeling' through historical examples. Home is attempting to prove how successful 'soldiers of feeling' can be, and indeed have been, in the British past. And with 1778 marking 900 years since Alfred's greatest success at the Battle of Edington, the Saxon king appeared to be the perfect vessel through which Home could vindicate sensibility as a defining characteristic of manliness.

²⁸⁹ John Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 124.

²⁹⁰ Carter, *Polite Society*, 108-9.

The Struggle to Create Sympathy

Alongside wishing to depict the triumph of sensibility, *Alfred* is also an attempt to create sympathy for emotionally vulnerable men struggling with the demands of leadership. Before Alfred's victory is complete, he believes that his fragile state of mind will lead to his downfall: 'Ruin'd I am; but it was human weakness, / And no disgraceful fault, that ruin'd Alfred.'²⁹¹ Just months before Alfred was presented on stage, a prominent British military figure attempted to justify his own failings in similar fashion. As Jones has argued, the trial of General John Burgoyne, who surrendered to American forces in October 1777, displayed the incongruity between the language of sensibility and contemporary masculine, military prestige.²⁹² The defeated general approached his parliamentary trial seeking to preserve his honour through the language of sensibility. He described himself as:

a man, whose faculties, far too weak for such shocks, are almost unhinged by a succession of difficulties abroad, that fall to the lot of the few, and whose disappointments and anxieties have been consummated, by the unexpected reception he has met at home.²⁹³

He won some sympathisers:

the humane solicitude of General Burgoyne – for the safety and good treatment indiscriminately of all his camp-artificers and attendants; - he is certainly a man of feeling – and I regard him more for the grandeur of his mind in adversity – than I should in all the triumphal pomp of military madness.²⁹⁴

²⁹¹ Home, *Alfred*, 45.

²⁹² Burgoyne was himself a playwright, author of *The Maid of the Oaks* (1774).

²⁹³ John Burgoyne, *The Substance of General Burgoyne's Speeches* 4th edition (London: J. Almon 1778), 16.

²⁹⁴ Ignatius Sancho, *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho*, ed. Vincent Caretta (New York: Penguin Group, 1998), 107.

Just like Alfred in Home's tragedy, it is the ability of these men to have such profound feelings and cares that distinguishes them as excellent and worthy of attention. For Sancho, victory or defeat is inconsequential to the primary concern of good conduct, and by being a 'man of feeling,' a military commander can demonstrate his worth. For parliament and the press, however, Burgoyne's vocabulary was too introspective and his justification too self-focused to effectively legitimise his actions. Burgoyne's emotional appeal to both politicians and the public failed to win him much support or sympathy. Jones argues that the general 'articulated his identity through languages so wrought with the rhetoric of affect [... that] such a gambit, even if it proved successful, undermined the very character it was designed to retrieve.' Jones continues: 'susceptibility to private affliction [...] was certainly inadmissible in the military and political realms in which Burgoyne needed to have his character confirmed.'²⁹⁵ For this reason, and taking into consideration the failure of both sentimental endeavours, the Burgoyne trial provides a pertinent and useful point of comparison with Home's tragedy. Both are attempts on behalf of military personas to justify their characters and abilities to perform in the nation's interest, despite massive personal suffering.

Burgoyne's parliamentary defence was termed neither manly nor apposite, and his misplaced theatricality was mocked in James Murray's satire *The New Maid of the Oaks*:

To be or not to be, now is the question
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The shame and scandal of a base surrender,
Be laughed at by both the whigs and tories;

²⁹⁵ Jones, *Literature, Gender and Politics*, 86-8.

By B[ur]ke and L[uttre], and all the patriots:

Or by a violent push against the bayonet

Be killed at once, and finish all my troubles.²⁹⁶

The most fascinating aspect of Murray's criticism is the question of genre which forms the basis of this caricature. By depicting Burgoyne as a wallowing parody of Hamlet, Murray is suggesting that the appropriate arena for the general's language *is* the theatre, far away from the elite halls of the British parliament. The full title of Murray's piece similarly distances Burgoyne from any claim to masculine respect by describing his military actions as 'A Tragedy, as Lately Acted near Saratoga.' Far from heroes of the crown, the general and his forces are relegated to 'A Company of Tragedians' putting on a self-pitying performance of sensibility instead of a robust defence of British territory. Conceptions of King Alfred were framed, very firmly, in the austere masculinity of political history and perhaps it is no surprise that just like Burgoyne, Home's sentimental Alfred failed to generate sympathy, let alone praise, from his audience. Jones claims that Burgoyne's failure at self-justification marks 'the limit of sensibility within the purview of elite politics.'²⁹⁷ Home's Alfred, then, can be considered to mark the limit of sensibility within the purview of historical representation.

This has fascinating consequences for the character of Alfred in this period. It demonstrates that he was not simply a character which authors could manipulate into whatever position they chose. There were conditions under which an audience of 1778 were willing to accept him. At a moment of national trepidation, when Britons were having their deeply-held values of liberty called into question and were facing military defeat and disgrace, a 'Man of

²⁹⁶ James Murray, *The New Maid of the Oaks* (London: 1778), 12.

²⁹⁷ Jones, *Literature, Gender and Politics*, 88.

Feeling' was an inadmissible substitute for the national hero. Whilst Henry Hoare had arranged his Stourhead garden to intertwine the stories of Alfred and Aeneas, both of course strong military leaders, Home's Alfred is instead compared with Orpheus: 'The tale of Orpheus', Alfred says of his own life, 'is verified to-day. The stubborn sons, / Of Denmark sympathize with Alfred's strain.'²⁹⁸ Instead of a magnificent warrior who founded a nation and an empire, Alfred is compared to a classical poet whose emotion was his biggest weakness. Rather than evoking a survivor of Troy who went through great physical and mental struggles, Home brings to mind the story of Eurydice, failed by her husband's inability to focus upon his task without giving in to emotion. The comparison is symptomatic of the kind of sentimental heroism with which Home defines his version of Alfred.

The trial of another military figure later in 1779 provides a similar explanation for the unacceptability of Alfred's personal struggles. When the First Battle of Ushant in July 1778 ended unfavourably for the British Navy, the commander of the forces, Admiral Augustus Keppel, placed the blame on his subordinate Sir Hugh Palliser, accusing him of disobeying orders. When vitriolic private correspondence from Keppel was published in the London press by Palliser's friends, the affair exploded into a prolonged campaign between the two men, each accusing the other of treasonous behaviour.²⁹⁹ The response of the *Morning Chronicle* on 7th November 1778 read:

²⁹⁸ Home, *Alfred*, 16.

²⁹⁹ Ruddock Mackay, 'Keppel, Augustus, Viscount Keppel (1725–1786), naval officer and politician', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Jan 07, 2010. Oxford University Press, accessed Jul 3 2019, <https://www-oxforddnb-com.libproxy.york.ac.uk/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-15439>.

Admiral Keppel and Sir Hugh Palliser are both allowed to be able seamen and brave officers, what a pity it is that two such respectable characters should be under the influence of either political or personal pique. When the service of their country is the business, every little passion should give way to the greater impulse, and all parties in employ should unite, hand and heart, in the discharge of their duty.³⁰⁰

Keppel and Palliser had unforgivably allowed their personal feelings to dominate over the duty they both owed to their country. A united sense of national identity and shared purpose had been abandoned as petty private matters gifted an advantage to the French. Whilst Keppel was cleared of all charges in his resulting trial and Palliser eventually bore the brunt of public outrage, the heartfelt disappointment and frustration expressed in the *Chronicle* as both men bickered over their disagreement should not be ignored. Cumberland's *Battle of Hastings* presents precisely this issue, conflicting personal interests, as fatally destructive to national unity and the cause of ignominious defeat. Under the usurping influence of Harold, the Saxons fail comprehensively to 'unite, hand and heart, in the discharge of their duty.' Home's Alfred, who continually puts protecting his wife alongside and arguably above saving England, is seemingly guilty of the same crime.

The evidence that Home was suggesting sensibility as a heroic virtue comes from within the play itself. At multiple times throughout the performance, Alfred's behaviour is called into question by the other characters, suggesting that Home was aware of the criticism likely to be levelled at his literary choices and attempted to vindicate them in-text. When Alfred, in disguise, makes himself known to Ethelswida in the Danish camp, it is she who shows the coolness necessary to maintain the deception. As Alfred 'offers to embrace her', she stops

³⁰⁰ Jones, *Literature, Gender and Politics*, 190.

him, offering words of caution: 'O, beware! / Death lurks in every corner.'³⁰¹ She begs him to be more careful, to hide his passion for her in case it betrays him (which it later does). She also lambasts him for his mode of approach, expecting him to come to save her as a warrior, not a disguised bard: 'Not thus did I expect to see the King [...] I hop'd to see him in the light of steel, / Prompt to defend himself, or rescue me. / Why com'st thou thus?.'³⁰² Even Alfred's justification of his actions elsewhere, although acknowledging his tactical mission, seems to include this military benefit as an afterthought: 'Nor is my [aim] confin'd to Ethelswida; /The strength and order of the Danish host / [...] I'll observe.'³⁰³ Additionally, of course, whatever information Alfred did gather is rendered useless as soon as the two kings decide to resolve the conflict in hand-to-hand combat. Moreover, Alfred's actions in Home's tragedy directly contrast with the account of Alfred given by Bicknell:

The security of his family gave him the most pungent concern [...] How distressing therefore must his situation be, when this anxiety was added to his apprehensions for his unhappy subjects! but there was no alternative; he must either submit to a temporary separation from the objects of his tenderness, or run the risk of becoming prey to his savage and inexorable enemies [...] The former he prudently chose.³⁰⁴

The fact that this version of Alfred, supposedly imprudently, chose the other option, is unsurprisingly a source of consternation amongst Home's audience and critics.

Additionally, the love of Ethelswida is shown to be paramount amongst both monarchs, with Hinguar proclaiming Alfred 'My rival, both in empire and in love' and proclaiming that

³⁰¹ Home, *Alfred*, 24.

³⁰² Ibid.

³⁰³ Ibid., 14.

³⁰⁴ Bicknell, *Life*, 144-45.

she is: 'dearer to my soul than empire.'³⁰⁵ The priorities of both monarchs are seriously suspect. Whether Alfred did or did not enter the camp from a public or private motive does not need to be resolved here, but for the purposes of this study it is worthwhile to note how vulnerable this tragedy makes Alfred to accusations of unpatriotic selfishness. By giving space to these criticisms, Home creates an Alfred text that is inherently unstable.

In Act 1, The Earl of Devonshire describes Alfred's situation: 'vain his virtue and his wisdom vain, / Against affection's power, too much he lov'd.'³⁰⁶ Despite praising Alfred's successes as 'Counsellor [...and] Sage', Devonshire condemns Alfred for the underlying weakness of sensibility, which undermines the established virtues and renders them all 'vain.' It is a fascinating and, perhaps, fatal way to introduce the protagonist of a drama before they have even appeared on stage. Alfred's isolation, from his closest advisors as well as the wider world, reflects a trope developed in sentimental literature by the mid-eighteenth century, in which sensibility is 'specialised, oppositional, set against the world.'³⁰⁷ Devonshire's lack of faith increases Alfred's impossible position, and consequently Home's authorial point, by further isolating him from an unfeeling world and the unreasonable expectations of traditional military masculinity. Alfred's ultimate victory is intended to serve as a vindication of the actions of a young man in love, as well as the artistic choices of his playwright.

³⁰⁵ Home, *Alfred*, 41; 17.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁰⁷ Mullan, *Sentiment*, 234.

‘Unnecessary Trespass’

The Saxon plays of both Home and Cumberland were reviewed in *The London Magazine*: 'We have the same fault to find with Mr. Cumberland, as with Mr. Home the author of *Alfred*, for unnecessary deviations from the history of his country, every page of which ought to be held sacred.' Whilst able to overlook these deviations in *The Battle of Hastings* to proclaim it 'one of the best tragedies of modern times, in point of language, fable, conduct, and catastrophe', the *Magazine* could not reconcile such 'unnecessary trespass on the truth of history' in *Alfred*. The author of the review claims that: 'to answer the purposes of a perplexed, double plot, he [Home] makes Ethelswida a bride, and captive to the Dane, on the very day of her nuptials, though Alfred was married to her in 868, full ten years before the fatal battle.'³⁰⁸ It may appear strange that the review is able to forgive 'trespass' on behalf of one author but not another, but when we consider the nature of Home's trespass - the fact that he undermined the traditional military and political strength of Alfred at a time of national vulnerability - we can perhaps see why Home's tampering was deemed more egregious.

The reviewer in the *London Magazine* did manage in places to find sentiment a valuable and entertaining aspect of Home's tragedy. He states that the scene in which Alfred is told of Ethelswida's capture was: 'one of the most animated and affecting scenes we ever remember to have beheld.'³⁰⁹ It is important to stress that sentimental themes were not the reason for *Alfred's* unpopularity; they were applauded by many critics. Rather, it was how

³⁰⁸ *The London Magazine, or Gentleman's Monthly Intelligencer*, vol.47 (London: R. Baldwin, 1778), 33-6.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

these sentimental themes compromised the message of the original historical story that led to the worst controversy; with Alfred's sacrosanct legend, deviations and diversions for sentimentality were simply unacceptable. The *General Advertiser*, on the morning after the first performance, claimed that the tragedy 'is but indifferently managed, both in respect to the spirit of history and poetry. Many passages in the play could prove this; we shall mention but one, which is, that of making Alfred, *the founder of our best laws*, and the *hero of British antiquity*, be actuated to revenge against the Danes *entirely by the passion of love*.'³¹⁰ In this understanding, the 'spirit of history' and the 'passion of love' appear completely irreconcilable in the figure of Alfred. The reviewer makes it plain that the king is remembered for his heroism and legislative impact, and to make love the primary motive of his actions is bordering on blasphemous.

Contemporary scholars who discuss the plays of the 1770s brush over *Alfred* as simplistic and unpopular, seemingly judging it to have little critical value. O'Quinn's seven-word appraisal is typical of most scholarship: '*Alfred* was a critical and commercial disaster.'³¹¹ Nobody has before looked into exactly why such a disaster occurred, or why the author at the centre of it ever thought his tragedy would be a good idea. Through a close inspection of the sensibility of the Saxon king at the heart of the play, however, we can see that John Home was embarking upon a brave attempt to tackle the assumptions of history and persuade the public that a real human being once stood behind the 'god-like' myth. Sympathising with his friend Mackenzie, Home's primary concern lay with the vindication of sensibility as a worthwhile expression of manliness. But as news of the war in America

³¹⁰ *General Advertiser*, Jan 22, 1778.

³¹¹ O'Quinn, *Entertaining Crisis*, 141.

progressively became worse for the British, Home's audience was seemingly in no mood to have their historical faith brought into question. There were simply too many instances where Alfred's vulnerability, although eventually overcome, weakened his character and challenged the necessary patriotism that this figure had come to represent:

[...] I tremble

And, like a coward, shake from head to foot.

My mind, for this encounter, is not arm'd.³¹²

Critics were unhappy with the disrespect the tragedy seemingly showed towards a revered episode of national history, and the motivational sensibility Alfred displayed was an unacceptable substitute for the traditional masculine strength they had come to expect from Britain's national hero.

³¹² Home, *Alfred*, 51.

CHAPTER THREE

'Be this the task of Alfred': Reforming the Prince of Wales after the Regency Crisis, 1788-90

The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate how the literary Alfreds of the late 1780s were constructed to be personal role models for royalty and ordinary Britons. The language of popular emulation is far stronger in these texts than in any other previous Alfred works. The presence of this language evidences the trend towards the popularisation of the figure of the king and a growing interest in the bond between individual Britons and Alfred the man, rather than exclusively Alfred the king. That isn't to say however, that Alfred as a model of kingship has been left behind. One individual in particular that Alfred was intended to inspire in this period was George, Prince of Wales, and two of the four texts considered in this chapter were written with the specific aim of presenting Alfred's royal dignity and personal integrity as a corrective for the Prince's wayward behaviour. Whether intended to inspire the general populace or the future George IV, the Alfreds of the 1780s are unrelentingly concerned with moral behaviour: they offer to their audiences or readers either direct teachings from Alfred, or opportunities to listen and learn from other Saxons alongside the king himself. The Alfred story becomes a teaching tool for late eighteenth-century Britons.

This chapter will consider four texts. The first, Alexander Bicknell's *The Patriot King, or Alfred and Elvida* (1788) holds a complicated and somewhat awkward place in this group of late-1780s texts, mostly due to its preservation of a style of Alfred representation more suited to

the early-to-mid century. The second, *Alfred, an Historical Tragedy* (1789) by Ebenezer Rhodes, is the best example of Alfred as a public role model, offering an accessible inspiration for all members of the audience. The final two texts, which will comprise the majority of this chapter's analysis, are *The Son of Ethelwolf* (1789), a two-volume novel by Irish writer Anne Fuller, and *Lessons to a Young Prince* (1790), written by political theorist David Williams, who presented Alfred's style of governance and personality as worthy of emulation to the Prince of Wales. Both of these texts had the express intention of reforming the behaviour of George in light of his damaging actions during the Regency crisis. The primary focus of this chapter will be on Fuller's novel and I will argue that her conception of the Saxon king is a carefully constructed attempt to appeal to the nature of Prince George and simultaneously reform his social and political character.

All four of the texts considered here concern themselves with 'virtue' in one form or another. Rhodes's tragedy, being the most public-facing, sees virtue most like an individual moral quality – a way to be a good human being and the only true way to acquire the pure joys of life: 'Virtue only, / is the road to bliss, or fame.'³¹³ Alfred is a model of this conception of virtue, a conception which is accessible to all. It demonstrates the most profound shift yet towards a depoliticisation of Alfred; he appears not as the advocate of any particular constitutional standpoint, but as the representative of a good man. The lessons the text offers, therefore, are not limited to any particular individual and offer moral guidance applicable to many. *The Patriot King* and *Lessons to a Young Prince*, however, remain interested in Alfred's virtue as a political quality – the ways in which he ruled fairly

³¹³ Rhodes, *Alfred*, 22.

and effectively. This similarly explains their closed nature and primary concern with royal education. Fuller's novel, on the other hand, blends both conceptions of virtue in the one narrative.

The form of virtue pursued by all four texts appears to be in line with the general view of George III's personal life at the end of the 1780s. As Colley has shown: 'George III with his undoubted domestic probity and obstinate patriotism now seemed to many to represent a reassuring stability in the midst of national flux and humiliation, honest uncomplicated worth in contrast with those meretricious, complex and immoral politicians who had failed.' By the time we reach this cluster, a reconfigured confidence in monarchy was steadily emerging: 'George III's reign had accustomed his subjects to expect two qualities of their monarch: first, the capacity for sporadic, glamorous show; second, a steady background of domestic responsibility and, preferably, domestic bliss. The royal *family* and not just the monarch had acquired increased currency and popularity in this period.'³¹⁴ A significant degree of the second quality, 'domestic responsibility', can be found in all of these texts, most frequently as the backbone of the virtuous life (and kingdom) Alfred wishes to establish. Furthermore, in the texts interested in addressing the Prince of Wales, concern and disapproval over disruption to any potential 'domestic bliss,' alongside a novel and increasing awareness of family harmony in Alfred literature, similarly echoes contemporary attitudes towards the royals. Popular perceptions of the Georgian royal family are closely interconnected with the personal virtues of the figure of Alfred in all of the texts considered in this cluster.

³¹⁴ Colley, 'Apotheosis', 104; 124-5.

In 1789, the Prince of Wales was perceived as dangerously prodigal by a large section of the public and the political establishment. 'The whole edifice of royal respectability and family values which George III worked so hard to create', writes Parissien, 'was, in the years following his eldest son's coming-of-age, rapidly demolished brick by brick.'³¹⁵ This state of affairs was only amplified by the Prince's chaotic management, on a political and personal level, of the Regency crisis of 1788-9 in which George III was too ill to fulfil his constitutional duties. After his father's recovery, the Prince's political dealings were widely condemned as underhand and selfish, there was scandal surrounding his clandestine marriage to the Catholic Maria Fitzherbert, and public disgust over his personal expenditure was palpable. David Williams reflected that George's recent behaviour had 'impress[ed] on the nation an idea of characteristic and incurable frivolity.'³¹⁶ As had occurred in moments of national distress earlier in the century, the figure of Alfred was once again mobilized and tasked with the reformation of the kingdom's most errant royal.

1780s Theatrical Alfreds

Before considering Alfred and George directly, it is worth taking some time to examine two theatrical Alfreds, the texts of which were published in 1788 and 1789 respectively, Ebenezer Rhodes's *Alfred, an Historical Tragedy* and Alexander Bicknell's *The Patriot King, or Alfred and Elvida*. Bicknell wrote the latter play in 1778, but did not see the play performed. He published the script ten years later in 1788. The reason behind the lack of performance, perhaps, was the play's rather antiquated approach to the figure of Alfred, most clearly

³¹⁵ Steven Parissien, *George IV: The Grand Entertainment* (London: John Murray, 2001), 57.

³¹⁶ David Williams, *Lessons to a Young Prince* (London: H.D. Simmons, 1790), 18.

identified in the play's references to the relatively outdated idea of the 'Patriot King.' The image of the 'Patriot King' was, of course, heavily indebted to the character of Frederick, Prince of Wales, in the 1730s and 40s. Bolingbroke's vision of kingship was inspired by and made all the more politically pertinent by the example of Frederick waiting in the wings ready to put this style of leadership into action. But to Britons of the late eighteenth century, the relevance of the model was heavily reduced by the fact that there was nobody who could plausibly fulfil this role.

Bicknell's play doesn't seamlessly fit into any of the Alfred clusters identified by this thesis. It was written in the midst of the texts discussed in chapter two, and is clearly relevant to the invasion threats being negotiated at that time. It was also surely intended to be a literary follow-up to Bicknell's *Life of Alfred the Great*. The majority of Britons, however, would not have encountered Bicknell's play until it was finally published in 1788, and the play's prologue, which will be discussed shortly, connects with the themes of personal and popular inspiration present in this third cluster. Despite this, the majority of the text itself, in particular Bicknell's focus upon Alfred as a 'Patriot King,' seems to have more in common with the political ideas of Viscount Bolingbroke and the Alfreds of the 1730s. The celestial battle also present in the play, in which angels and demons fight each other on behalf of the Saxons and Vikings respectively, could even be said to echo the cosmic politics of Sir Richard Blackmore's epic *Alfred* from 1723. Despite this, it is still worth spending a little time examining its themes and storyline. *The Patriot King* serves to demonstrate that the literary legacies of earlier Alfred texts did linger and amalgamate with later ideas.

In regards to the events of Bicknell's play, they follow a pattern very similar to Home's *Alfred, a Tragedy* from 1778. Since many of these plot points are introduced by Home and don't appear previously in Alfred texts (Alfred's mission to the Danish camp serving as a rescue mission for his wife, for instance, or the framing of Alfred's story as a 'tragedy') we can claim with some confidence that Bicknell modelled the events of his play on Home's. It is also true that there are identifiable moments in which Bicknell attempts to either avoid or resolve the controversies present in the earlier performance. In particular, *The Patriot King* works hard to ensure that Alfred's love for country and dedication to public duty cannot be questioned.

The Prologue makes it clear that Bicknell is telling Alfred's story as an exemplar for the public. Bicknell says of himself:

[...] while he charms, [he will] the Moralist assume;
From History's pure Page the Mind illumine;
By Scenes reviv'd, from Alfred's halcyon Days,
(Whose well-conducted Reign exceeds all Praise),
At once would fan fair Freedom's sacred Fire,
And with Respect for Rule the Heart inspire;
Those rare Exemplars, for your Guidance bring,
A patriot People, and a patriot King:
And while he paints the Scene, he would create,
In ev'ry Breast, a wish to emulate;
A Wish, to make their Happiness your own,

And find your Weal reflected from the Throne³¹⁷

Bicknell introduces his play with the language of a popular 'Moralist', a vocabulary that is largely absent from pre-1780s Alfred texts. The king is not being presented onstage to inspire an elite figure, nor is he intended to be an intangible national figurehead around which the masses can coalesce. Instead, the figure of Alfred provides a source of personal 'Guidance' for all. It is important to note the expressed desire of the play to create 'a Wish to emulate' in 'ev'ry Breast.' Under the collective identification of 'a patriot People', any individual can be inspired by tales of Alfred's life. This popular, public emulation leads not only to social good, but also personal joy: 'make their Happiness your own.' The appeal of tales of Alfred lies in their ability to resonate with and inspire any individual. The passage's key reference to 'A patriot People, and a patriot King' working in tandem evidences the strength of the connection being made between a people and their monarch, despite this relationship being identified as 'Respect for Rule.' This is certainly not an egalitarian project. Alfred's mission is therefore not entirely restricted to inspiring individuals – his role in their improvement is also part of a wider social purpose to establish loyal and content subordination to the crown. Although this prologue does demonstrate a direct attempt to appeal to each audience member's individual thoughts and feelings, happy subordination is the overwhelming theme of the text which follows. Alfred is still very much a king, distinct in social rank and demonstrating a level of divinely-inspired humanity unobtainable by those watching below. It is impossible to tell whether Bicknell wrote his prologue in 1778 or 1788, revising it for publication. But the presence of this popular inclusivity and this attempt to

³¹⁷ Alexander Bicknell, *The Patriot King; or Alfred and Elvida. An Historical Tragedy* (London: 1788), vii.

engage each audience member on a social level, means that it is possible that these words may have been added later, to fall in line with the practices of other 1780s Alfred texts.

The first scenes of *The Patriot King* take place in the Danish camp, where the war with the Saxons is established in parallel with the kidnapping of Alfred's wife (in this version called Elvida). As in Home's tragedy, the Danish king Haldane has fallen in love with Elvida, prompting jealousy from the Danish queen Gunhilda, who seeks to usurp her unfaithful husband. The figure of a rebellious, female, Viking warrior is similarly taken from Home's tragedy and Gunhilda is clearly modelled upon the character of Ronex found there. As for Alfred himself, he spends the early acts fighting his guerrilla war from a position of exile, while the tension builds in the Danish encampment. Bicknell uses this structure to stress the contrast between the two camps and their styles of leadership. The loyalty and praise fostered by Alfred's benevolent 'Patriot' kingship ('Happy the people bless'd with such a king!') is held up against the infighting and greed of the Vikings, where the chieftain Gothrum vows: 'as thou [Haldane] smil'st o'er thy expected harvest, / My baneful hand shall either blast or reap it.'³¹⁸ And again, like Home's text, the play ends and the Saxons are victorious when Alfred confronts and defeats Haldane in single combat.

Where Bicknell differentiates himself most from Home's tragedy is in establishing a distinct emotional hierarchy of Alfred's concerns. In this, the matters closest to the king's heart are explicitly named and their importance made clear. His love for Elvida is ranked alongside, but never surpasses, that felt for his country:

³¹⁸ Ibid., 48; 42.

[...] Forgive, fair excellence,
If in my kingdom's wrongs enrapt, I gave
Thy loss a second place among my woes;
Thy image stands not second in my heart;
There twin'd with England's thy idea lies.³¹⁹

Passages like these, in which personal and public cares are carefully reconciled, were surely written with the controversy of Home's tragedy in mind; they seek to balance Alfred's romantic love and patriotism with such dedicated interest. In a reversal of Home's technique, Bicknell is at pains to assert that the former is present despite the pre-eminence of the latter. In this passage, Alfred's first thought is for his country. The king's most emotive language and the most extensive of his speeches are similarly targeted at England, not Elvida:

But oh my country! My much-loved England!
The storm that spreads its terrors o'er thy plains
Rends with convulsive pangs thy sov'reign's heart –
[...]
The stately fabric I have toil'd to rear,
Sacred to justice, liberty and peace,
Is tumbled from its basis; and o'erthrown,
[...]
My scatter'd flock, a prey to rav'nous wolves,
Needing their shepherd's care, unfolded stray.³²⁰

³¹⁹ Ibid., 7.

³²⁰ Ibid.

There are few passages like this describing Alfred's love for his wife. And in this section, the king addresses his kingdom with such personal affection through repeated use of the term 'thy.' The effect on his emotions is made clear and physical: 'Rends with convulsive pangs thy sovereign's heart.' Bicknell ensures throughout his tragedy that no-one can doubt Alfred's commitment to his people or the Saxon nation.

As stated earlier, Bicknell's play does rather leave behind its promise to create 'in ev'ry Breast, a Wish to emulate' Alfred. His characterisation of the Saxon monarch, as the title suggests, is far more in line with the idea of the benevolent 'Patriot king,' a figure deeply concerned for his people but unequivocally superior, than it is with the 'everyman' language of elements of its prologue. The most extensive praise of Alfred's character and kingship comes at the start of Act IV, when the nobleman Edwyn hyperbolically praises the king's virtues before an eager audience of Saxon lords:

From godlike Alfred might succeeding princes

Learn to be great and good: learn to acquire

What only can repay a sov'reign's cares,

His subject's [sic] love

[...]

In him we saw combin'd, so rarely seen,

The sceptred monarch, and the PATRIOT KING.³²¹

Bicknell's choice of language and the form of this praise contains many similarities with mid-century Alfreds, and its presence in 1778/1788 suggests that Bicknell was working from an

³²¹ Ibid., 32.

earlier conception of Alfred's character. The closest the play comes to popular dissemination of Alfred's virtues is the response to Edwyn's panegyric: 'Let us away to prove they are diffus'd / In some degree, among his faithful troops.'³²² The parenthetical 'in some degree' is crucial as it highlights the distinction being drawn between the king and his subjects at the same time as the inspirational message is being supposedly shared. 'Patriot king' ideology may establish the notion of a benevolent monarch with his subjects' interests at heart, but it also builds a clear and explicit barrier in front of the object of emulation. But the idea of a 'Patriot King' doesn't here attain political purchase in the way it did earlier in the century. There are no associations of royal reform in Bicknell's text and no direct comparisons to any other royals, either historical or contemporary. Bicknell's position is that Alfred was indeed worthy of emulation, but he is unique amongst humanity and his characteristics out of reach of ordinary people. These virtues can only be copied by the people 'in some degree.' The character of the 'First Lord' laments of Alfred's position in exile: 'And yet, alas! he shares the common lot / Blind leveller! could nothing stay thy scythe?'³²³ Alfred's lowly position in exile, for the characters of Bicknell's play at least, is not an opportunity for the king to demonstrate his humanity and mingle affably with his people, but an extreme degradation. In *The Patriot King*, Alfred is available for public inspiration, but unattainable in regards to public imitation.

Bicknell's play, just like his biography of Alfred a decade earlier, received mixed reviews. Crucially, Bicknell's work was compared to previous Alfreds of the century. 'M-y', writing in the *Monthly Review*, claims that the Saxon king 'is not introduced with that sublimity of

³²² Ibid.

³²³ Ibid., 34.

sentiment and diction with which Thomson has adorned him; he sinks, in this play, to the level of Mr. John Home's *Alfred*.³²⁴ Clearly, the failure of Home's 1778 tragedy has had a lasting impact upon Alfred works and here is being used as the benchmark of a poor representation of the king. Similarly, Thomson's original masque is still being held up as the pinnacle of 'sublimity' that Alfred should be displaying. *The Gentleman's Magazine*, however, praised the originality of the work: 'Mr. B. offers this as his first effort of genius.'³²⁵

By contrast, Ebenezer Rhodes's *Alfred, an Historical Tragedy* is much more open to the notion of other characters and its audience successfully emulating the Saxon monarch. Rhodes himself was primarily a topographer, publishing books about Yorkshire and Derbyshire scenery and spent a short time in the nineteenth century working as a journalist. He struggled financially, however, and 'all his books involved him in financial loss.'³²⁶ Little else is known about his life, but his age at the time of writing *Alfred* (only 26) suggests that this was a work of youthful enthusiasm. His later pride in his local area also allows us to speculate that he may have had an interest in increasing awareness and appreciation of the Saxon king in Sheffield as a means in of itself. Regardless of motivation, Rhodes's work demonstrates how Alfred is becoming a much more national figure and generating interest across the country. Although Rhodes's play was seemingly never performed, according to its

³²⁴ 'M-y', 'Book Review', *Monthly Review, Or, Literary Journal, 1752-1825* 88 (1788), 523.

³²⁵ *The Gentleman's Magazine* 58, no.1 (1788), 427.

³²⁶ Charlotte Fell-Smith and Elizabeth Baigent, 'Rhodes, Ebenezer (1762–1839), topographer', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Sep 23, 2004, Oxford University Press, accessed Jul 3 2019, <https://www-oxforddnb-com.libproxy.york.ac.uk/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-23450>.

title page it was sold in London. Given, also, that Rhodes had his own cutlery business and in 1824 published an essay about razors, it is entirely possible that he is the ‘Sheffield Razor Maker’ who read Obadiah Hulme’s *Historical Essay on the English Constitution* in 1792 and used that to inform his own Saxon-constitution-inspired political tract.³²⁷ Through Rhodes’s enthusiasm, it is clear that Alfred is a national monarch at this point in the century. Moreover, the dominant message of this play is that eighteenth-century Britons of all ranks can be inspired by Alfred’s example. Rhodes himself appears to be the prime example of that claim.

Sheffield, where Rhodes’ play was published, was a city where ‘radical demonstrations and debate articulated the irreverent and often virulent disdain toward ruling elites on behalf of the ‘independent’ members of the community that the radical diagnosis of political ills promoted.’³²⁸ However, the city also had its centres of politeness, and, as Banham has shown, the city’s success ‘relied upon men who could afford to be neither parochial nor colloquial in their manners and outlook if their ambitions were to succeed.’³²⁹ Rhodes may have been something of a jack-of-all-trades in his home city, struggling to earn a living or gain recognition in a plethora of trades and disciplines, but his engagement with the Alfred story evidences a high degree of education surrounding the Saxon world and a high degree of literary competency, if not flair. Moreover, the fact that a young cutlery manufacturer would take the time to write and publish a play about King Alfred can tell us much about the penetration of the Alfred story across social orders, as well as the inspiration for individual

³²⁷ See chapter one. Both works also share the same publisher: J. Gales.

³²⁸ Wilson, *Sense of the People*, 232.

³²⁹ Julie Banham, ‘Politeness in Eighteenth-Century Sheffield; Practices, Accoutrements and Spaces for Sociability’, (PhD thesis, University of Sheffield, 2011), iii.

creative action that the king could provide. It is also a sign that Rhodes saw Sheffield's role within the British state by recognising Alfred's story as his own past and demonstrating a distinct lack of parochialism in his outlook.

The plot of Rhodes's play sees Alfred tackling a number of social and moral obstacles during his exile, chiefly negotiating his romance with his future wife (whom Rhodes terms 'Ethelwitha') and her father, the nobleman Albanac. These opening acts give Alfred a chance to 'prove himself' as an individual before taking on his role as war leader. Rhodes follows the same pattern as Bicknell in using this time to distinguish Alfred's united camp with the 'unparallel'd affrontery' of the disloyal and corrupt Danish forces.³³⁰ In the later acts, Alfred undertakes the disguise mission into his enemies' camp, although in this instance with his wife completely uninvolved. The king's actions in the camp, therefore, are entirely devoid of romantic distraction and concern only Alfred's kingdom and the state of kingliness itself. Although Alfred's disguise fails yet again, it is due to his noble qualities shining through: 'That menial garb but ill / Supplies the place of regal purple.'³³¹ Despite this, the Viking invaders are overcome through a mix of fear of Alfred's fighting capabilities and awe of his moral purity. There is something new in the way that Hardune surrenders to Alfred and is won over by the king's personality. The unarmed Viking confronts Alfred and tells the king he will have to murder him in order to escape. When Alfred refuses to kill him in an unfair fight, Hardune surrenders: 'Thus I resign / Myself, unarm'd, into your hands, and swear / By every power which Saxons, Danes, / Or Britons reverence! To guard thee hence / With

³³⁰ Rhodes, *Alfred*, 69.

³³¹ *Ibid.*, 85.

safety.’³³² Alfred doesn’t even need to fight; his moral purity wins over his enemies almost instantly, without a battle.

In his unique structure, Rhodes’s *Alfred* evidences a marked shift in the language of emulation. Rather than attaching the figure of Alfred to a specific, contemporary elite figure (Prince Frederick, Prince George), or using him as an example of a particular political or societal way of being, this play demonstrates that the Saxon king can inspire all individuals on a personal level. Morality and moral teaching are key themes in its drama and for the first time in the eighteenth century, Alfred is presented as a populist figure with significance for Britons not just as a national hero, but also as a source of personal inspiration. In the terms of the ‘ardent prayer’ of Rhodes’s prologue, it is hoped that: ‘each may find an Alfred in his heart.’³³³ These ideas can perhaps be linked to the fact that Rhodes was himself not a professional writer. It may be that Rhodes felt a particular personal affinity with Alfred, or perhaps saw writing about the Saxon king as a financial opportunity that didn’t work out. Regardless, what his text represents is an increasing public enthusiasm for the figure of King Alfred. Rhodes’s tragedy is a commoner’s view of the historical monarch, without patronage or personal connection to royalty or any political agenda.

Overwhelmingly, this *Alfred* is a persistently moralising text, and it has lessons of correct thought and good behaviour forced into its plot. Alfred’s first great test, for instance, is to nobly win the heart of his future wife Ethelwitha. Her father Albanac laments the corrupting power of romance upon monarchs and believes that Alfred’s interest in Ethelwitha will lead

³³² Ibid., 89.

³³³ Ibid., 5.

to the destruction of both her and the Saxon nation. Albanac laments previous kings who 'held a group of blooming beauties theirs' and is convinced that Alfred will sink into the same depraved state: 'such, alas! I fear, will prove / Our present sovereign.' He goes on to say: 'Alfred is yet but young; / And youth, when prompted by the charms of beauty, / Will oft o'er leap the barriers of right.'³³⁴ This concern with the 'charms of beauty' reflects not only a continuing concern with the private/public motives of Alfred's behaviour (the controversy prompted by Home's tragedy a decade earlier), but also may be tied into concerns over the Prince of Wales's recent wayward behaviour. Women are identified as corrupting temptations for royalty, and the possibility of misused power is presented as a subject of profound worry for the king's subjects. 'I fear the diming of my house's honour', Albanac cries, 'Alfred alarms me!.' In response to these concerns, Albanac decides to put Alfred to the test: 'I cannot live in doubt, Yes, I will probe / This Alfred to the heart; reclaim his wand'ring thoughts.'³³⁵ The question over whether the king will act honourably towards Ethelwitha is the primary focus of the play's opening acts and is presented as Alfred's first great challenge before confronting the Vikings. Through a demonstration of honour and by prioritising regaining his kingdom over a love affair, Alfred passes the test. He chooses to pursue an honourable romance with Ethelwitha and promises to marry her after he defeats his enemies. In response to this test, Alfred performs a lengthy soliloquy regarding the abuses of power:

Does, then, the name of king tolerate one man

To exercise an arbitrary tyranny

Over the mind and body of another? No:

'Tis not the saintly look which makes the saint

³³⁴ Rhodes, *Alfred*, 35-6.

³³⁵ *Ibid.*, 41-3.

[...]

Kings are the legal delegates of heav'n:

And shall we, then, break down the barriers of right,

And plunder those heav'n meant us to protect?

I shudder at the thought.³³⁶

It is a clear message about the importance of maintaining the dignity of royalty. In regards to the questions raised about George, the Prince of Wales's, behaviour, this is a pertinent issue resolved categorically by Rhodes's Alfred. The Saxon king's purity makes him the ideal object for kingly emulation. Albanac puts the record straight: 'Heroic youth! when England's good thy zeal / Demands, no other cares are thine. Pardon, / Pardon me, Heav'n! that I have dar'd suspect him.'³³⁷

As this chapter shall shortly demonstrate, Anne Fuller similarly used a number of moralising techniques in *The Son of Ethelwolf* to provide the reader of her novel with role models and tales of rewarding virtue. The plot of Fuller's text involves Alfred in a number of encounters with other characters who teach Alfred about benevolent kingship. Rhodes's play deploys a comparable technique, and establishes the importance of respectable and inspirational figures. It is partly Albanac's own teachings that persuade Alfred to maintain his kingly virtue and treat Ethelwitha honourably: 'Your nobleness recalls me to myself', Alfred confesses, 'Love might, perhaps, have led me from the paths / Of virtue: you point me out my duty, /

³³⁶ Ibid., 46-7.

³³⁷ Ibid., 62-3.

And I obey its dictates.³³⁸ Albanac's wisdom and virtuous sayings are not just reserved for the education of the monarch, as the nobleman instructs his children:

Have I not taught you all the paths of honour?
 And fondly strove to plant within your memories
 This glorious precept, that 'Virtue only,
 Is the road to bliss, or fame.' Have I not taught
 Your sympathetic hearts to melt at the
 Distress of others?³³⁹

In addition to Albanac's teachings, the play continually bombards its audience with references to role models of virtuous existence: 'Do you remember yet / The virtuous lessons, which that dear saint / Who was your mother, oft-times deliver'd to you?', 'the sage Ofreda; / The venerable friend and tutor of my youth', 'Watch o'er my every step, and guide me still to virtue.'³⁴⁰ The precise nature of the 'virtue' which the play holds so dear is never precisely delineated, but these exhortations of unspecified virtue proliferate. What is clear is that these are not inherently political virtues, but personal. Alfred has to decide as an individual, not a monarch, about what kind of behaviour is acceptable. Rhodes does not offer lessons regarding the political execution of the duties of kingship, rather the personal thoughts and feelings of an individual with power. In this respect, perhaps, the precedent set by Home of an Alfred coming to terms with the demands of his position has lived on beyond the 1770s. The persistence of these lessons and examples demonstrates that it was not just Alfred himself, but the entire Alfred story, the expanded world of Saxon proto-England, that could be deployed to provide inspiration to Britons of the eighteenth century.

³³⁸ Ibid., 49-50.

³³⁹ Ibid., 22.

³⁴⁰ Ibid., 37; 44-5.

And in many cases, the Alfred at the centre of the performance is expected to learn from these other characters alongside his audience.

One of the most effective ways in which Rhodes augments the elements of Alfred's conquering legend with such strong moralising is by linguistically connecting virtues with weapons:

Thus arm'd, as we are
With the sword of resolution, and the
Protecting armour of defensive justice,
What can we not effect?³⁴¹

Here again we see the continuation of the military Alfred, the warrior king. His status as a warlord is united with these eighteenth-century values to legitimise his violence and ensure that the military Alfred is only associated with defence. Bicknell claimed in his *Life* that 'Alfred proceeded from such principles as are not incompatible with the severest precepts of Christianity. They were only exercised against an Infidel invader [...] He assumed not the character of a Conqueror.'³⁴² Rhodes continues that understanding, as Alfred's arsenal is comprised of the elements of his virtuous character: the 'protecting armour of defensive justice.' Moral purity is intertwined with military action; 'resolution' is rewarded and a clear conscience gives confidence in the midst of war. Unlike Home's tragedy, there is no conflict here between Alfred's love for his wife and his military enthusiasm: the 'feeling' Alfred and the military Alfred are united. Rhodes's technique of presenting virtuous characteristics as weapons of war ensures that Alfred's honest love works to augment his success in battle:

³⁴¹ Ibid., 28-9.

³⁴² Bicknell, *Life*, xiii.

‘when surrounded by the noise of war/ My thoughts shall still be fix’d on thee, Ethelwitha; / Before mine eyes thy matchless charms shall glow, / ‘Till laurel wreaths have deck’d my conq’ring brow.’³⁴³ Not only does Rhodes use this play to preach precepts of virtuous behaviour, he also argues for their importance and effectiveness in achieving individual and national ambitions. By the drama’s conclusion, Alfred’s virtuousness is what wins over the Viking commander Guthrem:

Alfred, thy nobleness of soul amazes me
This curs’d ambition, the bane of monarchs,
Has led me on too far – and yet can I behold,
With admiration, the noble flights of
An heroic soul.³⁴⁴

The concluding lines of the play, spoken by Alfred himself, confirm this conception of virtuous behaviour as not simply the correct way to live, but also the only way to succeed:

a victory!
Of which each future age shall taste the bounty,
And own with us that, tho’ oppression triumph
For awhile, some greater pow’r beholds
Th’ unequal conflict, wars on the side of justice,
And gives, at length, success to suffering virtue.³⁴⁵

Rhodes enables Alfred’s lessons of morality to inspire his watching public by using the indefinite article to identify someone following in the footsteps of the king as ‘an Alfred.’

³⁴³ Rhodes, *Alfred*, 53-4.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 119-20.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 121.

The term first appears in the play's prologue, where it is wished that 'each [member of the audience] may find an Alfred in his heart.'³⁴⁶ It appears later in the play itself when the Saxon soldier Eldred promises to fight to save his country. 'Nor shall the aid she [England] asks from us / Be wanting', he cries, "'Tis true our influence / Is not extensive, yet what we can perform, / Lacks not a heart to prompt, or hand to execute.' On hearing this, his sister Ethelwitha replies: 'Heroic youth! the spirit of an Alfred / Breathes in thee!'³⁴⁷ The indefinite article creates the fascinating suggestion that 'Alfred' is not just one particular person, but a set of ideal characteristics and strengths that can be attained by all. What we are witnessing here is the gradual coalescence of the 'national character' that Alfred would soon come to define. This was a crucial element of Alfred's nineteenth-century cult and in Rhodes's play we begin to see its parameters forming.

In relation to the play's eighteenth-century performance and the desire for the audience to find 'an Alfred' in their own hearts, the figure of the king transcends his persona and his time. 'Alfred' has moved in significance beyond the label of a historical individual to become instead a title of honour to be applied to heroic people anywhere. 'An Alfred' is almost a state to be obtained, not merely a person to be emulated. Rhodes even suggests that the state of being 'an Alfred' can be applied to women as well as men. Shortly before this encounter with Eldred, Ethelwitha herself cries out: 'all I sigh for/ Is to be an Alfred!'³⁴⁸

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 5.

³⁴⁷ Ibid., 17.

³⁴⁸ Ibid., 16.

As the next chapter demonstrates, inspiring women became a much more established element of Alfred's social and cultural role towards the end of the eighteenth century, but this is the very first instance in which a female character expresses a desire to be like the king. Ethelwitha's wish is, of course limited to her imagination only, but at this moment in Rhodes's tragedy, Alfred's appeal is truly universal, as he is held up as a figure capable of holding personal appeal to all of society.

Lessons to a Young Prince

The idea of the immortal Alfred struck forcibly in my mind, who was born to create, combine, and establish, as I have been to sever and destroy. The mind which delineated the British constitution, founded the university of Oxford [...] both languishing in my reign.³⁴⁹

As can be gathered from the above parody, the political and religious theorist David Williams was no fan of George III. His mock diary of the king presents George as cynical and greedy and his constant grabs for power profoundly unconstitutional: 'I have waded so far in the waters of corruption, that I must not think of tracing back my steps.' It is this unconstitutional kingship that brings George III, in Williams's opinion, into conflict with the great legislator Alfred: 'when introduced among the memorials of ancient kings, I appeared a stranger, and not of their kindred.'³⁵⁰ Two of the Saxon monarch's most famous institutions, the constitution and the University of Oxford, are said to be 'languishing' under George, an aging king interested only in himself and increasing his own power. Grand kingship itself in Britain has all but perished, as symbolised in George's failed visit to the

³⁴⁹ David Williams, *Royal Recollections on a Tour to Cheltenham in the Year 1788* (London: James Ridgway, 1788), 12.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 11; 13.

battlefield of the Battle of Worcester: 'Would have seen the royal oak; but was informed in time, that the place was at too great a distance; that the tree was dead.'³⁵¹

And yet, Williams's parody goes on to suggest, there is hope for reform: 'the tree was dead: and an *heir apparent* sprouting up. – I have no fancy for heirs apparent.'³⁵² A young seedling is making progress alongside the enfeebled old oak: the king's eldest son and heir to the throne, George, Prince of Wales. It is clear from *Recollections* that Williams sees promise in the younger George, not only to bring life back into the monarchy, but to make it more Alfredian. George III reflects on the idea of a literary fund for impoverished writers in this text, and identifies it as a potential problem: 'Care must be taken to prevent the independence of men of letters; and if the plan be introduced, it must be regulated to *our* views.'³⁵³ In the event, it was Williams himself who proposed and went on to found the Literary Fund, and this moment in *Recollections* demonstrates how unsuitable a sponsor he considers Britain's current monarch. The patron Williams eventually found for this royal-literary institution, worthy of the great Alfred, was the Prince of Wales. The king himself, however, is a lingering obstacle to the young George's potential and seeks to poison the minds of the nation against him: 'I am very sensible [Prince] George is worth all the houses of Hanover and Mecklenburg, in real talents and disposition of mind. But I dread his popularity; and must contrive that his youthful impudences be regarded by the people through *reflections*.'³⁵⁴ This antagonistic relationship between the monarch and his heir is a crucial part of Williams's political views in the late 1780s. He compares both to Alfred the

³⁵¹ Ibid., 109.

³⁵² Ibid.

³⁵³ Ibid., 101.

³⁵⁴ Ibid., 101-2.

Great, and it is only in the younger generation that the hope of living up to the old Saxon is found.

Williams's other writings demonstrate a significant enthusiasm for the political Alfred: 'Alfred constructed the government of England, on principles so truly scientific, that it was animated and active in every atom.'³⁵⁵ In *Lectures on Education*, Williams makes a comparison between the gradations of power in 'the East' to 'the courts of tithings, hundreds, counties, and the appeal, in the last resort, to a national assembly, appointed by the English Alfred.' 'It was not difficult to discern the first symptoms of national passion,' he concludes, 'in our unanimous decision on the superior wisdom and justice of the English legislator.'³⁵⁶ In 1790, in a response to both the Regency crisis and the early developments of the French Revolution, Williams combined his appreciation for Alfred and his hopes for the Prince of Wales in a political text urging the young George to explicitly emulate the Saxon: *Lessons to a Young Prince*.

Williams's text is explicit in its connection between Alfred and Prince George and makes the lessons offered by the Saxon almost exclusively political. It is useful to scrutinise this direct constitutional association before considering the more interpretative, literary and popular work of Anne Fuller. Williams's *Lessons* refers to a number of residual political traditions surrounding the Alfred character, many of which were identified previously in Obadiah Hulme's *Essay*.

³⁵⁵ David Williams, *Lectures on Political Principles* (London: John Bell, 1789), 274.

³⁵⁶ David Williams, *Lectures on Education* vol.3 (London: John Bell, 1789), 95.

One of the biggest problems raised by the Regency Crisis of 1788 was public concern over Prince George's willingness and ability to rule for the benefit of all the nation's subjects. He was perceived as the manipulated protégé of Charles James Fox, a slave to the whims of his Whig faction and 'selfish, extravagant and immoral.'³⁵⁷ Despite the popularity of William Pitt, the essential functions of the political system meant that the sovereign was the ultimate arbiter when it came to selecting a governing ministry. So when the king fell ill at the end of October 1788 and became subsequently incapable of undertaking his political duties, the British parliament faced a constitutional crisis. Whilst Pitt attempted to delay passing the Regency Bill and hope that the king's recovery would help keep him in power, the opposition forces of the Prince of Wales, Fox and Sheridan quibbled over the terms of the Bill to ensure maximum powers for the forthcoming Regency. On 20th February 1789, however, George III recovered and the Bill was abandoned. Despite Britons experiencing four months without a politically functioning monarch, the Prince of Wales did not hold a single day as an officially legislated regent. Worse was to come, however, for George and his political allies: 'The royal brothers suffered from popular disgust at their conduct [...] his public image was confirmed as selfish, dissolute and uncaring, and his political supporters had been divided more than ever.'³⁵⁸ The recovery of his father, on the other hand, was celebrated enthusiastically across the country and seen, as 'a restoration not only of the king's health, but [also] of the type of monarchy which he was perceived to represent.'³⁵⁹ The Prince of Wales, far from increasing his political standing, had shown through his actions that he and his supporters were completely untrustworthy in government. One of

³⁵⁷ E.A. Smith, *George IV* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), 48.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 58.

³⁵⁹ G.M. Ditchfield, *George III: An Essay in Monarchy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 142.

the most dominant themes in literature addressing the Prince after the Regency crisis, therefore, was the reform of his political instincts and behaviour.

The most direct attempt to reshape the political fortunes of the heir to the throne came in the form of Williams's *Lessons*. Although its specific context is the 'Present Disposition in Europe to a General Revolution', Williams makes it starkly clear that the problems he is attempting to address have their origins in the Regency Crisis. 'The artifices of that period', Williams writes, 'were so clearly and instantaneously perceived, that the nation felt to its utmost extremities a repugnance and detestation, which the amiable character and manners of your Royal Highness could hardly restrain within the limits of peace.'³⁶⁰ *Lessons*, therefore, contains a number of admonitions for George's benefit, but crucial for this study is the prominence of King Alfred as the chief political role model Williams provides. Williams's connection with radical politics would take him over to France as the 1790s progressed and he went so far as to accept French citizenship. Yet he declined a seat on the Convention and shortly became disillusioned by the political project and returned to Britain. 'His experience in France certainly dealt a blow to the radical in him, and in his writings he increasingly deprecated political experimentation.'³⁶¹ So although Williams had a clear passion for Alfredian constitutionalism, the political beliefs he expressed in *Lessons* failed to progress much further. His evident disdain for the figures comprising the parliamentary opposition, moreover, ensured that he was unable to invest these ideas in any concrete

³⁶⁰ Williams, *Lessons*, ii; 13.

³⁶¹ Damian Walford Davies, Williams, David (1738–1816), political and religious theorist and founder of the Literary Fund', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oct 08, 2009, Oxford University Press, accessed Aug 26, 2019, <https://www-oxforddnb-com.libproxy.york.ac.uk/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-29494>.

possibility of effecting change. Williams was a clear enthusiast for the radical ideas he was expressing, but largely failed to find any purchase for his ideas amongst any contemporary politicians.

As was customary in the Whig historical tradition, Alfred appears in the text as the founder of 'a political constitution, the best imagined and the most effectual that has hitherto been exhibited in the world':

By an attentive glance your Royal Highness may understand the excellences and defects of this wonderful fabric, and learn to revere the memory of a prince, who in an age deemed dark and ignorant could look further into a science which has hitherto baffled the strongest efforts of human reason, than any philosopher or statesman of ancient or modern times.³⁶²

Williams's approach designated the current century as in need of the bright light of Alfred. In a sense he reverses the image of human progress, suggesting that Alfred knows more of government from his 'dark and ignorant' age than many figures in the present. Sources of contemporary inspiration for George are evidently deemed few and far between. Because Williams is responding to public disgust, his primary aim is reform of George's popular image. The text continually refers to public reaction to his recent behaviour as evidence for necessitating reform of his character and political actions. In particular, the Prince is attacked for the 'cabal' of unpopular and manipulative statesmen ('Fox', 'Burke', 'Sheridan') who surround him. Like Williams's parody of George III, these politicians are attacked for their lack of distinctly Alfredian values:

The abilities and accomplishments of these three united would not constitute a statesman, or a truly great man. Their fancies or imaginations are not balanced by science, or by that

³⁶² Williams, *Lessons*, 42; 45.

high and exalted reason which is formed by the calm and patient study of philosophy, a profound acquaintance with history, and the strict discipline of mathematics.³⁶³

Williams is careful to word his criticisms so that this 'cabal' surrounding the Prince is blamed for the poor public response to his actions: 'The nation lost all judgment on the subjects under consideration: the people saw only the cabal.' If a change is not forthcoming, Williams fears that George's negative behaviour will result in perpetual disrespect from his subjects and 'fix your character with the public.'³⁶⁴ Consequently, the descriptions of Alfred which the *Lessons* contain are couched in the language of public service and approbation, paired with assertions of rule for the benefit of all members of society.

Compared to the present state of the English government in 1790s, Alfred's constitution represents 'Prometheus at liberty [...] conferring heavenly blessings on the world.'³⁶⁵ The two original diagrams comparing Alfred's constitution with the present day, which Williams includes for the benefit of the Prince, provide excellent visual metaphors for Alfred's embracing role as king.³⁶⁶ Under Alfred, equally spaced, consistently shaded and uninterrupted concentric circles radiate out from his position in the centre. The image conveys unity, completeness and inclusion, echoed in the language used in the key at the bottom of the page, which draws attention to the frequency of elections (most often 'annually') and the mutually beneficial co-ordination and interaction between each group. Compare this with the 'English Government in 1790', however, and the 'round table' of Alfredian equality is shattered in two by the divisive effects of party politics. The perfect

³⁶³ Ibid., 8-9.

³⁶⁴ Ibid., 15-6; 157.

³⁶⁵ Ibid., 51.

³⁶⁶ Figures 9 and 10.

circle is broken, fragmented into two sections: one, significantly less than half, representing those with the sovereign's support and receiving heavy black lines to delineate it from the rest. As the key indicates, the representatives of the people are repeatedly 'appointed, influenced and divided.' 'By comparing these delineations with the structure of Alfred', Williams advises, 'your Royal Highness must perceive the difference between a whole society organised into a political constitution, and any internal machinery at the will of one or more persons.'³⁶⁷

In *Lessons*, Alfred's capability to form a representative government features so heavily to contrast with the fiasco of the Prince's recent failure to pull together an effective Regency ministry. The chief reason for the superiority of Alfred's leadership, Williams asserts, was its 'reasonable, equitable and beneficial principle' of appealing to the 'public will', something which George's actions utterly failed to do. Williams criticises the abilities of the Prince's closest political allies and condemns their lack of Alfredian values of 'exalted reason' and 'calm and patient study.' The Alfred of *Lessons* is a diligent, disciplined and public-minded figure intended as the advocate of 'reason and judgment.' The Saxon king's example is deployed as a corrective to the 'passion and tumult' of the Prince of Wales's political and social activities.³⁶⁸

'N and G', writing in the *Monthly Review* question the motivations of the *Lessons*: 'In regard to such obtrusive lessons as those which are now on the table before us, it will be suspected

³⁶⁷ Ibid., 51.

³⁶⁸ Ibid., 45; 9; 83.

Figure Nine

Political Constitution of England by Alfred in David Williams, *Lessons to a Young Prince* (London: H.D. Simmons, 1790), 43.

Figure Ten

English Government in 1790 in David Williams, *Lessons to a Young Prince* (London: H.D. Simmons, 1790), 49.

that a preceptor must have had some other motive, who thus publicly seats himself in the magisterial chair, and proclaims the abilities that can so smartly take to task the Heir Apparent of a Crown!’ They also praised and criticised in equal measure Williams’s frankness: ‘while he appears to espouse no sect or party, it seems pretty clear that no sect or party, will espouse him; yet we doubt not that his acuteness and spirit will procure for him a great number of readers, and not a few admirers.’ When it comes to Alfred and Williams’s constitutional diagrams, however, the reviewers are scathing and mocking: ‘so this ingenious politician exhibits four diagrams, which are called the constitution formed by Alfred [and others...] These illustrations may be calculated for princely optics: but to our humble organs, they appear only fanciful contrivances, fitted rather for amusement than instruction.’³⁶⁹ It appears, then, that the political precepts that Williams was hoping to convey by discussing Alfred’s reign, like most of his political thoughts, were met with bemused disbelief.

The Son of Ethelwolf

Almost nothing is known regarding Anne Fuller’s life, despite her recognition as one of the earliest writers of Irish Gothic and an influential female Irish writer.³⁷⁰ However, it is possible to build some sense of the author and her intentions from the two novels of historical/Gothic fiction which she published prior to *The Son of Ethelwolf: The Convent; or, The History of Sophia Nelson* (1786) and *Alan Fitz-Osborne, an Historical Tale* (1787). The former, Morin claims, ‘propounds an idea of ‘safe’ and ‘appropriate’ prose fiction as that

³⁶⁹ ‘N and G’, ‘ART. XI. Lessons to a Young Prince, on the Present Disposition in Europe to a General Revolution’, *Monthly Review, Or, Literary Journal, 1752-1825* 4 (1791): 63-65.

³⁷⁰ John Wilson Foster, *The Cambridge Companion to the Irish Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 40 and 80.

which educated its young (female) reader by way of didactic realism,' suggesting that Fuller's main message was that 'more important than *what* one reads is *how* one reads.' Elsewhere, Morin demonstrates how *The Convent* 'reveals a keen awareness of then-current political developments' and is a novel 'implicitly engaged in solidifying British national identity.' Other critics identify in Fuller's work an active hostility towards Catholics and Catholicism and a tension between domestic realism and Gothic abnormalities.³⁷¹ Fuller, then, evidently considered herself invested in the British state and contemporary politics and was enthusiastic about engaging creatively with the past of both Britain and Ireland in a didactic fashion. Morin's observations also demonstrate Fuller's keen interest in engaging and instructing the reader, encouraging constructive engagement with her texts. Her approach to the Alfred story in *The Son of Ethelwolf* combines all these interests and we can clearly see Fuller's authorial style asserting itself over the subject matter in the novel's heavy didacticism.

The Regency Crisis played out a little differently in Fuller's homeland than it did in Westminster, and emphasised the difficulties of British government in Ireland more than any issue of regency. The Irish Parliament decided to offer the Prince of Wales regal power, but their delegation to London arrived *after* the King's recovery and proved irrelevant. The Dublin Parliament's decision to act independently of Westminster posed questions over Irish rule, however, as a situation in which the Prince of Wales had authority in Ireland but

³⁷¹ Christina Morin, *The Gothic Novel in Ireland: c. 1760–1829* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 87; and 'Forgotten Fiction: Reconsidering the Gothic Novel in Eighteenth-Century Ireland', *Irish University Review* 41, no.1 (2011), 88; See also Jarlath Killeen, *The Emergence of Irish Gothic Fiction: History, Origins, Theories*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 126. and Eugenia C. Delamotte, *Perils of the night: a feminist study of nineteenth-century Gothic* (Cary: Oxford University Press, 1990), 164-5.

not in Britain could easily have emerged.³⁷² Fuller's Alfred novel, Morin writes, 'participates in the broadly apologist vein of the Loyalist gothic romance.'³⁷³ Fuller was seemingly alert to the potential personality issues of the forthcoming reign of George IV, perhaps more than most, and her book was an attempt to both defend and reform the Prince's character.

The first volume of the novel is comprised of two parts: in the first, Alfred encounters a Viking youth who has defected to the Saxons and calls himself Ethelbert. This young soldier proceeds to tell the story of his life, including the trials of his parents back in Denmark. His story is given a great deal of attention, earning its own in-text subheading: 'The Narration of Ethelbert.' In total, it comprises 138 of the first volume's 227 pages. Alfred listens to this tale, told to him and the reader directly by Ethelbert, with the king only infrequently interjecting to ask further questions and demonstrate his willingness to listen and learn: 'Alfred, anxious to be relived from the suspense he felt for the fate of Harold and Gunilda, urged Ethelbert to continue his narration.'³⁷⁴ It is the longest of a number of encounters Alfred has with his subjects across the two volumes, and these tales seek to inspire and instruct the king: 'Alfred, strongly affected by the events of his story, became still more inclined to serve him than before.'³⁷⁵ The verb 'serve' indicates the interesting switch made between monarch and subject: royalty can (and should) learn from ordinary people. By extension, of course, the reading Prince George is also intended to be 'strongly affected' by these stories. Indeed, the fact that Ethelbert's tale begins with the address 'Illustrious prince' only hammers home the fact that Alfred is not the only royal to which these didactic

³⁷² John W. Derry, *The Regency Crisis and the Whigs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 198-201.

³⁷³ Morin, *Gothic Novel*, 130.

³⁷⁴ Anne Fuller, *The Son of Ethelwolf* 2 vols. (London: G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1789), 1:81.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:163.

narratives are being targeted.³⁷⁶ The remainder of the first volume sees Ethelbert join Alfred as his protégé and also his adoptive son. This second part is filled with instruction in moral behaviour, as Alfred trains the young warrior to be virtuous. He does so by detailing his own struggles with passion and his love for Ethelswitha. Alfred's preparations for war are ongoing during this time, and the Danish invasion is never forgotten, but the majority of Fuller's text is concerned with this new paternalistic relationship in which Alfred teaches his new companion in exile. The novel is surprisingly vague about a number of details such as the location of Alfred's exile. This is mostly because Fuller's use of Alfred's legend is less concerned with historical detail and more interested in the opportunities for learning they offer. The result of this structure is the proliferation and domination of first-person narrative. Any reader of *The Son of Ethelwolf* is required to listen extensively to the experiences of others in the expectation that wisdom can be gained from these encounters. The personal stories of the characters Alfred meets, not to mention his own legend, are delivered at such great length that the original scenario of the third-person narrative is often forgotten, and the direct speech assumes the style of a formative address. Swathes of Alfred's legend are also delivered in this fashion, through the king's own mouth as he relates his past to others.

The second volume shows more interest in the events of the war and Alfred's romance with Ethelswitha, but still finds time for encounters with peasantry who impart valuable lessons to their king. Upon leaving Athelney, Alfred receives criticism from his peasant host in the cottage, who tells him that the benevolence of monarchs very rarely reach those at the

³⁷⁶ Ibid., 1:25.

lower end of the social spectrum. Chastened, the king reflects 'within himself': 'The lesson of this day I will not neglect to observe.' After an encounter with the old shepherd Adelfred, to whose sad tale Alfred's eyes 'bore testimony to his sympathising feelings', Alfred proceeds alone into the Danish camp in disguise as a harpist. Fuller makes use of this episode to stress Alfred's emotional and performative capabilities and prove his suitability as a role model: 'Such was Alfred: born to inspire admiration, to attract affection, and to secure esteem.'³⁷⁷ Because of these skills, Alfred becomes 'the favoured companion of the Dane' (the commander Guthrum) and is able to gather all the intelligence he needs. Having then escaped the encampment, he is reunited with his army, who greet him with an explosion of hyperbolic reverence: 'They gazed as if some wondrous portent stood before them [...] affection, joy, and gratitude, filled their thoughts, and animated their looks and gestures.' As can be seen here, Alfred is a catalyst for action amongst his otherwise despondent subjects. United with his soldiers, Alfred then leads them into battle and is victorious, as inspirational in war as he was throughout his moralistic teachings: 'The bright example of their godlike chief urged them on [...] his destroying sword marked the path they were to follow.'³⁷⁸ In every action he undertakes, Alfred is leading the way and setting down standards for his people to follow. With the conflict now over, Fuller resolves a significant number of complicated romantic sub-plots, demonstrating that honesty and virtue will eventually lead to happy conclusions for all.

It is not difficult to see why the Saxon king would appeal to Prince George. He often felt resentful to his parents for clearly favouring his younger brother, Frederick. Whilst George

³⁷⁷ Ibid., 2:6; 2:21; 2:30.

³⁷⁸ Ibid., 2:99; 2:122.

was left at home yearning for the excitement of a military role, it was Frederick who was to serve in the continental army. Alfred, on the other hand, was the youngest of four brothers and outlived and overshadowed them all. Whilst his brothers were killed in conflicts with the Danes, Alfred proved his superiority in arms and defeated the national enemy. It is to appeal to George's desire to shine amongst his siblings that Fuller makes multiple references to Alfred's status as the most successful 'son of Ethelwolf.' Firstly, the title of the novel itself only recognises the one son, relegating the others to obscurity. Similarly, when one of Alfred's subjects describes the king in the early pages of the first volume, his superiority over his siblings is a key feature of his greatness: 'In all endowments, and all excellencies, he surpassed his brethren, who, though much older in years, were younger in wisdom and virtue.' Indeed, Alfred's later description of his eldest brother Ethelbald, could also serve as a warning for George not to treat his position as heir with the contempt he had previously demonstrated: 'The heart of Ethelbald was corrupted. The pride of birth, and the consciousness of power, had set him, in his own opinion, above the observation of those forms and duties which preserve peace and good order amongst mankind.'³⁷⁹ Despite actually being the eldest 'son of George', the image of one brother outperforming the pack must have appealed greatly to a resentful Prince of Wales. Many supporters of the Prince, including the anonymous 'Man of Kent,' were flattering George with comparisons: 'I have entertained a hope that you may one day take your seat by the side of an Alfred. The age of heroic virtue seems, indeed, to be long elapsed; but it is in the power of a prince, a British prince, to restore it.'³⁸⁰

³⁷⁹ Ibid., 1:5; 1:184.

³⁸⁰ 'Man of Kent', *Letters to a Prince from a Man of Kent* (London: W. Richardson, 1788), 5.

It is important, however, not to stress too strongly the association between Prince George and King Alfred. 'George was a man who preferred to live in the past', writes Parissien, but this past was 'often absolutist, papist, and irredeemably foreign.'³⁸¹ So although he may have had a passing interest in Alfred's military legacy, and found the idea of being compared to a great leader of the past appealing, Alfred was overwhelmingly associated with values of austere virtue. It is perhaps difficult to see how Prince George could have been imagined by the public as an Alfred figure. So, in many ways, the identification with the Saxon king is an unnatural union, resulting from the necessity of the circumstances arising from the Regency crisis rather than any affinity between the two men. The figure of Alfred is being deployed as a corrective, not an analogy.

The consequences of this for the novel are that its protagonist, Alfred, is required to connect with the personality of the Prince at the same time as it seeks to reform him. Alfred is therefore, for better or worse, presented as a man with great passion and strong emotions, tempted by the desires of his heart and attempting to define a role for himself in the kingdom he inherited. At the same time, these moments of connection to the young Prince George, most of which are delivered in a sympathetic and/or encouraging manner, are without exception coupled to stern lessons in unwavering virtue and morality in the pursuit of public good. Although they chart the traditionally related phase of Alfred's life from exile to victory at the Battle of Edington, the king's experiences in the novel are actually less about securing military victory and more about preparing his personality and public image

³⁸¹ Parissien, *George IV*, 206.

for leadership. Alfred transitions between the lifestyles and personalities of the Prince of Wales and his father George III, as Fuller creates a relatable, but also instructive figure for her patron to learn from. The 'Son of Ethelwolf' of the title, therefore, is both his own man and a product of a past generation; capable of strong, independent thought and personal passion, but ultimately ruled by a superior power which professes virtue and selfless public service.

In the previous texts looked at by this thesis, concluding lines have been indicators of the main purpose to which Alfred is being deployed. In the previous chapter we saw how Alfred was providing a rallying cry to war in a time of national crisis. In *The Son of Ethelwolf*, Fuller uses her final words to reinforce her instructional message to the future George IV:

By such actions did Alfred justly acquire the appellation of Great; an appellation which admiring posterity has confirmed. Princes of the earth, ye are ambitious of the title. Ye would attain it by blood and devastation. But ye mistake the means. Recall the example of Alfred, and learn that virtue alone is the basis of true greatness.³⁸²

Fuller successfully gained the Prince of Wales's permission to dedicate her work to him, yet the dedication itself is a complex mix of hyperbolic flattery and chiding instruction on the importance of a prince's moral duties. Although she heaps lavish praise upon the Prince (claiming that he recently exhibited 'the most affecting exertion of disinterested greatness!' during his father's illness), the implication of the later, more delicately worded sentences is that she is keen to see him improve: 'A bright ray of consolation dissipated in some measure the surrounding gloom.' She places focus upon George's 'submission to the laws,' seemingly

³⁸² Fuller, *Son of Ethelwolf*, 2:209.

the restrictions which Parliament placed upon him during the Regency crisis. Referring to the Prince in third person, she states: 'He, who despising the advantages of royalty, when they clashed with the rights of justice, nobly divested himself of them, and gave in his own conduct the most sacred, and most energetic lesson, of submission to the laws.' George's frustration and ultimate failure to establish himself as regent is reframed as an exercise in submission, enabling Fuller to praise the prince for a noble retreat. Focusing on this deference, she then proceeds to use that positive behaviour to attempt to inspire George to listen more to wise superiors: 'That action was a promise of future good', Fuller claims, 'As such, a freeborn people accept it. They know that man is liable to error, and that princes above all men are most exposed to its delusions. But they trust, that the monitor within your Royal Highness's breast, will still counteract the insidious voice of flattery without.'³⁸³ These hopes and disguised warnings intend to help the prince by means of lessons with which he can resist the corruptions of an evil outer world. George already has, Fuller claims, 'within your Royal Highness's breast', the personal strength capable of resisting temptation. Her examples of the moral Alfred are intended to reinforce that latent interior virtue: 'In good morals, in all which should distinguish and dignify mankind, his own example was a living lesson to his subjects; they saw what he *was*, and perceived what *they* ought to be.'³⁸⁴ Fuller demonstrates the union of the political and the individual 'virtues' that are the core consideration of this chapter. Alfred is important for the Prince of Wales *both* as a royal and as a human individual. Fuller's novel represents a combination of the personal and political Alfreds seen thus far in the eighteenth century. The Alfred of *The Son of Ethelwolf*, therefore, appeals to its royal dedicatee in addition to the ordinary reading public.

³⁸³ Ibid., 1:v-vi.

³⁸⁴ Ibid., 2:189.

What is also clear is that Fuller's novel appealed to both critics and supporters of the Prince of Wales's behaviour during the Regency crisis. She is able to boast among her subscribers both Henry Grattan and Viscount Mountmorres. The former of these Irish politicians was 'personally friendly with [...] Charles James Fox' and during the Regency crisis took the position of 'persuading the Irish parliament to request the prince to exercise full royal authority when the king was indisposed.'³⁸⁵ Conversely, Mountmorres 'dissented from the view generally taken in Ireland, and argued strongly in support of the course pursued by William Pitt and the English parliament' to restrict the prince's powers in the hope of his father's swift recovery.³⁸⁶ Whether they were a loyal devotee of Prince George or not, it appears to be the case that both these men were willing to back Fuller's attempt to lead him to be more like King Alfred. Fuller was to a large extent prompted to write this novel by the prince's behaviour during the Regency crisis and she addresses the matter in the dedication: 'Heaven has restored to you a father.'³⁸⁷ This is just one of a number of indicators which show this Alfred text to be heavily influenced by the Regency crisis.

One such example is the novel's title: *The Son of Ethelwolf*. Æthelwolf was King Alfred's father, and reigned over the kingdom of Wessex from 839 to 858. His reign was not

³⁸⁵ James Kelly, 'Grattan, Henry (bap. 1746, d. 1820), politician', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Jan 03, 2008, Oxford University Press, accessed Jul 03 2019, <https://www-oxforddnb-com.libproxy.york.ac.uk/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-11303>.

³⁸⁶ Robert Dunlop and Alexander Du Toit, 'Morres, Hervey Redmond, second Viscount Mountmorres (1741/2–1797), politician', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, September 23, 2004, Oxford University Press, accessed Jul 03 2019, [.https://www-oxforddnb-com.libproxy.york.ac.uk/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-19299](https://www-oxforddnb-com.libproxy.york.ac.uk/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-19299).

³⁸⁷ Fuller, *Ethelwolf*, 1:v.

considered particularly flatteringly by eighteenth-century historians and it made very little impact in contemporary histories. According to Hume, Æthelwolf 'was better qualified for governing a convent than a kingdom.'³⁸⁸ The multiple possibilities offered by Fuller's reference to Alfred's father lead us to some fascinating conclusions about her invocation of Æthelwolf. Fuller is perhaps attempting an appeal to the young prince's (previously absent) sense of duty to his father, whilst also suggesting that the pattern established by the Saxon pair, in which the son magnificently outshone the father, is similarly possible with the Georges. Alfred may be defined in the novel's title as the production of the past in the form of his father (an origin that should be profoundly respected) but the glory of success lies almost exclusively with the son. Although clearly intending to inspire a small degree of paternal affection in the young prince, Fuller is also criticising the over-moralising of the Æthelwolf/George III figure; Alfred himself holds equivalent virtues in abundance, but unlike his father is crucially able to turn them into action and effective kingship. The relationship between royal progeny is encouraged to be one of respect, but also one in which the son surpasses the mediocre achievements of the father. Despite these possible inferences, Fuller is never explicit about the intentions behind her choice of title, and the issue is not elucidated by the text itself. Æthelwolf never appears as a character in the novel, existing only in the remembrances of Alfred and his older subjects, which are mostly favourable. Once again, Fuller is toeing that difficult line between providing necessary instruction and positive example to the prince, whilst also making him aware of the seriousness of poor choices and behaviour. By merely alluding to royal paternal relations and suggesting something important is to be learned by them, Fuller is able to both praise and criticise the

³⁸⁸ Hume, *History*, 71.

example set forth by George III. It is never her intention to tell the Prince of Wales to merely be more like his father.

Regardless of the complexities involved, this is the first instance of a strong paternalism in Alfred texts, the king's parents are entirely absent from previous plays and poems. The only exception, perhaps, is Sir Richard Blackmore's *Alfred*, an epic poem from 1723. In that heavily classicised tale, Alfred the hero is shown to be the saviour of a failing family of Saxon overlords. During his absence in the Mediterranean, Alfred's father and brothers progressively perish in battle with the Vikings, forcing Alfred to return and reclaim Wessex/England alone. In connecting Alfred with Æthelwolf, Fuller is similarly attempting an association of Alfred's legend in relation to dynasty and inheritance – implying like Williams that the Georgian dynasty is in need of restoration through a dynamic heir. In regards to the development of the Alfred myth, it is the Regency crisis alone that can explain this direction of travel towards key father-son relationships in the mythology. Alfred adopting surrogate sons becomes an extremely prominent theme in the plays of the 1790s, as shall be demonstrated in the next chapter, and it is clear that the personalities of the two Georges were the catalyst for this development in the late 1780s.

The reciprocal learning and teaching relationship Alfred establishes with many of his characters also indicates a marked difference between previous literature which identified Alfred with a single individual. In the Thomson-Mallet masque, Alfred was very clearly modelled upon Frederick, another Prince of Wales, and the plot equating the tribulations of the two men reflected this direct connection. In the case of *The Son of Ethelwolf*, however,

George's connection to the figure of Alfred is much more fluid. As in the ambiguous title, it is never made explicit that George *is* Alfred; merely that the king's experiences, whether giving or receiving positive examples, are a tool through which the Prince of Wales can improve himself. In Alfred's relationship with Ethelbert, for instance, George could take the role of the king himself, giving out a wonderful example, or the role of Ethelbert who is receiving instruction from a wise monarch: 'he sought to render himself worthy of Alfred's society, by imitating the example he admired.'³⁸⁹ Fuller never makes it clear whether the 'example' to be 'admired' in the contemporary debate is George III, or the innate strength she already identified in the Prince of Wales himself. Such flexibility demonstrates the complexity of Fuller's task; she was not merely intending to flatter by connecting Prince George with Alfred, but to instruct and reform using Alfred as her tool.

The novel is filled with moments of paternal inspiration and fondness, whether connected to Alfred or his subjects. Ethelbert's long story, for instance, which dominates the first volume, traces the speaker's woes back to his father Harold, who fell into conflict with another Viking, Guthrum. Ethelbert's reverence for his lost father was perhaps intended to serve as a model for George: 'Harold, this pattern for the human race, the God-like Harold, he was my father, and he lives no more.' In his response, Alfred vindicates the younger man's sentiments as well as offering himself as a surrogate father: 'He deserves thy tears [...] though not thy sire by natural ties, behold in me one who will claim thy affection by paternal deeds.'³⁹⁰ By having Alfred step in and act as Ethelbert's father, Fuller makes a statement about the importance of paternal role models. She weaves this theme

³⁸⁹ Fuller, *Ethelwolf*, 1:166.

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:28.

throughout her narrative, providing strong (sometime surrogate) father-son relationships throughout and making many more references to paternal bonds. Later in Ethelbert's story, for instance, his mother Gunilda witnesses her own father's life threatened and breaks out of her petrified fear in order to defend him: 'the danger of her sire quickly restored to her the power of utterance [...] 'cannot my death suffice? My father! thou wilt not kill my father!'. The moment is made all the more powerful by the antagonist's own lack of fatherhood: "I am childless', cried he, 'thy sire shall also be childless!'"³⁹¹ Praise for fathers, threats against fathers and sorrow arising from troubled father-child relationships are key to a large proportion of the secondary narratives of the novel. Whether it is Guthrum's selfish belief that he deserves love more than his friend because of his father ('I, the son of a king, I am scorned, and thou art loved!') or Ethelbert's personal anguish at not knowing the fate of his other father-figure Wittigild ('Filial duty and filial fears, gave him many sensations of regret and pain'), this is a novel relentlessly interested in fostering positive paternal relationships and condemning harmful ones.³⁹² Fuller's text echoes the damaged paternal relationship between the two Georges, weaving it into her novel which continually questions the meaning of fatherhood. Williams parodied George III's paternalism in *Recollections* by presenting him as uncaring and neglectful: 'Monday, 12, George's birth-day. I had some thoughts of parental love; but I dismissed them. I am called the father of my people – in what sense?'³⁹³ By presenting so many troubled fatherhoods in Saxon and Viking history, Fuller is giving fuel to both paternal longing and paternal resentment in the young Prince George whilst also demonstrating that he can be his own man.

³⁹¹ Ibid., 1:44-5.

³⁹² Ibid., 1:48; 2:189.

³⁹³ Williams, *Recollections*, 112.

To encourage the Prince of Wales and her wider readership to be receptive to her characters' lessons, Fuller makes Alfred both a willing instructor ('not to reproach, but direct you, is the purpose of Alfred') and a willing student ('Listening therefore to the suggestions of wisdom and virtue, he turned to Ethelbert').³⁹⁴ In doing so, she gives George the opportunity to learn *through* Alfred as well as *from* him, all the while stressing the importance of learning and personal improvement. The king's chiding and later praise of Siward, another Saxon encountered in the second volume, demonstrates the seriousness with which the novel treats the role model/student relationship: "O king', cried the young noble, 'thy words, are daggers to my heart. I see, I feel the horrors of my offence.'" After then receiving praise from his monarch, the impact of Alfred's words upon Siward is clear: 'An encomium so flattering, from lips so highly respected, animated Siward [...] 'To merit the esteem of my sovereign, shall be my future study, and I will hasten to insure it, by instant obedience to his will'.³⁹⁵ Even Alfred's relationship with his wife is seen in terms of a mutual search for knowledge and improvement: 'Ethelswitha [...] became the partner of my studies, and the confidant of my projects', 'in all moments of leisure we were companions in study.'³⁹⁶ Nowhere is the positive, reciprocal sharing of knowledge stronger than in the king's relationship with his protégée Ethelbert. The young Saxon man refers to his king as his 'revered instructor' and Alfred reinforces the bond by considering him 'his young pupil.'³⁹⁷ Both the strength of these and similar sentiments - and the number of pages dedicated to Alfred's tutoring - means that the paternal relationship between the two men is equated with the educational. Connection to a father figure is not just emotional, the novel

³⁹⁴ Fuller, *Ethelwolf*, 2:126-8.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 2:107-9.

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:183-7.

³⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 2:91-2.

demonstrates, it is also crucial for personal guidance. Given the evident rift between the two Georges, the reason behind this theme can be found once again in their relationship.

Having established the crucial nature of educational, paternal relationships, Fuller proceeds to use them to dispense her lessons of moral virtue. *The Son of Ethelwolf* is similar to Rhodes's *Alfred* in its continual reassertion and unrelenting focus upon the king's morality and the superiority which it affords him: 'the heart of Alfred was above fear, because it enjoyed the consciousness of virtue.'³⁹⁸ This is the chief element of Alfred's lessons to Ethelbert in the first volume, and is clearly intended to inspire the readers of the text as well as the characters within it:

Alfred instructed the young Ethelbert in all the virtues which should dignify and elevate the human race above the brutal. He delineated the beauty of goodness, he painted the deformity of vice, and his auditor, affected by the well drawn picture, wondered at the blindness and folly of man, who shuns and flies the former, and courts its hideous contrast with eagerness and assiduity'³⁹⁹

Here, of course, can be heard echoes of the public respect for the healthy domesticity demonstrated by George III. It is hoped that the Prince of Wales will prove to be as assiduous an 'auditor' of these precepts as Ethelbert.

Lessons in Self Control

One of the most skilled and effective ways in which Fuller conducts her educational mission is by including moments in which Alfred's emotions cause him to lose control, before

³⁹⁸ Ibid., 2:1.

³⁹⁹ Ibid., 1:169.

making him regret and address his outburst. Powerful emotions were an established element of Alfred's literary character, inherited from as far back as the Thomson-Mallet masque which attempted to replicate Frederick's wait for kingship in a tortuous Athelney exile. But as was shown in the previous chapter, the eighteenth century public also expected a commanding dignity to be demonstrated by the Saxon king. For Fuller, the precedent of emotional Alfreds instead provides the perfect opportunity to showcase lessons of self-control. Her Alfred is continually seized by moments of passion (no great innovation here) but which, in order for him to be instructive to the reader, are consistently overcome through internal fortitude. Herein lies the key to Fuller's innovative correctional approach. Whilst previous Alfreds were brought into line by courtiers or left sombre and guilt-ridden throughout their story, Fuller provides, for the first time, a version of the king who is able to provide emotional checks and balances upon himself. When considering this, it is important to remember Fuller's words in her dedication to Prince George regarding control of oneself: 'the monitor within your Royal highness's breast, will still counteract the insidious voice of flattery without.'⁴⁰⁰ She therefore writes an Alfred who is entirely able to undertake this self-reflexive task, simultaneously resolving the contentious issue of over-emotion that had plagued so many previous Alfreds.

The Son of Ethelwolf overcomes many of the objections raised to Home's *Alfred*, in which it was deemed by critics that the 'Hero' was 'degraded to a lover.' One contemporary review of Fuller's novel asserted that: 'the different materials are so skilfully wrought together, that they form, with a few exceptions, one uniform and beautiful whole.' Specific attention was

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., 1:vi.

drawn to 'sentiments [which] breathe the most pure and innated virtue.'⁴⁰¹ This is a demonstrable distance from the accusations of an 'unnecessary trespass on the truth of history' that Home's emotional Alfred was attacked with.

This is not to say, however, that Fuller completely escaped the ire of those keen to defend Alfred's 'established' historical image. In the same review of, the final scene in which Alfred zealously takes command of a ship is criticised:

[this moment] favours a little too much of the old romance, in which it was constantly made the duty of the hero, to seize with avidity, every favourable occasion for parting with his mortal existence. The heroic valour of Alfred was tempered and directed, by the most consummate wisdom and generous love of his people.

This comment provides insight into perceptions of Alfred's legacy in a number of ways. Firstly, the dismissal of 'old romance' and the implied assertion that tales of Alfred are distinct from this category, demonstrate that far from being relegated to the past, Alfred holds strong contemporary significance to eighteenth-century Britons; the importance of telling his story 'correctly', therefore, is greatly increased. Secondly, the reviewer makes it clear that the factor which distinguishes Alfred from the risible heroic tales of old is the belief that his 'valour' was crucially 'tempered and directed' by 'wisdom' and 'love of his people.' For this commentator, Alfred is exclusively defined from all other heroes by his self-control: the ability to ignore the calls of self-driven passion and act in the best interests of his subjects. The fact that the reviewer finds only 'trifling negligences of composition' in relation to this matter, and provides as their only example of deviation a single event at the end of the final volume entirely insignificant to the plot, is testament to Fuller's success in

⁴⁰¹ *Woodfall's Register*, Jun 01, 1789.

negotiating such a hazardous representational issue. That this lone breach of historical veracity is still considered worth expostulating upon at length, however, indicates the continuing sensitivity of this issue to contemporary critics. It was because of the need to provide a stable, educational example to the Prince of Wales that Fuller puts so much literary work into accomplishing this synergy between her hero's inner passion and moral virtue.

The balancing act between Alfred's 'heroic valour' and 'consummate wisdom,' intended expressly to teach the reading Prince George the importance of self-control, manifests itself in-text as an interior moral struggle. In one of the king's most vulnerable moments, as he speaks of his love for his wife-to-be Ethelwitha, he becomes 'overpowered by the violence of his emotions' and 'the guard of prudence desert[s] his lips.'⁴⁰² The military metaphors deployed to express this battle serve to heighten the stakes and increase the ferocity of what Alfred feels. In the dedication referenced earlier, Fuller disguises criticism as flattery by depicting the Prince's own personal troubles as similarly soul-consuming: 'Man is liable to error', she asserts, and 'princes above all men, are most exposed to its delusions [...] trust, that the monitor within your Royal Highness's breast, will still counteract the insidious voice of flattery without.'⁴⁰³ By representing George's breast as his fortress, surrounded by the foes of flattery 'without', Fuller gives the Prince the impression of himself as an intrinsically virtuous individual who needs to defend himself against the dangerous outside world. Alfred's own siege, in which his lips 'guard' against fault, is deliberately calculated to resonate powerfully with this battle which Fuller implores the Prince of Wales to fight. The

⁴⁰² Fuller, *Ethelwolf*, 1:177.

⁴⁰³ *Ibid.*, 1:iv.

achievement of perfection is not important - for neither Alfred nor George. Instead, the dedication's assertion to the Prince that 'man is liable to error' finds its equivalent in Alfred's own speech, when he admits to his companion Ethelbert that: 'I am not this perfect character.'⁴⁰⁴ Paradoxically, it is the act of denying his own perfection which elevates the king's virtuousness and it is a sagacious Alfred that is introduced to overcome the resultant defects of these emotional moments. Fuller is, of course, echoing Hume's lasting assessment of Alfred as the 'complete model of that perfect character' and denying its veracity. A little like Home, she is challenging this designation of the king as somehow *inhumanly* virtuous, and proving to her royal reader that perfection is not what matters in a role model.

As shown earlier, Hume asked to see Alfred 'delineated in more lively colours' so that 'specks and blemishes' may be scrutinised; the image of the Saxon king Fuller presents has his blemishes very much on show. She isn't afraid to draw attention to them and demonstrate how a responsible monarch attempts to address them. When the failure of Alfred to keep his emotions in check prompts an equally unedifying expression of passion from Ethelbert, the Saxon king recalls himself to 'reflexion and prudence': 'He became calm by degrees, dismissed the messenger, and then retired for a moment to take counsel of his own thoughts.'⁴⁰⁵ Whenever Alfred becomes emotional, these moments of subsidence into rational calm always instantly follow, ensuring that passion never translates into action. To return to the review in *Woodfall's Register*: 'The heroic valour of Alfred was tempered and

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid., 1:172.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid., 1:177.

directed, by the most consummate wisdom.' Fuller never allows her reader to forget this crucial lesson.

This structure of emotional instinct immediately conquered by calm reflection is prevalent throughout the text and the reader encounters it almost immediately at the very beginning of the novel. Alfred, exiled to the wildernesses and hiding in the guise of a peasant's servant, is overcome by the honest domesticity of the rustic Dunwolf's lifestyle and cries out: 'Why, O why was I not born in this humble rank?' Alfred immediately ceases his exclamation and rapidly counters himself: "Selfish wish!" cried he again; 'Selfish, and unworthy! Pure and sweet are the pleasures that virtue gives; let me fulfil the duties she exacts, and I shall feel them'.⁴⁰⁶ The early emotion is condemned and reason, with the ultimate end of achieving virtue, is employed to correct the wayward outburst. It is thus that Fuller's Alfred provides the perfect role model for her royal benefactor whilst managing to maintain the delicate balance between sentiment and respectability in the process. 'It is [...] the duty', Alfred professes, 'of him who would act with propriety, and steadiness, not to palliate his faults, but seek to correct them. Be this the task of Alfred.'⁴⁰⁷ Be this also, Fuller asserts, the task of George.

Fuller creates scenarios in which the moral passion of Alfred causes him to interrupt the story being told and expostulate upon a matter of deep significance. Interjecting into Ethelbert's narrative, Alfred takes exception to the 'blind and furious zeal' of the Danes which called for Ethelbert's mother to be sacrificed to their gods:

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid., 1:9.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid., 1:178.

'O fanaticism', exclaimed Alfred at this period, 'thou pest, and scourge of the human race, how long shalt thou continue to impose on man with thy delusions? When shall heaven-born reason regain the dominion which thou hast usurped? When shall she dissipate the errors with which thou hast enveloped human-kind [...] and display, by her clear and unerring light, the true attributes of divinity?'⁴⁰⁸

Instead of maintaining a quiet dignity and internalising these thoughts, Fuller makes Alfred earnestly and zealously project the contents of his mind into direct speech. His constant flow of rhetorical questions evidence great anxiety and the hyphens which follow each question mark can be read to signify dramatic gasps of air. Alfred shows in physical form the power of his earnest thoughts. Incapable of keeping them inside his own head, he appears intensely animated whilst delivering these lines. No responses to Alfred's questions are forthcoming from his companion Ethelbert, who remains silent and seems unable to match the ferocity of the king's righteous anger. This is an almost theatrical outburst from Alfred, quite possibly inspired by the impassioned and uninterrupted soliloquies of onstage Alfreds. It is therefore a moment in which the dramatic and novelistic discourses blur and the inheritances of Alfred texts can be clearly seen.

The young man's silence is also crucial for maintaining the established structure of emotion directly followed by contemplation: 'Alfred ceased; he appeared for a few moments absorbed in thought, and then made a sign to Ethelbert to proceed.'⁴⁰⁹ This is, once again, another example of Fuller's intelligent manipulation of the reader. First, she presents her reader with the passionate cry of Alfred's virtuous laments, directing and solidifying his moral thoughts in an inescapable and uninterrupted tirade. Alfred's voice is then stopped,

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., 1:83.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid., 1:83.

as abruptly as it began, for a moment of solemn meditation. If the Prince of Wales is reading the book, Fuller provides him with an authorial prompt to meditate upon the lesson himself.

Alfred the Universal Role Model

This cluster of Alfred texts has been, perhaps, the most diverse and difficult to cohere into a stable grouping; all appearing within two years of each other at the end of the 1780s, they nonetheless have different audiences in mind and were written for a wide number of reasons. However, what they do demonstrate (with the exception of Bicknell's *Patriot King*), is that the figure of Alfred was becoming increasingly depoliticised and associated with individual qualities of morality and virtue. In the case of George, Prince of Wales, and the Regency crisis, Alfred was seen by both Anne Fuller and David Williams as a role model capable of reshaping the Prince's political *and* personal prodigality. Their Alfred works attempted to do so by not only referencing Alfred's actions during his own life, but also by comparing the Saxon monarch with Britain's current king George III. Royal connections are still being made, but they are done so more on the basis of personality and domestic morality, rather than solely political actions. The political elements of both Williams and Bicknell are present, and taken very seriously by both writers, but it is the disconnect between these ideas and the present that distinguishes them from previous political Alfreds. The 1780s provided no equivalent of the 'Patriot King' and reformers were steadily becoming less interested in ancient Saxon constitutionalism in favour of Painite concepts of universal rights. On the other side of the social scale, Ebenezer Rhodes's Alfred is a populist expression of reverence, an encouragement for ordinary people to follow the ways of Alfred and find a part of the king's character within themselves. The presence of an enthusiast

such as Rhodes in this study's list of writers – and, indeed, the first female writer of an Alfredian literary text – serves to demonstrate the growing popularity of Alfred amongst an increasingly diverse base of enthusiastic Britons. These are the aspects of Alfred's trajectory which this cluster best demonstrates: the language of popular emulation is increasing and Alfred's audience is growing.

CHAPTER FOUR

'I am for Alfred, I': Three Loyalist Alfreds of 1796

The various misfortunes of the early part of his reign, brought him acquainted with the habits of life of every description of people: with Peasants, for with them he lived in disguise; with Yeomanry, for with them he fought; with Sailors, for he launched our first navy; and with Men of Learning, for with them he studied, and laid the foundation of the University of Oxford. Hence it arose, that his Code of Laws, which is the Origin of our Common Law, was adapted to all; for it was framed by one, who knew better than any man that ever existed, what were the wants of All, and what their relative Situation.

In addition to the praise of Alfred quoted above, Rowland Hunt confidently asserts that: 'There never was a Time when it was so much worth while to be an Inhabitant of Great Britain, as at this moment.' Alongside the 'Principle of Religion' in causing such supreme contentment stands Britain's constitution, demonstrably wise thanks to 'the Laws of King Alfred', which in Hunt's eyes still form the backbone of the current system.⁴¹⁰ In the passage quoted above, Hunt authenticates the prudence and suitability of Alfred's laws to the entire populace by valuing the king's interactions and shared experiences with his people. Personal knowledge of individual situations, Hunt implies, is of paramount importance to the nation's laws of governance. The episodes of Alfred's life – his exile, his military struggle, his intellectual pursuits – are in this instance refigured as a series of fact-finding missions about the people over whom he rules. Each of Alfred's 'misfortunes', as Hunt terms them, is responsible for providing the Saxon king with a unique understanding of 'the habits of life of every description of people', which necessarily informed the king's laws. This emphasis on the interaction between sovereign and subject reflects a much wider cultural shift occurring

⁴¹⁰ Rowland Hunt, *The Prosperity of Great Britain*, (Shrewsbury: J. and W. Eddowes, 1796), 1-3.

to the British monarchy itself in the 1790s, as it mobilises against the forces of the French Revolution. In Hunt's panegyric, as in all three texts considered in this chapter, contemporary revolutionary concerns dominate and come to define the qualities and behaviour of King Alfred.

As Oliver Cox has shown, the figure of Alfred still retained his great significance in the political world in the 1790s, for both radicals and loyalists. The language of ancient liberties 'enjoyed continued popularity even when forced to share Alfred with Pitt the Younger's administration.' Key to Alfred's continuing longevity in radical circles was the popularity of his recognisable legend amongst Britons, providing a known reference point to abstract ideas: 'Not only was this [the language of ancient liberties] a native, English tradition of radicalism, but also it was the language that could affect the greatest number of people.'⁴¹¹ The role of the theatre in disseminating this message should not be overlooked either: 'theatricality was indispensable to the attempt by various agents, groups, and movements, whether successful or not, to produce a less hierarchical social order and a more democratic form of representative government than had existed previously in Britain.'⁴¹²

That as may be, however, the three Alfred plays that make up this cluster are all firmly loyalist, and seek to strengthen Britain's hierarchical social order, as shall be seen shortly. These plays, which appeared one after the other in 1796, are part of a tradition of appealing

⁴¹¹ Cox, 'King Alfred', 267-9.

⁴¹² Julia Swindells, *Glorious Causes: The Grand Theatre of Political Change, 1789-1805* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), xi.

to the figure of Alfred as a way of legitimising social status and social rank. The monarchy in general and Alfred in particular provided proof of robust and beneficial continuity:

the peaceful family of Wapshot has continued to cultivate the same spot of earth from generation to generation, ever since the reign of King Alfred, by whom the farm in which they live was granted to Reginald Wapshot, their ancestor [...] The Saxon, Danish, or Norman conquests affected them not; and every King, from Alfred to George III. inclusive, may see the same space of a few acres, freely yielding its produce to the laborious hands of a Wapshot.⁴¹³

The proud connection between people and monarch evidenced here in the flourishing of one family under the eyes of a catalogue of social superiors, was a crucial element of loyalist rhetoric. ‘To the social conservatives who still dominated British politics’, Lee has argued, ‘to belong to the nation meant not so much to participate in a horizontal formation as to occupy a specific place within a larger, hierarchical whole.’⁴¹⁴ This pride in a ‘specific place’ is demonstrated perfectly in the Wapshot family history, which eagerly demonstrates that their farm – whether grand or humble – has been their place in the kingdom, in the ‘larger, hierarchical whole’ since Alfred’s days. With the French Revolution threatening that social order, Alfred was mobilised once again to defend it. The editor of the *Letters of the Ghost of Alfred*, a series of letters supposedly by Alfred himself that were printed in the *True Briton* and subsequently published as their own collection, was keen to make the most of Alfred’s potential to defend Britain’s constitutional monarchy: ‘the publication of these Letters may conduce to the maintenance and security of that Constitution, among the founders of which we have ever been proud to reckon the great and venerable character, whose shade here

⁴¹³ *Lloyd’s Evening Post*, Jun 22-4, 1796.

⁴¹⁴ Yoon Sun Lee, *Nationalism and Irony: Burke, Scott, Carlyle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 5.

speaks to us with a Warning Voice.⁴¹⁵ The *Letters* sought to argue over the political debates of the time, whereas more popular conservatism, the main interest of this chapter, was largely ‘divorced from actual political issues and reified into an *abstract* virtue of loyalty to symbolic images of king and country.’⁴¹⁶ When searching for a ‘symbolic image of king and country’, loyalist writers in the 1790s couldn’t do much better than King Alfred.

As the previous chapter demonstrated, interactions between sovereign and subject were already becoming an established part of Alfred’s story told towards the end of the 1780s, with peasants and soldiers alike providing the monarch with vital moments of perspective and self-reflection. Hunt’s panegyric on Alfred’s constitution-building experiences, however, evidences an additional layer to the interaction – a concern with how the monarch feeds these experiences back into society. In this reconfiguration, a superior, benevolent monarch is only the means to a greater end; the public benefit, the pay-out for the people, takes precedence. The judgment criteria for Alfred’s success involve how *representative* the king’s law is; how his private experiences and values manifest themselves in constitutional practice. Moreover, the political Alfred has become less theoretical and more ‘hands-on’ – a culture of dialogue and personality defines good kingship above all else. A monarch’s ability to tend to the ‘wants of All’ becomes primary in the institution and support of a harmonious, fair and free social structure.

⁴¹⁵ *Letters of the Ghost of Alfred* (London: J. Wright, 1798), vii.

⁴¹⁶ George Taylor, *The French Revolution and the London Stage, 1789-1805* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 158.

The three Alfred texts considered in this cluster, all performed and published in 1796, reflect on the British stage this preoccupation with the integrity and unity of Great Britain, in both national and social terms. They present a king who stands at the head of, but also amongst, his people, and ask their audiences to share this vision of society through their inheritance of Alfred's kingdom from 'ancient days': 'Their cause, their courage, both are now your own.'⁴¹⁷ Alfred is both lofty and affable; he is able to skilfully demonstrate the social flexibility so important to representative law-making and this is made a crucial part of both his Saxon popularity and future legacy. All three plays work innovatively to present an Alfred in touch with and familiar to his subjects. In John O'Keeffe's *Alfred; or, The Magic Banner*, the playwright presents to his audience a light-hearted medley of Alfred myths, each of which celebrates the interactions between monarch and subject as productive of social harmony. Matters of popular politics emerge in the comedy, which evidences both Alfred's weight as a cultural product and his efficacy as a means of engaging with contemporary concerns. The chaos of Danish invasion provides a parallel to threatened French invasions of the late 1790s. Conflict, nonetheless, provides the opportunity for monarchical government to prove its legitimacy and demonstrate its effectiveness in uniting the people and protecting their lives and property. Cumberland's *Days of Yore* similarly gives its audience an Alfred at the head of Saxon society, engaged and influential in the everyday lives of his subjects. The Alfred of Cumberland's drama playfully engages with the concept of the king being the 'father of his people' by various surrogate and metaphorical paternal relationships. These include interactions with his adoptive son, the half-Danish Voltimar, and his protective, paternal intervention in the marriage politics of the Earl of Devonshire's daughter Adela. Here we see the enduring influence of the paternalism introduced by

⁴¹⁷ Richard Cumberland, *The Days of Yore* (London: C. Dilly, 1796), ii.

Fuller's *Son of Ethelwolf*. Throughout the play, Alfred proves both his own right to rule and the suitability of monarchical government to Saxon (and thereby, the suggestion is, to Georgian) society, through his public availability and wise mediation.

The Battle of Eddington: or, British Liberty by John Penn is perhaps the most overtly political of the three dramas and the playwright therefore addresses the social and private lives of its subjects more subtly than either O'Keefe or Cumberland. The play introduces a Saxon traitor as the chief source of Alfred's difficulties and evidences the fraught questions of loyalty and deception so prevalent during the time of its original composition. First written in 1792 yet unable to find a theatre willing to perform it, Penn rewrote his play in 1796 and, after eradicating most of the work's vocalised political debate and toning down its sense of fear and anxiety, saw it performed at the Haymarket on 28th March that year, then 23rd and 26th January and 10th May in 1797. The altered work provided a far less intellectual consideration of varying constitutional constructions, instead offering a celebratory drama, representing a series of brief but impactful incidents during Alfred's conflict with Danes and traitors. With the kidnap of Alfred's wife, Elsinha, forming the majority of the plot, the storyline provides numerous characters with the opportunity to show their loyalty and fight for the royal family, offering sterling examples of patriotism to the audience. The final message of the play is clear: social hierarchy should be accepted and the king can be trusted, as an individual and as a constitutional force, to maintain the happiness, safety and freedom of all. This chapter contains two sections: the first focusing upon *The Battle of Eddington* and Alfred's functioning as a symbol of political unity, the second centred on O'Keefe's *Alfred* and Cumberland's *Days of Yore*, identifying the king's importance for social cohesion.

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'The mid-1790s saw a new kind of political crisis in British politics, in which the Government of William Pitt was fighting a war on two fronts, against a republican enemy abroad and a small but highly organised network of popular radical societies at home.'⁴¹⁸ As shall be explored shortly, the concerns about internal fractures in the social and political fabric of the nation made themselves manifest in these plays through the appearance of traitors and unreliable vassals of the Saxon monarch. The Treason Trials, in which prominent members of the radical London Corresponding Society and Society for Constitutional Information were tried on a charge of high treason in 1794, accused Britons of threatening the life of the king. These trials 'brought the safety of the monarch to the forefront of the public's mind' and an audience encountering an imperilled Alfred on stage would have reminded audiences of the potential for regicide in their own time. Moreover, danger to the monarch was emphasised by the government as 'the best means of dramatising the threat the societies posed to the constitution.'⁴¹⁹ These plays, then, appeared in front of a public that were used to hearing about traitorous plots and designs on the king's life and were being nudged by the government into equating revolutionary and reformist ideas with regicide. Ceoloph's betrayal in Penn's *Battle of Eddington* would therefore have been encountered with this in mind and his desire to kill Alfred, rather than peacefully counter the Saxon's

⁴¹⁸ John Barrell, *Imagining the King's Death: Figurative Treason, Fantasies of Regicide 1793-1796* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 29. For an in-depth study of theatre in this period, see Frederick Burwick, *Playing to the Crowd: London Popular Theatre, 1780-1830* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

⁴¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 29; 129.

passionate defence of constitutional monarchy, perhaps equated with recent radicals on trial. In O’Keeffe’s much more light-hearted comedy, the over-zealous enforcing of the literal letter of the law in Eustace’s mistaken betrayal, discussed later, may also be a subtle engagement with the recent trials.

The middle years of the 1790s also saw an intensification of counter-revolutionary writing and an increase in patriotic plays and pageants. Prompted by the Treason and Seditious Meetings Acts the year before, 1796 in particular generated many ‘loyalist responses to the threat of resistance,’ including *A Vindication of the Privilege of the People* by George Chalmers, the anonymous tract *The Alarmist* and John Bowles’ vehement loyalism and attack on the LCS in the *True Briton*.⁴²⁰ On the stage, what Taylor calls a ‘rash of popular spectacles’ took advantage of a clear public demand for patriotic display. The popularity of patriotic militarism and tales of national glory generated ‘a concrete market which merged patriotic ideals with economics.’⁴²¹ Harris, the manager of Covent Garden where plays such as *England Preserved*, *British Fortitude and Hibernian Friendship*, *To Arms* and *Fall of Martinico*, as well as Cumberland’s *Days of Yore*, were performed, was a fervent loyalist and used his position to support the government and the monarchy. George III himself inspired a number of new works celebrating British militarism; *Rule Britannia* and *Britain’s Glory* were both performed at the Haymarket and inspired by the king’s naval review at Portsmouth in 1794. Old works were also revived with a more popular patriotic edge: the 1796 version of *Coriolanus* saw John Kemble deliberately emphasise the nobility of the Roman leader and

⁴²⁰ Ibid., 598.

⁴²¹ Taylor, *French Revolution*, 157; David Worrall, *Celebrity, Performance, Reception: British Georgian Theatre and Social Assemblage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 154.

‘ridicule the fickleness of the mob.’⁴²² These loyalist performances often worked by asserting that the stability and success of the British nation was a result of calm and rational tradition: ‘As patriotic dramas advocated hegemonic principles they avoided controversy and asserted normalcy in simple narratives of the triumph of the national and familial, the common sense and typical, over the crafty, sophisticated, perverted and un-British.’⁴²³ This ultimate victory of common sense and stability over tumultuous change is a key feature of all three Alfred plays in this cluster and justifies considering them amongst the loyalist works of the period.

However, it is also worth noting Worrall’s observation regarding theatrical displays of naval conflict in this period. ‘Throughout them all,’ Worrall writes, ‘the presence of social dissent and domestic fracture quickly arises within the dramas as a normal aspect of public life ready to be seamlessly included into theatrical commentary on Britain’s imperial conflicts and the progress of war with France.’⁴²⁴ Just like the plays Worrall considers, ‘domestic fracture’ is also a feature of both O’Keeffe and Cumberland’s plays, brought on by the pressures of Viking incursions. Both plays, however, make a point of the ease with which Alfred’s style of kingship and character overcomes these difficulties, crucially indentifying a strong and beneficent monarch as the one power able to mollify and rehabilitate wayward members of society. These Alfred plays did not shy away from demonstrating the threats and temptations of social disruption and change, but would make a point regarding how these were resolved.

⁴²² Taylor, *French Revolution*, 56.

⁴²³ *Ibid.*, 157-61.

⁴²⁴ Worrall, *Celebrity*, 153.

It is also worth highlighting the growing crisis in Ireland over the 1790s to add context to the positions of the Irish, newly-introduced into the Alfred story in 1796 by John Penn. Political tensions in Ireland and between Britain and Ireland had been growing throughout the century, but in the 1790s 'great seismic shifts in the political landscape' begin to occur. These include 'the patriot campaigns for free trade and legislative independence, the northern calls for parliamentary reform, and the Catholic Convention of December 1792,' not to mention rioting and violent deaths in 1793 and the 'vast insurrectionary movement' built up by the United Irishmen in the years preceding the failed French invasion of 1798. At this period in Ireland, dramatic and tragic events gave the impression 'that something in the social fabric had snapped.'⁴²⁵ Of particular interest in regards to Irish integration into the Alfred story is the fraught question of Irish Catholic armament. Since the American Revolution and continuing throughout the final quarter of the eighteenth century, the British government had traded increased freedoms for Catholics in exchange for Catholic contributions to the armed forces. 'These developments,' Helen Burke writes, 'reactivated the debate in the public sphere in which could be called the character question behind the broader Catholic Question: namely, could Catholics, and in particular the poorer type of Irish Catholic, be trusted with the full rights of citizenship, including, and most controversially, the right to bear arms?.'⁴²⁶ Mistrust of Catholic Irish character and intentions meant that 'Dis-arming [...] became the principal activity of the loyalist forces in the eighteen months

⁴²⁵ Ian McBride, *Eighteenth-Century Ireland: The Isle of Slaves* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2009), 227-9.

⁴²⁶ Helen Burke, 'The Catholic Question, Print Media and John O'Keeffe's 'The Poor Soldier' (1783)', *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 27, no.3 (2015), 428.

before the rebellion' (i.e. at the time of Penn's play in 1796).⁴²⁷ The sudden appearance of bands of Irish warriors in Alfred's Wessex at the time of Viking invasion, then, is clearly a development reflecting this troubled state of affairs. By looking at the way in which Penn finds a historical role for armed Irish in Britain's foundation myth, we can see how telling the Alfred story at this moment was a means of responding to, and potentially shaping, contemporary events.

O'Keeffe's connection with his home country, within his plays generally and within *Alfred* in particular, is much more difficult to tease out. 'O'Keeffe avoids completely the theme that is central to almost all of Anglo-Irish literature [...] the conflict between Ireland and England,' Kosok has demonstrated, 'He sometimes appears to go out of his way to evade this subject.'⁴²⁸ Burke suggests this is likely the result of 'complex and artful self-styling' common amongst Irish people keen to disavow connections with Catholic rebellion.⁴²⁹ Burke also draws attention, however, to the fact that O'Keeffe *was* willing to make a point about Irish identity in certain situations. We can certainly draw fruitful conclusions about O'Keeffe's attitude towards Anglo-Irish relations from *Alfred*, as Wehlau demonstrates. However, O'Keeffe deliberately chooses not to replicate the precedent of Irish introduction into the Alfred story set by Penn earlier in the year. This is despite O'Keeffe's *Recollections* actually demonstrating a personal interest in Irish connections with the Alfred story. Reflecting on a recent trial he witnessed in London, O'Keeffe says the experience was 'an honour to the English jury, and gave me a higher veneration for the memory of the Irish-educated Alfred

⁴²⁷ McBride, *Eighteenth-Century Ireland*, 229.

⁴²⁸ Heinz Kosok, 'George my beloved king, and Ireland my honoured country': John O'Keeffe and Ireland', *Irish University Review* 22, no.1 (1992), 48.

⁴²⁹ Burke, 'Catholic Question', 421.

the Great.⁴³⁰ It is easy to imagine how even a brief mention of Alfred's Irish connections could have been placed into the play. It is worth noting that no such reference is made.

Elsewhere in his *Recollections*, we can glean a small insight into O'Keeffe's motivations for writing about Alfred when laments the failure of his play:

On some well-known circumstances recorded of Alfred the Great, I formed a three-act play [...] but it had not much effect. It was played three nights, and then the audience furl'd up my tremendous Danish banner of the three ravens forever [...] Though my 'Alfred' had no great success, I deriv'd some comfort from the proud thought that in the time of King Bryan Borrou, at the decisive battle of Clontarf, the Danes were completely driven out of Ireland, by the regal chieftain, O'Keeffe, striking off the head of Magnus, the Danish standard-bearer, and taking the banner of the three ravens; thus destroying its magic power, by which the Danes lost all hopes and were ultimately discomfited.⁴³¹

In the first instance it is worth noting the description of the play as made up from a collection of 'well-known circumstances' of the Alfred story, supporting this chapter's claim that the comedy works as a kind of medley of popular Alfredian episodes. Secondly, O'Keeffe laments the relative failure of the piece, but once again draws pride from a personal, and a national, connection with Alfred the Great. This reflection serves as yet another example of the pervasiveness of the Saxon king across all peoples of the British Isles, and that his pan-British appeal was in some cases extending to Ireland.

O'Keeffe was one of George Colman's 'proven dramatists' at the Haymarket, featuring 'nearly every season.' This theatre was itself a location of theatrical innovation, with 15 out

⁴³⁰ John O'Keeffe, *Recollections of the Life of John O'Keeffe* vol.2 (London: Henry Colburn, 1826), 22.

⁴³¹ *Ibid.*, 346-7.

of 24 mainpieces in 1796, including Penn and O’Keeffe’s Alfred works, being newly-written plays.⁴³² It is fitting, therefore, to see two of the most experimental Alfred plays appearing here, which between them feature the introduction of the Irish and the first ever move into comedy. O’Keeffe in particular ‘worked always in popular genres’ and ‘turned out pieces to celebrate special occasions’, so his *Alfred* was almost certainly a sign of the king’s popularity amongst audiences and perhaps too an indication that the anniversary of the defeat of Hasten/Hastings was indeed in some people’s minds.⁴³³ The regular audience of the Haymarket is also worth considering, given the play’s interest in Saxon labourers. Colman’s theatre was mostly frequented by ‘the business-, crafts- and tradesmen, and their families, of the increasingly mercantile city’, as well as being part of a ‘process of deterritorialisation of fashionable practices and habits.’⁴³⁴ The context of this play in particular demonstrates that O’Keeffe’s version is ‘the Alfred story’ for the masses.

Alfred’s appearances throughout various other published works of the 1790s evidence an increased public interest in a reciprocal relationship with their monarch. The Saxon king is included far more frequently in texts whose aim is to educate the literate of Britain in how the nation was formed and how their place within it can be defined. Copied, plagiarised or reworked versions of earlier histories of Alfred the Great appear in miscellanies throughout the period, such as anonymous works *The Biographical Magazine: A Selection of Interesting Lives* (1791), *The Beauties of Biography, A Selection of the Lives of Eminent Men* (1792),

⁴³² William J. Burling, *Summer Theatre in London, 1661-1820, and the Rise of the Haymarket Theatre* (London: Associated University Presses, 2000), 174.

⁴³³ Olive Baldwin and Thelma Wilson, ‘O’Keeffe, John (1747-1833), playwright’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Sep 23, 2004, accessed Jan 29 2021, <https://www-oxforddnb-com.libproxy.york.ac.uk/view/10/1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128>.

⁴³⁴ Taylor, *French Revolution*, 13; Worrall, *Celebrity*, 21.

Early Blossoms of Genius and Virtue (1797) and Alexander Bicknell's *Instances of the Mutability of Fortune* (1792). Instructional Alfred texts intended for 'youth' also proliferated and were increasingly written by female authors, itself a noteworthy development of the late eighteenth century. Demonstrating that Alfred was no longer only a role model of elite males, Mary Pilkington enthusiastically declared that Alfred's story provides 'instances of humanity [which] are delightful even in contemplation.'⁴³⁵ Sarah Trimmer includes Alfred in her list of figures worthy of emulation, concluding 'He was very pleasing in his manner, and had an open engaging countenance, and an air of great dignity.'⁴³⁶ Priscilla Wakefield proclaimed that the 'beneficial effects' of Alfred's reign are 'felt to this day, and endears his memory to posterity, as the universal benefactor of mankind.'⁴³⁷ James Alderson even instructed his readers in the use of the accusative case through the following example: 'Alfred, *than whom* a greater king never reigned.'⁴³⁸

Perhaps the most suggestive and endearing instance of the king's greatness occurs in Harriet English's *Conversations and Amusing Tales* of 1799. As 'Mrs Abney' turns to a small group of children and asks them to tell her 'by whom maps were first invented', one of the youngsters, Elizabeth, responds confidently: 'I have lately been reading the reign of the great Alfred. I do not recollect that it is mentioned there; but his genius was so universal; that I should think it probable Alfred had introduced this invention.'⁴³⁹ In this passage, the ubiquity of the name of Alfred in the minds of the British public is effectively and, perhaps

⁴³⁵ Mary Pilkington, *A Mirror for the Female Sex* (London: Vernor and Hood, 1798), 125.

⁴³⁶ Sarah Trimmer, *The History of England, for Youth* (London: William Jones, 1793), 23-4.

⁴³⁷ Priscilla Wakefield, *Leisure Hours: Or Entertaining Dialogues* vol.2 (London: Darton and Harvey, 1794), 29-30.

⁴³⁸ James Alderson, *English Grammatical Exercises* (London: C.D. Pignenit, 1795), 106.

⁴³⁹ Harriet English, *Conversations and Amusing Tales* vol.2 (London: Hatchard, 1799), 247.

also satirically, suggested. His name, the details of his reign and the nature of his character are all understood by this educated young girl. The importance of her age and gender should not be disregarded as Elizabeth's knowledge of Alfred through private study produces tacit approval in her mentor. It is apparent that to the literate of the late eighteenth century, Alfred was an accessible historical figure for youth. His reputation as a beneficial innovator is instantly known and the fact that Alfred is a go-to answer for invention carries with it a hint of good-natured satire on the king's ubiquity. Elizabeth, incidentally, learns that cartography was not invented by 'the great Alfred.' Nevertheless, this conversation recognises the inescapable presence of the king as a cultural phenomenon.

Alfred was a frequent presence in the lives of ordinary people in the 1790s, and he was increasingly invoked in civic, educational and political contexts as a monarch who contributed enormously to all levels of society. Whether creating a constitution uniquely able to appeal to all or providing a model of virtuous character, Alfred the Great was a cultural phenomenon increasingly conceived of as a figure able to represent every British subject. This mass public appeal is what enables the following plays to deploy Alfred as such a powerful unifying force. These texts work as confirmation of beliefs already held, and this assumption of comprehension, an assumption that the audience already know who Alfred is and what he stands for, is responsible for fuelling both the comedic parody of O'Keeffe and the ardent loyalism of Penn.

Political Unity in John Penn's *The Battle of Eddington*

The driving force behind each of the three plays in this cluster is a defence of the social cohesion provided by Britain's social hierarchy, with Alfred vindicating the role of the monarch. This is the primary distinction between my work and that of Wehlau.⁴⁴⁰ *The Battle of Eddington*, revised and republished in 1796, focuses upon political unity, with King Alfred leading a combined English and Welsh force against the Vikings, ensuring Scottish and Irish support as the plot progresses. The inclusion of British forces, not just Saxons, is a brand new innovation on the part of John Penn, and would inspire others at the start of the nineteenth century to make Alfred's salvation of Wessex a pan-British occasion.

As many critics including Worrall have observed, the theatre in the 1790s presented the British public with unique opportunities of social mingling; a rare space, comparable only perhaps to church, in which all members of society could be found. The theatre consequently served: 'as a metaphor mirroring the politics of national life, the boundaries between public and private in the playhouse was a surrogate of the debate between nomination and representation in English political structures.'⁴⁴¹ *The Battle of Eddington* demonstrates the relevance and critical importance that Alfred and his constitution should hold to every individual inside the theatre, regardless of rank or wealth. Penn uses the figure of the king to tie all members of the social strata together in a harmonious collective whilst reinforcing the political boundaries Worrall identifies. The figure of Alfred justifies the

⁴⁴⁰ See introduction, pages 19-21, for further comparison with Wehlau's study.

⁴⁴¹ David Worrall, *Theatrical Revolution: Drama, Censorship and Romantic Period Subcultures 1773-1832* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 9-10.

constitutional status quo and persuades all social classes to celebrate and support it in defiance of revolutionary principles.

Penn wastes no time in making his intentions clear, with a thinly disguised, politically motivated prologue. As Wehlau has shown, 'The construction of the state is enacted on stage [...] side boxes, house and gallery are addressed separately, each representing their class in British society and each enjoined to 'see', to 'observe' how their own interests are best fulfilled by the government originated with Alfred.'⁴⁴² First, the wealthy occupants of the boxes:

You to whom rank and fortune grant on earth
 A power unrivall'd to encourage worth;
 See to what cause ye owe the prosperous state.

Next, 'looking round the house', the prologue's speaker addresses those occupied in 'arts', 'industry', 'the land' and 'distant markets', instructing them to:

Observe the fortune of that glorious day,
 Since which the laws all equally obey;
 Have rous'd your enterprize, and bid you feel
 Your own advantage in the public weal.

Finally, 'to the gallery', those 'on whose support our state relies', the prologue has a message of gratitude and a promise of protection:

See how that honour'd government arose
 Which ever has secur'd and will secure,

⁴⁴² Wehlau, 'Alfred', 804.

Alike from violence the rich and poor;
And both of ease and freedom, gives you more,
With comfort join'd, than had been felt before.⁴⁴³

In this calculated construction of the theatrical space as, in Worrall's words 'a metaphor mirroring the politics of national life', the story of Alfred's victory at Edington in 878 becomes synonymous with the constitution enjoyed by all in the 1790s. What will be presented onstage is not just a historical recreation of military success, but the origin of the nation's laws to which all in the theatre owe their contentment and security. The play's full title, after all, makes this connection explicit: *The Battle of Eddington; or, British Liberty*. To talk about the events of Edington means to talk about liberty itself. Victory over the Danes is presented to the audience as a 'cause', 'that glorious day', to which all the benefits in their lives can be attributed. And as this liberty is individualised, Alfred is presented as a social and political champion to whom the prosperous can trace their good fortune, the middling classes their enterprise and the poor their security and freedom.

The play which follows tells the story of Edington through the well-established trope of a symbolic capture and liberation of Alfred's wife Elswitha, itself metonymically representative of wider national salvation. Where Penn's play wildly diverges from established Alfredian tradition, however, is with the introduction of the traitorous Saxon nobleman Ceoluph. Betrayal has never featured in any of the Alfred literature of the eighteenth century so far, and its presence in all three of these plays shows the strong influence of revolutionary fears and pervading public concern over disruptive and disloyal radical behaviour. As Philp has

⁴⁴³ John Penn, *The Battle of Eddington; or, British Liberty* (London: Elmsley, 1796), 13-4.

shown, 'Loyalists' commitments were broadly to king, constitution and country, and they were able to see reformers as tantamount to a foreign threat, which did not require refutation in detail so much as repudiation in general.⁴⁴⁴ We see this loyalist repudiation of the reformist (and therefore traitorous) Ceoluph taking effect in Penn's play, and of these three plays *The Battle of Eddington* deals most forthrightly with fears of revolution, making the divergent political beliefs of Ceoluph a critical part of the national crisis. The original 1792 version of the play is rife with terror and suspicion, providing alarming scenes of imminent national destruction and personal suffering. There is no evidence to suggest why Penn's first attempt failed to find a theatre willing to perform it, but at a time when Cumberland's *Richard II* was deemed 'extremely unfit for representation at a time when the Country is full of Alarm', Penn's offering may well have met the same resistance.⁴⁴⁵ His 1796 rewrite, however, is far more celebratory, sliding much more comfortably into the milieu of confident counter-revolutionary fiction so prevalent at this time.

Act 1 sees a united force of English Saxons and Welsh Britons successfully repelling the Danish skirmishes, but big questions remain about the status of the Irish, recently conquered by the Danes and now serving as mercenaries to the invaders. The role of the Irish in this play is excellently examined by Wehlau. The act ends with a political debate between Alfred and Ceoluph, in which the Saxon nobleman encourages Alfred to use the conflict to seize despotic control over the country. Rebuffed by the king's unyielding faith in constitutional monarchy, Ceoluph reveals his traitorous intent to the audience and throughout the second act puts his scheme of kidnapping Queen Elsitha into action. Far

⁴⁴⁴ Mark Philp, *Reforming Ideas in Britain: Politics and Language in the Shadow of the French Revolution, 1789-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 97.

⁴⁴⁵ Worrall, *Theatric Revolution*, 110.

from the dangerously effective traitor of the 1792 edition, however, Ceoluph is made out to be ineffective and his ideology reduced to mere opportunism. By the middle of the third act he is abandoned by his Irish allies. A now united force of inhabitants of the British Isles, led by Alfred, saves Elsitha from captivity and restores justice under the monarchy. The final scene sees Alfred victoriously projecting his vision for the nation and promising to establish the constitutional monarchy so pointedly drawn to the audience's attention in the play's prologue.

The political allegory of Penn's play is unavoidable and it has a marked effect upon the characterisation of Alfred. By matching the king with Ceoluph and having to defend his political system, Penn makes Alfred not just the institutor of British freedom in the ninth century, but also its champion in the eighteenth. Alfred fights less for his immediate liberation from the Danes and more for the freedom of ordinary people almost a millennium in the future: '[B]e assured, if any recompence / Of public services to me were grateful, / It were that Britons should, in future, say, / 'Alfred established here the ancient jury'.⁴⁴⁶ Legitimacy, longevity and legacy are top of his mind.

The play also stresses the importance of individual loyalty to the figure of the king, echoing the themes presented in the prologue and asserting the reciprocity inherent in a system of monarchy. 'Know', Elsitha proclaims to Editha, a simple cottager who wishes she had more power to aid the king, 'loyalty in dangerous times like these, / Honours, however helpless,

⁴⁴⁶ Penn, *Eddington*, 40-1.

those who feel it, / And merits gratitude from all that's virtuous.'⁴⁴⁷ Dialogue like this, present throughout the play, serves to strengthen the contract between monarch and subject, conveying echoes of Burkean loyalty, in which support for royal institutions is an impulse 'felt' by individuals.

The Battle of Eddington is a proudly conservative text and its revolutionary villain is written so that he fits the stereotypical Jacobin antagonist present in much counter-revolutionary fiction. The Jacobinism present in anti-Jacobin novels, Grenby writes, 'had no identity of its own, but was always only a cover for something else. This might be personal libertinism, the desire to grow rich at the expense of others, or sometimes merely personal spite. New philosophy was nothing but empty words, had no shape or substance independent of the debauched will that directed it.'⁴⁴⁸ In this strain, Ceoluph's constitutional ideas are shown to be merely a cover for his own ambition and greed. At the start of the confrontation with Alfred, Ceoluph actually professes loyalty to the king and proposes a military coup in order to 'compel the people to adopt / What laws thou wilt.' Such a move, he believes, will 'prove that Ceoluph / May be suspected, but was ever loyal.' The nobleman disguises his personal ambition in a show of dedication to the king. However, Alfred instantly counters this despotic idea: 'Our maxims differ wide.' The king, instead, pledges that he will restore trial by jury, as only a first step in establishing British freedom, and that he seeks only 'wholesome change / Which springs from peace and unanimity.' Misinterpreting Alfred's wishes as a promise of pure democracy, Ceoluph conducts an about-face and backs this radical reform:

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid., 29.

⁴⁴⁸ Matthew Grenby, *The Anti-Jacobin Novel: British Conservatism and the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 124-5.

Did I, as clearly know that government
Thy wisdom plans, as this divulged intention,
I should not hesitate, my liege, to affirm
What rights consist with it, or what possess
Too uncongenial natures to endure it.⁴⁴⁹

In this speech, Penn has actually weakened Ceoluph's support for democracy in comparison to the 1792 version, in which his enthusiasm for near anarchy was apparent: 'Now, now, let liberty unbounded rule / These happy fields!.'⁴⁵⁰ By Ceoluph's transformation, Penn indicates that despotism and democracy are two sides of the same coin. The Saxon nobleman is shown to be only interested in personal gain, and willing to latch on to and promote any political philosophy from which he might benefit. Again, to refer to Grenby, 'Literary anti-Jacobinism, then, did not think of itself as waging a war against ideas, but against a more worrying menace still – the absence of any guiding principle whatsoever.'⁴⁵¹ Ceoluph's argument here does not persuade Alfred, who steadfastly backs a constitutional monarchy and deems any deviation an assault on liberty. Frustrated with lack of progress, Ceoluph's true threat becomes apparent in the next scene: 'I see how likely is my suit to prosper [...] My obedience / Thou hast once more, 'tis after that – revenge.' Whereas in 1792, Ceoluph's arguments for non-constitutional government are heard, in 1796 the force of the nobleman's argument is undercut immediately as his real intentions are swiftly revealed. In the form of the 'revolutionary' Ceoluph, the sham of despotism and the sham of democracy are revealed as one and the same lie. Alfred, conversely, is a solid and unyielding

⁴⁴⁹ Penn, *Eddington*, 39-41.

⁴⁵⁰ Penn, *The Battle of Eddington; or, British Liberty* (London: Elmsley, 1792), 38.

⁴⁵¹ Grenby, *Anti-Jacobin Novel*, 75.

beacon for the union of 'King, lords, and commons'; he is steadfast and principled, grounded firmly in his constitutional convictions.⁴⁵²

Ceoluph's death, tellingly absent from the play's first edition, brings closure and finality to the dangerous ideas he was introducing into the kingdom. His final words are themselves recycled conservative ideology, and urge his followers, and indeed the audience, not to make the same mistakes he did:

Beware of those, who, by the lure of reason,
 Would draw them to destruction. Nay, and urge them
 Ev'n to distrust their own self-counsel'd thoughts,
 Prompting precarious change.

The message of this defeated and humiliated traitor's final words is unmistakable: respect your place in society and don't be envious of others. Alfred is on hand immediately to reaffirm the lesson: 'let his judicious counsel / Sink in your souls, and prove your future guide.'⁴⁵³ In truth, the play does not effectively present any kind of ideological conflict. It conforms to the pattern in the decade's literature that: 'by the mid-1790s the Revolution was indeed no longer debatable ground [...] but a battlefield already taken.'⁴⁵⁴

The important question of Penn's rewritten play is not what kind of government Britain should have – constitutional monarchy, overwhelmingly, has taken that field – but how far the collective British characters are willing to go to defend it. What we can trace in the

⁴⁵² Penn, *Eddington*, 42-4.

⁴⁵³ *Ibid.*, 94-5.

⁴⁵⁴ Grenby, *Anti-Jacobin Novel*, 34.

changes between Penn's two versions of *The Battle of Eddington*, is the transformation from ideological anxiety to national resolve. In the former state, Alfred is the leader of counter-revolutionary thought, steadfast and unyielding, but nevertheless under threat from both powerful individuals who think differently and a changeable populace available for manipulation. In the latter, the ideological political battle is over; Alfred's enemy Ceoluph is weak and ridiculous. An external threat still remains, however, and in Penn's 1796 version, constitutional debate is replaced with questions of national cohesion. Alfred's mission, in this text, is to bring his people together to face a common enemy.

The drama's final words seek to confirm the hierarchical social structure which will be the resultant blessing of Alfred's great new constitution. But first, the king reflects on the turmoil of conflict in a speech heavy in the lexicon of domesticity:

To bear the weather's worst inclemencies,
Or find, at most, in some half-ruin'd hovel,
Or hut, a shelter from the raging storm,
Each will be lodg'd beneath his roof again,
And mansions which the Danes have long possess'd
Are open to receive us; there repose
Will be just as welcome.⁴⁵⁵

Alfred's words frame the conflict as a tale of domestic upheaval. Instead of enjoying the private pleasure of their own homes, the king's soldiers and friends have been forced into 'half-ruin'd hovel[s]' and 'hut[s]', not suitable for their station. According to Alfred's legend, of course, the king himself was forced to seek shelter amongst the commoners of Athelney,

⁴⁵⁵ Penn, *Eddington*, 103.

although this particular tale is not related in Penn's play. Alfred's promise that 'Each will be lodg'd beneath his roof again' conjures the image of comforting, homely bliss, where each individual feels proud and safe in their property ownership once again. As will be seen later in the chapter, the loyalist lexicon of property ownership and the pride Britons could take in the security of their homes was contrasted with the seizures of the French National Assembly. Consequently, the great eviction which Viking invasion has caused is framed as disruptive not only to individuals but also the social order and British principles of liberty. The promise that each will be beneath his own roof once again therefore carries with it a reassertion of hierarchy and proper social place. The sense of domestic stability, proud ownership and belonging, reinstated only by Alfred's victory, clearly celebrates conservative constructions of the British state, and Alfred is used here to reaffirm the strength, joy and longevity of these principles.

Tension regarding Ireland's position within Britain can be seen in the edits made to Penn's 1796 script by the Lord Chamberlain. At the end of the play, the Irish soldiers are offered the protection of Alfred's men. Alfred's original line read: 'Rest you, brave Irishmen, protected here, subjects of England.' In the published version, the vassalation of the Irish is made less chafingly direct: 'You, men of Ireland, rest protected here,/ Awhile our subjects.'⁴⁵⁶ There is nothing changed about Irish allegiance, but their connection is made less explicit and the qualifier of 'awhile' throws the longevity of the arrangement into some doubt. The Irish

⁴⁵⁶ John Penn, *The Battle of Eddington; or, British Liberty*, n.p.. Eighteenth Century Drama, accessed December 01, 2020. http://www.eighteenthcenturydrama.amdigital.co.uk.libproxy.york.ac.uk/Documents/Details/HL_LA_mssLA1151.

become temporary subjects of Alfred himself, not necessarily bound to England in perpetuity.

Another quite minor change worth dwelling on is Marven's assessment of a hierarchical society as, originally, 'Alfred's justice.' After editing by John Larpent, this becomes 'Alfred's wisdom.'⁴⁵⁷ The subtle shift changes the idea of social hierarchy into an objective right, something that Alfred was clever enough to identify rather than invent himself. It suggests that this conservative tenet is unquestionably correct and Alfred's wisdom comes in identifying it as such.

In many ways, Penn's play takes the spotlight away from Alfred and turns it upon Ceoluph and the people forced to respond to his coup attempt. The king himself is physically absent for most of the play, with the action instead revolving around the traitors, the queen, her guards and the Irish mercenaries. It is a tale of response, of duty, of loyalty; the play establishes Alfred as a respectable, loved, benevolent monarch and then seeks to test its characters in their affection towards the king and display how they act upon that loyalty. Unlike its predecessor, *The Battle of Eddington* of 1796 seeks to reassure its audience by displaying the strengths and successes of loyalist feelings. It shows a thinly disguised historical Britain encountering the same threats of the 1790s and surmounting them with fortitude and unity under the king's name. After Alfred's promise that: 'The British constitution shall arise', the various nations come together in a proudly united kingdom:

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid.

They look on each other with admiration. The English, Scots, Welch, and Irish following in procession, in their respective arms and dresses.⁴⁵⁸

Social Cohesion in Cumberland's *Days of Yore* and O'Keeffe's *Alfred*

The notion of Alfred, and, by extension, the figure of the monarch, as a glue for social and national cohesion is the most dominant theme in Cumberland's *The Days of Yore*. Wehlau discusses the conflicted loyalty of Voltimar in this play, torn between his adoptive and monarchical father Alfred and his biological father Hastings. She reads into this a symbolic choice for the people of Ireland, who have to demonstrate their loyalty to the British monarch against an invading force (Danish/French) in order for the nation to maintain its cohesion and survive. In this interpretation, Alfred's adoptive and monarchical 'fatherhood' triumphs and the Irish are integrated into the wider British national story. In this brief consideration of Cumberland's drama, however, I am particularly concerned with Alfred's social role. Like all three plays in this cluster, *The Days of Yore* is neither named after Alfred nor really about him, but he provides for British society the glue which unites all members in a single national mission. It is a role which Alfred himself in Penn's original 1792 play described as: 'A firmer power to fix its [society's] scatter'd parts, / To hold them join'd, as from a common centre.'⁴⁵⁹ Alfred does this by folding the potentially conflicted Voltimar into his ranks and family, but also by proving himself to be of social use to the daughter of Earl Oddune, Adela.

⁴⁵⁸ Penn, *Eddington*, 104. It is worth noting that this line contains another subtle Larpent edit; Penn's original read: 'They look on each other astonish'd.' This is a clear strengthening of patriotic and unified intent. The peoples of the British Isles are no longer surprised at their shared endeavour, but impressed and further determined by their new sense of community.

⁴⁵⁹ Penn, *Eddington* (1792), 39.

Cumberland emphasises this social peace-making element of Alfred's duties as distinct from his martial role through the words of Lord Roger de Malvern: 'Who says that Alfred is a mighty conqueror, gives him but half his praise: he is a peace-maker by natural choice, a warrior by necessity.' Additionally, Alfred himself proclaims that his chief joy comes from bringing happiness to his people: 'much it glads me when my friends and nobles live in such love and concord with each other.'⁴⁶⁰ In addition to winning the conflict against the Danes, Cumberland's Alfred demonstrates his worth by resolving all the relational troubles of the play's various characters. He does so through both his magnanimity and, crucially, the power of his influence over individuals.

Adela has to choose between marrying the Saxon Alric, her father's preference, or her true love the Viking Voltimar. When news of a forthcoming visit from Alfred reaches the Earl, he tells her that the wedding will be conducted by their monarch: 'your king, who is his people's father, will be your's, and join your hand to Alric's.'⁴⁶¹ Not only does this announcement echo the continual references to Alfred as the nation's father that proliferate this play, the linguistic flexibility of the term 'father' also demonstrates a king who is active in the social lives of his subjects. When Adela gets the chance, she appeals to Alfred to overturn her father's decision and allow her to marry Voltimar. Her speech recognises Alfred not just as a political superior, but also a force for social good:

You are all goodness, Sir; the power that Heaven has put into your hands, you, as Heaven's almoner, dispense so bounteously, that misery flies to you as a friend, and every child of sorrow owns you for its father. I have ventur'd to lift up my eyes towards your's, and I have

⁴⁶⁰ Cumberland, *Days*, 44; 23.

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

there discover'd beams of such mild benevolence, that I perceive, where you are present, fear cannot inhabit even in my woman's heart.⁴⁶²

Alfred undertakes his task as 'Heaven's almoner' flawlessly, ensuring that Adela marries the man she wishes to and that her father is happy with her choice. He demonstrates that no subject is too small for his consideration and, for Cumberland's audience, that a king is capable of having a positive impact upon the lives of commoners. Adela praises Alfred: 'I stand in wonder at your goodness, and blush to think that any thought of me should occupy a mind, where a whole nation's interests are repos'd.'⁴⁶³ In this case, a king provides an independent court of ultimate arbitration, one capable of balancing all interests and ensuring happiness amongst his people.

Throughout the play Alfred is also described by Voltimar in near-religious terms: 'I keep the seas for Alfred; I pay him tribute of the spoil I take; and when I flesh my hook I do pronounce his name three times for luck, and then the silly fry come to the bait religiously, and I catch them.' The devotional invocation of Alfred's name three times will bring the speaker luck, or so Voltimar claims. The language of his expression of loyalty to Alfred in this section is laden with devotional terms; 'tribute,' 'flesh' and 'religiously' all give the sense of Alfred's influence as almost supernatural. A similar all-encompassing statement of identity is made when Voltimar's loyalty to Alfred is challenged by the Danish chief Gothrun: 'Go, get you gone! why do you peer at me, and listen to my talk? I am for Alfred, I.'⁴⁶⁴ The repetition of 'I' implies a straightforward and exhaustive means of identification. Voltimar is entirely

⁴⁶² Ibid., 28.

⁴⁶³ Ibid., 30.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid., 5.

‘for Alfred.’ Of all three plays considered in this chapter, *Days of Yore* is most keen to express a completely uncompromising loyalty from a subject to a monarch. As Alric summarises: ‘Who wou’d not die for such a generous master, faultless himself, he is all candor to the faults of others, and lives amongst us like a descended angel, sent to reform our errors by the example of his own perfections.’⁴⁶⁵

In *Alfred; or, The Magic Banner*, John O’Keeffe uniquely uses Alfred’s story to stage humorous and satirical situations that work through the prevailing social and political questions of the late 1790s. The setting of the ravaged Saxon proto-nation provides the social upheaval necessary to address matters of national cohesion, ideologies of distinct social roles and an accessible, popularised monarchy. Like in Cumberland’s *Days of Yore*, Alfred’s personality and kingship affects the lives and storylines of every character in the play – an accessibility and affability clearly inspired by George III’s own style of monarchy. O’Keeffe presents a witty compilation, a medley of Alfredian myths, to present a king who is endearingly human, paternally protective and intimately available to every member of his society, regardless of rank or status.

The first act witnesses the effects of war with the Danish upon the various characters of the play: the carpenter Gog and his wife Bertha; their daughter Blanche; Eustace, her betrothed; the Danish standard bearer Sweno; and the indolent, self-absorbed Earl Burrhed and his frustrated wife Lady Albina. Gog and Bertha, standing in for the traditional figures of the neatherd/shepherd and his wife on Athelney, are members of England’s simple but

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid., 37.

industrious working poor. They evidence a much more socially-minded approach to Alfred's subjects than any previous depiction and exist as characters in their own right, struggling with the problems of inhabiting the lowest rank in society. Gog's appeal comes from his simplicity and frank honesty. He is matched against Earl Burrhed, whose social and domestic failings are continually brought into sharp light by Gog's earnest challenges to his superior status. Unfortunately for Gog, his unsuitability for high social status is made evident in multiple scenes in which he is outwitted by other characters - not least when Burrhed tricks him into locking himself into his own stocks.

Alfred is introduced victoriously in the third scene, having just defeated the Danish general Hubba. He is in the process of procuring a peace settlement (c.f. post-Battle of Edington in 878) when Viking reinforcements arrive under the leadership of the Briton Hastings (c.f. Alfred's conflict with Hastein in 892). As shall be seen shortly, the historical fluidity of the plot forms a crucial element of O'Keefe's accessible Alfred by presenting a collection of the king's most famous moments, irrespective of the timeline. O'Keefe is also at pains to present Alfred as a national unifier, incorporating all classes, factions and genealogies under his banner. This is most effectively and creatively achieved through Alfred's adoptive son, the native Briton Eustace, whose 'natural' father, it transpires, is Alfred's opponent Hastings. Eustace brings the notions of paternal kingship and adoptive nationhood to the forefront of the play's military conflict by rejecting an alliance with Hastings and swearing loyalty to Alfred.

Act 2 mostly pursues the more comical storylines of O’Keeffe’s play, which variously include Blanche’s outwitting of her captor Sweno and Lady Albina’s manipulation of Gog, who is made to believe she will marry him in an attempt to reform the wayward interests of her husband, Earl Burrhed. Crucially, however, Alfred is not excluded from these light-hearted scenes and O’Keeffe’s humorous interpretation of two key moments of the Alfred myth take part in the midst of these more playful episodes. It also provides the audience with a relatable and consciously whimsical characterisation of Alfred who can play a significant role in his subjects’ daily interactions. Firstly, as Wehlau has observed, O’Keeffe offers a reversal of the bread-breaking episode, when Alfred’s enemy Hastings unknowingly offers the disguised king a drink of life-saving water.⁴⁶⁶ The second instance invokes the disguised visit to the peasant’s cottage and the burning of the cakes, which will be considered in detail later.

Finally, the third act sees the resolution of the social chaos instigated by conflict and the restoration of a functional social hierarchy. Victory is brought about through a combined effort of the Saxon characters. Possession of the ‘magic banner’ of the original title, proclaimed as vital to the Danish morale, is contested throughout the play and is eventually captured by the carpenter’s daughter Blanche, assisted by the court fool Hollybush. The importance of this symbolic triumph achieved by the non-fighting, non-noble elements of society coheres with Alfred and his soldiers’ military victory to stress the significance of united social forces. The play concludes with the Saxon king standing aloft as the affectionately admired figurehead of a unified national endeavour.

⁴⁶⁶ Wehlau, ‘Alfred’, 809.

'Can I Reach Again the Isle of Athelney': O'Keeffe's Alfred Medley

Alfred's appearances in the play are less of an attempt to tell a chronological story of the king's life than a collection of Alfred's most famous moments, consciously arranged to capitalise upon Britons' familiarity with his story. O'Keeffe demonstrates a cavalier approach to the Alfred story, blending parts of the myth into a fluctuating melange of events. When told of the approach of Danish warriors, Alfred asks himself: 'Can I reach again the Isle of Athelney.'⁴⁶⁷ The fact that Alfred, who is at this moment in disguise and sheltering in a cottage, should strictly already be on Athelney is inconsequential to the play's plot. This chronological flexibility is indicative of O'Keeffe's comedy. 'The play was not,' Keynes observes, 'intended to serve a serious purpose, for as the theme became more familiar so too did it become fair game for satire, pantomime, and farce.'⁴⁶⁸ It is unclear as to what precisely the form of this Alfred story is; whether a retelling of history, a collection of Alfred's 'best bits' or even an attempt at a fictional sequel. The events of the Alfred story are anachronistically accumulated with little consistency, unashamedly self-referential and continually fluctuating. Like all caricature, O'Keeffe's *Alfred* 'depends upon the viewer's physical proximity to and personal knowledge of the subject who is lampooned' – in this case, an extensive awareness of the Alfred story.⁴⁶⁹ The familiarity of the scenes to the audience and the popular recognition of elements of the plot would have helped to build the sense of farce itself, as a comic caricature of the hallowed Alfred. This approach alone suggests that the Alfred story is popular and well-established in the cultural consciousness.

⁴⁶⁷ John O'Keeffe, *The Dramatic Works of John O'Keeffe Esq.* 4 vols. (London: T. Woodfall, 1798), 4:237.

⁴⁶⁸ Keynes, 'Alfred', 289.

⁴⁶⁹ Amelia Rauser, *Caricature Unmasked: Irony, Authenticity and Individualism in Eighteenth-Century English Prints* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2008), 17.

The most striking characteristic of this unique medley is the deliberate portrayal of the inherent ridiculousness of some elements of the Alfred story, including the burnt cakes. Bertha, whose cakes are burned, is comically direct and physical: 'You idle lazy dolt, get you gone out of my doors *pushes him.*' Throughout the play, there is little attempt on O'Keeffe's part to maintain the kind of inherent nobility so commonly deployed earlier in the century. Previously, Alfred's royal dignity has enabled the cottagers to sense Alfred's true identity and save their, and the king's, blushes. Uniquely, O'Keeffe allows Alfred's visit to the cottage to descend into farce. Bertha's husband Gog arrives shortly after the burning and accuses his wife of adultery with Alfred: 'yes, I see its a love affair.'⁴⁷⁰ Through such moments, Alfred's actions are given a distinct undignified edge. For his part, he ignores all such negative comments and keeps his mind occupied on his kingdom.

Alfred exhibits frequent moments of confused behaviour and a certain lack of judgement. He is often bumbling and pushed around by other characters – literally in the case of Bertha's rebuke. Any sense of stately composure is completely absent: this is a humanised king, who is at various moments in the play injured, thirsty, tired, scolded, panicked, paranoid and capable of making significant mistakes. These final traits are most evident in Alfred's interactions with his adoptive son Eustace. Although O'Keeffe never labours the point like Penn or Cumberland, questions of loyalty and treachery run throughout the play and account for a large proportion of the king's vulnerability. When he hears of the arrival of Danish reinforcements, Alfred's previously composed and imperious manner switches almost immediately to distressed paranoia:

⁴⁷⁰ O'Keeffe, *Works*, 4:236-8.

Eustace! – say how has the coast been guarded – where was Earl Burrhed’s care? this his vigilance! His scouts from Corfe did they sleep, or were they bribed to treachery? And Eustace where hast thou been?⁴⁷¹

This quick-fire questioning, punctuated frequently with panicked exclamations, presents the image of a king unable to distinguish between incompetence and malice. Alfred is left confused and uninformed, bewildered by the actions of his supporters and outmanoeuvred by his enemies. Although the stakes of political betrayal are toned down from other 1796 plays, the presence of treasonous acts is nevertheless indicative of the pervading atmosphere of national paranoia. Alfred is, however, not imagining the role of wayward members of his society. Burrhed’s thoughts are not concerned with protecting his monarch and it transpires that Eustace was neglectfully courting Bertha’s daughter Blanche instead of standing at his king’s side. Alfred does regain a moment of dignity, though, when he chastises the young man: ‘(with severity) Pleasure may be the happiness of vice, but happiness is the sure pleasure of virtue.’⁴⁷² But this stern rebuke follows somewhat incongruously from Alfred’s previous words of panic. The moment is indicative of Alfred’s portrayal throughout the play; he is somewhat incoherent, fluctuating between the dignified Alfred and the typically confused statesman of satirical comedy. He is capable of delivering panic and proverbs just seconds apart. The king falls something of a victim to O’Keeffe’s style and the expectations of the comic stage, both of which deploy misunderstanding as a necessary part of their humour. With so many hilarious mistakes, the very nature of comedy does not allow an infallible Alfred.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid., 4:210.

⁴⁷² Ibid.

O’Keeffe’s innovatively light-hearted presentation of the ‘highlights’ of Alfred’s reign is best demonstrated in moments where Alfred’s legal reputation comes to the forefront. Far from a controversial constitutional issue, Alfred’s lawmaking is treated with little reverence; it escapes neither exaggeration nor caricature. In order to provoke jealousy in her husband, Albina and the court fool Hollybush construct the lie that, prior to her marriage, Albina promised to be the wife of Gog. As Gog considers what action to take, he is urged to consider the implications of Alfred’s law code:

Holly. Then Gog she really promised to marry you?

Alb. Yes; but what are promises.

Holly. By King Alfred’s new law, they are solemn contracts.

Gog. (*pauses*) Solemn contract! – Was her bare promise so very binding! – it was – The Baron has married my wife – She’s my betrothed.

Having been convinced of his claim to Lady Albina’s hand in marriage, Gog once again refers to Alfred as his enabler: ‘Alfred is a just King, he’ll give her to me.’⁴⁷³ These moments echo Cumberland’s *Days of Yore*, in which Adela rests her hopes of being rescued from an unpleasant engagement on Alfred’s sense of justice. Cumberland’s play uses Alfred to emphasise the king’s social role and bring attention to the beneficial intervention the monarch can have in the lives of ordinary people. In listening to Adela’s wishes, he is presented as an independent judge, fair, knowledgeable and righteous, unaffected by faction or party by the very nature of his constitutional position. He is able to provide those without a voice a chance to present their case and seek justice. That an ordinary carpenter such as Gog can have recourse to the independent judgment of the king is a glowing testament to the constitutional role of a monarch. However, the ludicrous scene above

⁴⁷³ *Ibid.*, 4:223-4.

extrapolates this laudable access into a frivolous abuse of the otherwise serious matter of Alfred's law code.

The resulting implication for Alfred is that his love of justice is exaggerated into an obsessive compulsion to follow the letter of the law in all cases. This caricatured behaviour is brought to a head in the play's final scene, where Alfred falsely accuses Eustace of betraying him and sentences him to death. Having proclaimed that 'on pain of death [...] no lights appear throughout the camp', Alfred subsequently finds Eustace writing to the leader of the enemy army in his tent with a lit torch. Immediately assuming betrayal, Alfred demands: 'let him die within the hour.'⁴⁷⁴ The audience, however, is aware of Eustace's true purpose – his letter to Hastings, his real father, is urging the enemy commander to flee and not take part in the battle. The dramatic irony makes Alfred's sudden decision appear foolish and unjust, especially when Eustace decides not to appeal: 'Disclosing the truth to any other might save me, but justice is Alfred's only counsellor.'⁴⁷⁵ The king's established rule was broken and, whatever the circumstances, the stated punishment will be applied. Alfred's stately persona as the champion of English law is over-emphasised to the point of inversion, as draconian compliance replaces true justice.

The culmination of Alfred's hasty decision-making and hyperbolised love of justice is the king's institution of juries. When Alfred's error is revealed to him, his response is equally exaggerated and presents another caricature of one of Alfred's signature triumphs. The king states:

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid., 4:257.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid., 4:260.

[...] A man's life is too sacred to depend upon the capricious breath of an individual (*pauses*) – Alfred decrees, that henceforth none shall be deemed guilty till convicted by twelve of his peers; and from this happy moment let posterity date the glorious blessings of an English Jury (*all kneel – Grand Flourish*)

All: Long live Alfred, the father of his people!⁴⁷⁶

Invented on the spot, after an almost catastrophic blunder, Alfred's institution of trial by jury is far from the solemn moment of social genius and benevolence it was otherwise imagined to be. The 'Grand Flourish' and the proclamation of Alfred's national importance consequently become part of the farce itself, as the revered moment becomes straightforwardly joyful – a popular, uncomplicated celebration of an important national institution. Alfred's legacy is not disrespected by the lack of seriousness but made more open and accessible, connecting ordinary people with the critical moment.

As this moment demonstrates, O'Keeffe's play evidences not a reinterpretation of Alfred's character but rather a reimagining of what Alfred storytelling can achieve. The king is a caricature extrapolated from the potentially humorous implications of his reign, whilst imagined members of Anglo-Saxon society attempt to grapple with the consequences. O'Keeffe presents to his audience a homage to Alfred through a light-hearted medley of famous incidents. His approach to Alfred's history is both learned and cavalier, his comedy an informed, devoted, yet playful engagement with its themes. It is an approach to monarchy, the next section of this chapter will argue, that evidences the impact of George III's new style of kingship on conceptions of Alfred.

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid., 4:264.

'Its called a Sovereign. I make laws, and work by rule': Accessible Monarchy

The build-up to Alfred's burning of the cakes begins with a human portrayal of the figure of the king, echoing the new accessible monarchy instituted by George III. As Morris has asserted: 'George III's ruling style fostered a loyalist culture that was accessible to all ranks of society. The image he cultivated of devoted father to his immediate and his larger families endowed the monarchy with an approachability that encouraged an attitude of protectiveness.'⁴⁷⁷ This sense of an approachable monarch forms a key part of O'Keeffe's *Alfred* and the episode of the burning of the cakes is reworked to imitate and play with these supposed interactions between George and his people.

By 1796, the British public was well used to seeing depictions of the present king in farming attire and as Alfred approaches the cottage in 'Peasant Dress',⁴⁷⁸ the myriad prints of a caricatured farmer George, present as early as 1786, would certainly have come to mind. In *Going to Market*, a pitchfork-wielding George, dressed in a smock, sends his produce to be sold, whilst in the same year, George's activities in the grounds of Windsor Castle are satirically depicted in *The Farm Yard*. These were followed by another *Going to Market* in 1791 and *The Thieves Detected at Last; or, a Wonderful Discovery at Windsor Farm!!*, both depicting the king in farming attire. These famous images of Farmer George did of course mock the king for his parsimonious interests, but also reflected a significant degree of respect and affection for his charming, good-natured simplicity. They rendered the king

⁴⁷⁷ Marilyn Morris, *The British Monarchy and the French Revolution* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 159.

⁴⁷⁸ O'Keeffe, *Works*, 4:224.

accessible, relatable, a figure whom, just like O’Keeffe’s Alfred, could be imagined strolling into a farmyard cottage.

This is precisely what is depicted in James Gillray’s *Affability*, published the year before O’Keeffe’s *Alfred* was performed.⁴⁷⁹ It depicts an inquisitive, overbearing George, dressed in riding gear as if just dismounted from his horse, approaching a startled peasant outside his cottage. His awkward stance and beady eyes draw uncomfortable attention to the physicality of the king’s body. Attention is also drawn theatrically to Alfred’s body at the start of the cottage episode, as he almost stumbles onstage, overcoming exhaustion from his flight from danger and carrying an injury. With nowhere else to go he settles into the nearby cottage: ‘When the man is weary this is indeed a seat for a King.’ The collapse of Alfred’s title into ‘man’ draws attention to his ordinariness. Echoing the caption of Gillray’s *Affability*, there is also a hint of *over*-familiarity between king and subject. When Bertha enters (portentously bearing ‘a large dough cake on a plate’) she accosts Alfred in a reversal of roles from *Affability*: ‘Eh! who are you, pray? [...] Who bid you walk in and sit down here?’⁴⁸⁰

Within the context of the French Revolution, Bertha’s consternation can also represent a proud, populist defence of British property rights. She confronts trespassers on her land and attempts to defend the cottage as her own. Edmund Burke claimed: ‘The strong struggle in every individual to preserve possession of what he has found to belong to him and to distinguish him, is one of the securities against injustice and despotism implanted in our

⁴⁷⁹ Figure eleven.

⁴⁸⁰ O’Keeffe, *Works*, 4:234.

Figure Eleven

Gillray, James. *Affability*. 1795. © The Trustees of the British Museum.



nature. It operates as an instinct to secure property, and to preserve communities in a settled state.⁴⁸¹ Bertha is here defending those rights to secure property and the genre of popular theatre uses the interaction between sovereign and subject to celebrate that stout resistance to tyranny. Whilst the French National Assembly have 'left nothing but their own arbitrary pleasure to determine what property is to be protected and what subverted',⁴⁸² Alfred faces a stern and righteous inquisition for his encroachment. The story of Alfred's sheltering in Athelney is reworked as piece of popular legal policy, as not simply an example of the benevolence of the commoners, but also a reassertion and celebration of their right to ownership and their ability to welcome, or not, strangers into their homes.

Lee argues that in Burke's *Reflections*, 'social hierarchy was [...] seen as both eternal and self-consuming; it was defended as both essential and inconsequential.' She continues: 'Britain's political liberty arises mainly through a tradition of ironic *and* enthusiastic complicity with political illusions.'⁴⁸³ Alfred's confrontation with Bertha puts these political illusions on show for the audience, who in their laughter and enjoyment are complicit in the irony and reinforcement. O'Keeffe's playful negotiation of a controversial legal issue works to solidify both the role of the monarchy in 1790s British life and the social hierarchy upon which it sits. 'In loyalist propaganda,' Barrell argues, 'the cottage was pressed into service as an image of instinctive patriotism and loyalty to the king that the poor should exhibit, and that should lead them to face their poverty, even in the terrible scarcity of 1795, with resignation, or to feel gratitude for the plenty they were sometimes represented as

⁴⁸¹ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* ed. L.G. Mitchell (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 139.

⁴⁸² *Ibid.*, 226.

⁴⁸³ Lee, *Nationalism*, 29-30.

enjoying.⁴⁸⁴ O’Keeffe is playing with this idea in this scene. The colloquial way in which Bertha addresses the unknown Alfred has the potential to undermine any instinctive sense of patriotism or gratitude that she was perhaps expected to hold. Yet Bertha’s pride in her ownership remains steadfast, and in effect demonstrates that even suffering is not enough to overcome her personal ties to her social place.

The fact that Alfred has not been identified echoes the stories of George III’s countryside wanderings circulating towards the end of the century and the humour derived from the populace’s inability to recognise their monarch. In a popular story, a farmer fails to identify George III and instead engages him in a conversation about the monarch himself: ‘the farmer said ‘Our neighbours say, he’s a good sort of man, but dresses very plain.’ ‘Aye, said his Majesty, as *plain* as you see me know’, and rode on.’⁴⁸⁵ This style of interaction, the sense of miscommunication and the humorous tone adopted by the monarch are all present in the conversation between Alfred and Bertha. Like George, Alfred’s witty response to his subject’s incomprehension seeks to reinforce the commonality which exists between them. Pointedly choosing not to answer Bertha’s first question regarding his identity (‘That’s not a question to be answered’), Alfred responds not by announcing his superior rank but by pleading his human need: ‘Nay, Dame, I came in, for your door was open– sat, because weary.’ It is not because he is king, but because he is a fellow human in need of rest, that explains his presence in her cottage. Like George revelling in the plainness of his attire, Alfred’s own private joke derives from the pleasure of blending in. The justness of his response is evidenced by Bertha’s immediate change of tone and her acceptance of Alfred

⁴⁸⁴ John Barrell, *The Spirit of Despotism: Invasions of Privacy in the 1790s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 10-12.

⁴⁸⁵ Barrell, *Spirit of Despotism*, 113-5.

in her home: 'Marry, then, if my chair gives the traveller rest, I thank my door for being open.'⁴⁸⁶ Whereas Gillray's print, amongst other accounts, evidences a degree of unease about George III's encroachments, this interaction is notable for its welcoming array of open doors, rested feet and kind words. Alfred's smooth interposition of himself into the cottage presents the image of a monarch very capable of rendering his presence in all levels of society unobjectionable. He is a king who has a firm understanding of the lives which his subjects lead and can pass amongst them.

The ease of Alfred's interaction with Bertha in no way results in his degradation. Alfred is genial whilst maintaining his integrity and sense of decorum. As opposed to Gillray's caricature, it isn't the monarch who pesters with incessant questions:

Bert[ha]. [...] Whither going? want a place? have you a trade?

Alfred. Yes: but they won't let me follow it now.

Bert. What trade?

Alfred. Its called a Sovereign. I make laws, and work by rule.

Bert. Rule a carpenter, mayhap? Since our lad Eustace runs about among the battles, my husband Gog wants a man; he shall employ you: Eh, what sayst thou?

Alfred. I would willingly be employ'd --- I'll stay with you but I'm poor.⁴⁸⁷

Alfred's identification of his sovereignty as a 'trade' is risible both for the ensuing wordplay and for the king's willingness to engage positively with Bertha's questioning. The king's expression of the role of the monarch in workman's terms sees the daily business of a sovereign associated with that of a carpenter: both occupations, after all, 'work by rule.' The

⁴⁸⁶ O'Keefe, *Works*, 4:234.

⁴⁸⁷ O'Keefe, *Works*, 4:234-5.

interaction functions as a moment of association, as the king and the carpenter are connected through the fact that each has a task to accomplish. The pun on the word 'rule' and Alfred's readiness to 'be employed' suggest that the two men and their different social worlds may well have something in common. However, Bertha's inability to fully comprehend Alfred's meaning also has the effect of reinforcing distinctions between these levels of society. That the carpenter's wife cannot grasp the concepts of kingship suggests that this understanding is a one-way street; a function only of Alfred's personality and a statement of his appropriateness for the role of monarch. Alfred's social success is not only symbolic of his remarkable personal attributes, but also a vindication of his constitutional role and his ability to represent his people.

Alfred's capability to justify his 'trade' is worth remarking upon, especially when taking into consideration similar moments in O'Keeffe's works. Throughout his career, O'Keeffe shows a great deal of interest in the humour to be derived from the mixing and confusing of nobility and tradespeople. In *The Castle of Andalusia* (1782), Pedrillo, the son of a tailor, fails completely to act the part of a nobleman. His lack of manners earns the following stern rebuke: 'I'll send your father an account of your pranks, and he'll trim your jacket for you.' Pedrillo's response evidences the same literal, workman's understanding of a figure of speech ('trim your jacket') as Bertha demonstrates in *Alfred* with 'work by rule': 'Nay, Sir, for the matter o' that, my father could trim your jacket for you [...] he's the best taylor in Cordova!'⁴⁸⁸ Alfred's willingness to be accommodated in the carpenter's cottage finds a similar parallel in *Czar Peter* (1789). The Czar is attempting to spy on Chatham Docks, in

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid., 1:153.

disguise as a carpenter, and earns the following praise from one of his supporters: 'Here the Monarch of Russia comes to labour like a handy crafts man [...] The true glory of the Great Peter's humble carpenter's jacket, shall transmit his actions to posterity with splendour and admiration.'⁴⁸⁹ In this instance, the Czar's disguise and willingness to 'descend' temporarily to the status of a carpenter garners the same wry smile and respect as Alfred in the carpenter's cottage, earnestly seeking 'employment.'

One final example is worth dwelling upon, taken from *The Basket-Maker* (1789). When the basket masker and the arrogant Count Pepin are captured by Iroquois, the former endears himself to his captors by fashioning a reed crown for their leader. When the Count is asked to perform the same skill, his lack of ability is apparent:

Count. Weave! I'm no weaver! I'm a gentleman

Sok[oki]. Gentleman! Vat be dat.

Count. Why, Sir, a gentleman is – a me, what I am.

Otch[egroo]. But what can you do?

Count. Do! don't I tell you I'm a gentleman, and do nothing.

Otch. Den de gentleman be good for notting.

Sok. Knock him brain out. (*they yell and raise their clubs*)

After attempting to display his skills in fencing, singing and dancing, the Count is asked:

Otch. But what be use in all dis?

Count. Use! – 'tis useful – and 'tis used when we use it. (*confused*)

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid., 3:172.

Sok. Knock him brain out. (*they yell and raise their clubs*)⁴⁹⁰

That O’Keeffe chose not to put Alfred in a similar confrontational position is telling. Rather than a description of a king as an indolent, useless member of society, Alfred offers a definition of sovereignty that highlights its functionality in the everyday lives of the people: ‘I make laws, and work by rule.’ His statement that ‘I would willingly be employ’d’, in addition to his immediate concern to defend the cottage from marauding Danes, shows a king willing to undertake a functional, self-sacrificial role. Contrasted with previous noble justifications in O’Keeffe’s *Works* and the behaviour of Earl Burrhed in the rest of *Alfred*, the Saxon king is notable for his accountability and willingness to be of use.

‘What, when I had power, have I done for the poor?’: Conservative Social Hierarchy

As with the other Alfred texts discussed in this chapter, the main concern the Saxon king is faced with is the social cohesion of the nation. There is no longer a focus upon Alfred’s interiority; his state of mind is no longer an obstacle to success. What is at stake is whether he can command the loyalties of his subjects. A fine example of this new focus is Alfred’s moment of panic discussed earlier:

Where was Earl Burrhed’s care? this his vigilance! his scouts from Corfe did they sleep, or were they bribed to treachery? And Eustace where hast thou been?⁴⁹¹

Faced with trouble, Alfred doesn’t pity or blame himself, but seeks answers from the countrymen he trusted. Earl Burrhed’s ‘care’ and ‘vigilance’ are both questioned. The

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid., 2:359-60.

⁴⁹¹ Ibid., 4:210.

concern is not whether Alfred's Saxons are capable of repelling their enemies, but rather if they are psychologically willing to undertake the effort.

In the shadow of the French Revolution, wayward noble behaviour, such as that displayed by Earl Burrhed, became one of the key targets of counterrevolutionaries: 'degenerate aristocrats threatened revolution every bit as much as levellers and nabobs could do, since in not fulfilling the duties incumbent upon them by virtue of their station they deprived the hierarchies of the nation of the very *raison d'être* and therefore of their sustainability.'⁴⁹² Burrhed is a prime example of such a degenerate aristocrat and his crimes are compounded by being committed in the midst of war. His negligence is at fault for allowing the Danish to undertake their invasion – a fear with resonance in the mid-1790s as the French army loomed large over the Channel. Burrhed's behaviour not merely criticises members of the nobility who fail to pull their weight, but also enables Alfred to stand above such degeneration as a reliable pillar of stability.

The opening scene of the play features Burrhed and his hunting party, amusing themselves with the pursuits of the wealthy rather than assisting their king in defending the country. Oswald, the Earl's falconer, protests against this behaviour: 'when an enemy ravages our country, it is not a moment for a Saxon Baron to give up his time to amusement.' In an act of nationally-motivated protest, Oswald's disgust leads him to resign from his service to the Earl and immediately join Alfred's army: 'while there's a Dane in England [...] Alfred the King

⁴⁹² Grenby, *Anti-Jacobin Novel*, 168.

is now my only master.'⁴⁹³ This moment not only highlights the corruption of the Earl, but also establishes Alfred as the ultimate recourse of the loyal and patriotic-minded subject. In the figure of the king, any person in the country has a source of grievance and patronage. This conception of a monarch for everyone was a novel development resulting, as Russell has argued, from the new sense of patriotism:

Patriotism, or 'loyalty' as many supporters of the king and constitution preferred to call it, became a matter of 'natural' obligation transcending allegiances of party, class, and ethnicity.⁴⁹⁴

With Burrhed pursuing his selfish interests, Alfred stands above faction, enabling Oswald to serve him as a matter of simple patriotism. Loyalty to England and a desire to defend the nation against its enemies is all that is required to qualify as a servant of Alfred. The conflation of 'patriotism' and 'loyalty' to the king which Russell identifies is manifested here. It establishes Alfred as a monarch whom any subject can immediately and naturally be connected to and protective of.

That Alfred himself is amongst the benevolent aristocracy is clearly demonstrated during his first visit to Bertha and Gog's cottage. It is not the misfortunes of war that makes Alfred lament their impoverished situation, but rather his previous economic mismanagement: 'What, when I had power, have I done for the poor? Alas! Benevolence is man's work: riches are his tools; and, with such tools, woe to the idle.'⁴⁹⁵ This lament by the king is indicative of a monarch who judges the success of his reign on the functioning benevolence of the

⁴⁹³ O'Keeffe, *Works*, 4:199-200.

⁴⁹⁴ Gillian Russell, *The Theatres of War: Performance, Politics, and Society 1793-1815* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 5.

⁴⁹⁵ O'Keeffe, *Works*, 4:235.

wealthy and the social and economic position of the poor. That he has heretofore neglected to care for the needy is somewhat inconsistent with Alfred's historical reputation, but provides another example of where the Alfred of history is put aside in order to make a more contemporary point to O'Keeffe's audience.

Alfred's presence in the cottage itself also carries greater social weight than previous depictions thanks to the intense politicisation of rural domestic scenes. 'For loyalists', Barrell argues, 'the rural cottage became an image of the peaceful life Britain was fighting to protect and restore.'⁴⁹⁶ This is very literally the case for O'Keeffe's Alfred: 'But for the trifling check I gave the Danes, they might also have pillaged this cottage. Should they yet come, I have no weapon, and I'm now bound to defend this hospitable abode, for the shelter it has so timely afforded me. Here is genuine kindness.'⁴⁹⁷ Not only does Alfred recognise the vulnerability of the cottage and identify it as an inevitable target for the destructive Danish forces, he also politicises the inhabitants in the idealistic loyalist fashion of the 1790s. Described as a 'hospitable abode', offering 'shelter' and 'genuine kindness', the cottage is figured as the kind of pastoral haven inherent to the 'polite fantasy of rustic retirement' identified in loyalist thought.⁴⁹⁸ These properties of the cottage are allowed to become crucial to Alfred's motivation of defence: he is explicitly 'bound' to protect the innocent happy life of the cottagers because of its rural perfection and hospitality, 'the shelter it has so timely afforded.' Alfred's interaction with Gog and Bertha, therefore, subtly advocates this conservative way of thinking about the poor and the role the rich have in supporting them. According to Gilmartin, the trope of the 'open cottage door,' literalised in this

⁴⁹⁶ Barrell, *Despotism*, 220.

⁴⁹⁷ O'Keeffe, *Works*, 4:235.

⁴⁹⁸ Barrell, *Despotism*, 214.

encounter, 'made the lives of the rural poor available to charitable middle-class interference.'⁴⁹⁹ The same kind of accessibility is engaged with here by O'Keeffe, presenting the poor of Alfred's kingdom as a grateful people in need of protection from the dangers of the outside world seeking to disturb their place in the social hierarchy.

Even Alfred's burning of the cakes is reframed as part of this overarching theme and serves symbolically in the play as an indicator of a society whose functional hierarchy has collapsed. In her novel *The Medallion* (1794), Susanna Pearson writes:

[A baker] with no other knowledge than what he has picked up at his kneading trough, looks just as silly as a nobleman would do, who should tuck up his shirt-sleeves, pin a white apron before him, and flourish his dredging box. Because why? the nobleman knows no more than a sucking child of the baking-business, that the baker is just as wise in state-affairs.⁵⁰⁰

In such a nation where the baker and the nobleman were confused, 'both figures would lose the purpose of their ranks and fail in their duties. There would be 'no good government and no bread.'⁵⁰¹ In his retelling of the story of the burnt cakes, O'Keeffe presents his audience with a situation where this is literally the case. Whilst Bertha fails to conceive of the notion of sovereignty and rule of law, understanding Alfred's words only within the frame of her social sphere ('Rule! a carpenter, mayhap?'), the king is equally incompetent in undertaking the task of baking. This is indeed a situation where there is 'no good government and no bread.'

⁴⁹⁹ Kevin Gilmartin, *Writing Against Revolution: Literary Conservatism in Britain, 1790-1832* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 35.

⁵⁰⁰ Susanna Pearson, *The Medallion* (London: G.G. and J. Robinson, 1794), 99, quoted in Grenby, *Anti-Jacobin Novel*, 144.

⁵⁰¹ *Ibid.*

It is a rarity to see the burning of the cakes actually depicted in Alfred literature of the eighteenth century. No other text considered by this thesis in detail did so. Not in poetry, prose, nor on the stage could readers or audiences actually read or see this moment depicted. A number of the histories of Saxon England mention the episode, but O’Keeffe’s *Alfred* is the first literary depiction to actually burn some cakes. Its inclusion here is down to a number of reasons. Firstly, Alfred’s popularity made him, in Keynes’s words quoted earlier, ‘fair game’ for comedy. O’Keeffe presents this moment because it is inherently amusing, the nature of his work. But the political elements also play a part. It isn’t a mistake that Alfred burns the cakes; in the understanding of different social roles in society it is quite right that the monarch is unable to bake. Like other writers before him, O’Keeffe uses Alfred’s time in the peasant’s cottage to prove his suitability for kingship, but uniquely it is Alfred’s failure to accomplish a task beneath his social standing that proves part of his qualification for monarchy.

At the play’s conclusion, the burnt cakes are referred to again as part of the successful resolution of the social chaos created by the conflict. As Earl Burrhed and Lady Albina are reunited, Gog’s social mobility frustrated, and the happy marriage of Blanche and Eustace confirmed, the question of who bakes the cakes becomes part of the play’s closing remarks. ‘Eustace’, Alfred proclaims, ‘you shall have a wedding-cake, and I promise dame Bertha to give a better watch towards the baking of it.’⁵⁰² As the hierarchy’s roles are restored, as Gog goes back to his cottage with Bertha and a reinvigorated Earl Burrhed is restored to his castle, the king’s burnt cakes serve as a reminder of the chaotic flux of the conflict: a time in

⁵⁰² O’Keeffe, *Works*, 4:226.

which roles were unclear and in which the king was ludicrously asked to bake. Alfred's assertion that a better cake will now be made serves just as powerfully as the restored Earl and carpenter as a sign that cohesion of the social hierarchy has been restored.

O'Keeffe's *Alfred* evidences the conservative loyalty towards the monarchy and established order that filtered through into most aspects of cultural life in Britain in the 1790s. 'Anti-Jacobin fiction', Gilmartin argues, 'tended to relegate 'the lower orders' to a pastoral frame of representation, where their disruptive political desires were easily overcome by facile reassertions of social hierarchy and government authority.'⁵⁰³ Although the disruption of the hierarchy in O'Keeffe's play is made somewhat more perilous by the continually present threat of armoured bands of Danes, *Alfred* nevertheless resolves its myriad strings of complication by a restoration of the social and political hierarchy with King Alfred at its head. 'An active philanthropy', Grenby argues, 'was the [loyalist] novelist's shorthand for virtue, for sensibility and thus for fitness to be a hero or heroine.'⁵⁰⁴ O'Keeffe's Alfred, therefore, can be considered as a fine example of such a loyalist hero.

As Jeffrey Cox has argued, Gothic drama in the 1790s provided potentially destabilising elements: 'it could be seen as portraying the *ancien régime* in decline. Pitting evil aristocrats against clever servant and simple folk, it could be read as evoking a 'levelling muse''. In a Saxon society ravaged by invading Vikings, a monarch forced to roam the woods alone and corrupt or uncaring nobility, all three of the Alfred plays examined by this chapter certainly contain their fair share of social upheaval. However, they all follow the pattern of reversing

⁵⁰³ Gilmartin, *Literary Conservatism*, 152.

⁵⁰⁴ Grenby, *Anti-Jacobin Novel*, 138.

from this chaos and reinstating traditional society. Cox goes on to explain the trend demonstrated by most Gothic drama of the decade, a trend which the plays of this cluster all follow:

While they wish to entertain radical notions, they want to make sure that, in the end, their patriotic salute to the order of British church and state is clear [...] These plays do not replace tyrannical aristocrats, lusting over young women, with Painite democrats of Wollstonecraftian feminists, but rather with other aristocrats who restore order.⁵⁰⁵

King Alfred, for Penn, Cumberland and O’Keeffe, in historical drama or historical comedy, is a prime example of the ‘other aristocrats who restore order.’ His role as founder of the constitution, rather than making him a radical figurehead, has at this moment in the century made him the perfect representation and champion of constitutional monarchy that loyalists were keen to protect. Cox’s analysis demonstrates not just how these Alfred plays functioned during the 1790s, but also how the figure of Alfred was deployed. The Saxon king was a representative of good kingship at a time of near-revolution, and his benevolent and capable governance, alongside his sociable and accessible personality, restored a superior British constitution and brought both sense and order back to British lives.

⁵⁰⁵ Jeffrey N. Cox, ‘The Gothic Drama: Tragedy or Comedy?’, *The Oxford Handbook of the Georgian Theatre, 1737-1832* eds. Julia Swindells and David Francis Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 419-20.

CONCLUSION

Thus hath our Bard, with pencil dipp'd in gore,
And hand advent'rous, sketch'd the days of yore,
When, clad in steel, amidst surrounding foes,
To save his Country, royal Alfred rose,
He who the olive round his sword entwin'd,
The mildest, wisest, bravest of mankind;
Who framed those laws that tyranny restrain,
And bade Britannia rule the azure main;
Whom warm imagination, from the sky,
Sees on his Albion fix'd his awful eye,
That views the bolt launch'd forth on faithless foes,
By those who from his bright example rose,
Whoin his Country's bosom plac'd his throne,
And made his people's happiness his own.⁵⁰⁶

This epilogue serves well as an example of the culmination of the themes which this thesis has attempted to trace throughout the final decades of the eighteenth century. There are of course a number of echoes in this passage of previous Alfred texts. The formulation of 'The mildest, wisest, bravest of mankind' mirrors that present in the king's inscription in the gardens of Stowe: 'The mildest, justest, most beneficent of kings.' The opening lyrics to 'Rule Britannia' are of course similarly echoed in the line 'Britannia rule the azure main.' Alfred's eighteenth-century literary journey is evidenced here in this epilogue through the

⁵⁰⁶ Francis Gibson, *Streanshall Abbey: or, The Danish Invasion* (Whitby: G.G. and J. Robinson, 1800), 99.

phrases and terms that became associated with his figure over the decades. But the epilogue is also notable for the relatively uncomplicated blending of a number of ideas which, thirty years earlier, were deployed as contesting ideas. The political freedom of Alfred's constitution ('who framed those laws that tyranny restrain') is here complementary with the brutality of the war he fought to accomplish it ('the olive round his sword entwined').

The mutual relationship between Alfred and his subjects is made clear by the final two lines, in which the people's happiness and the king's are united. The play itself follows this theme – depicting to its audience a story set during Alfred's reign at the time of Viking invasion, but surprisingly not featuring the monarch himself. The way in which this works is that the accomplishments of Alfred are in large part achieved by the Saxons themselves. The defenders of Streanshall Abbey are faced with a Viking invasion from across the sea, which, by uniting and keeping faith in their identity as strong and immovable Saxons, they repel. It is thanks to them that the northern coast of what would become Yorkshire is defended from the Danes and their local victory runs parallel with Alfred's achievements in Wessex. Crucially, through these accomplishments, the Saxons in the play show themselves to be humble imitations of the greatness of Alfred himself. This also demonstrates to the eighteenth-century Britons in the audience that they too can prove themselves to be proud descendants of Alfred in spirit and action – by resolutely defending their island nation from Revolutionary France. In this structure, elements of Alfred's myth – military victory over the Danes, the capture of a Danish banner, mercy and kindness in victory – are performed by

the Saxons themselves. It is a literal demonstration of the values of King Alfred enacted by his own people.

Throughout the play, the Saxons of Streanshall are inspired by news of Alfred's actions in the south and attempt to emulate them: 'Thanks to the skies, our hero [Alfred] still survives / The Father of his country and her hopes! / And though envelop'd in misfortune's cloud, / His sun of glory yet shall brilliant shine.'⁵⁰⁷ The metaphor of Alfred as a sun shining through the clouds of adversity goes right back to the very first masque in 1740; the imagery is deployed by Corin to describe the disconsolate exiled monarch on Athelney. Here, however, faith in the sunshine is already rewarded, and the metaphor is deployed after the sun has broken through. Another echo of the Alfred myth is present in the fifth act, in which Edgar (one of the Saxons' captains) defeats the Danish onslaught. Demonstrating a typically Alfredian mercy, he tells his troops to give 'Quarter to all but those who still resist us; / We know no enemies but those in arms.' Even more tellingly, just moments before he returns from the fray he has captured 'the Danish Standard.' This, of course, was one of Alfred's legendary accomplishments at Edington. In the case of Streanshall as well as Edington, capture of the standard guarantees Saxon victory: 'I lay with transport at your feet', Edgar cries to his chief, 'The Danish standard and their final hope.'⁵⁰⁸ To complete the parallel storylines, as the successful defence of Streanshall Abbey is confirmed, news arrives from Wessex that Alfred, too, has been victorious: 'I now with transport learn, our royal master / From Edington returns with conquest crown'd: / Their [the captured Danes at Streanshall]

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid., 70.

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid., 91-2.

future fate depends upon the will / Of royal Alfred, merciful as brave.⁵⁰⁹ In mimicking their monarch, these Saxons truly demonstrate the possibility of Ebenezer Rhodes's wish over a decade earlier that 'each may find an Alfred in his heart.'

Francis Gibson's *Streanshall Abbey* is essentially Alfred's story without Alfred in it – a tale of individual and national fortitude, military strength and loyalty, forged in the unyielding defence of the British Isles from an invading enemy. Its message for contemporary British audiences to demonstrate equal resilience and patriotic faith is clear. But Gibson's play also demonstrates a truly powerful culmination of the popularisation of Alfred and the growing universality of his example to ordinary Britons. 'The people' themselves, ordinary Saxons, brought Alfred's myth to life.

As well as *Streanshall Abbey*, 1800-1 saw the publication of two poems, both entitled *Alfred, an Epic Poem*. One was written by Joseph Cottle, the famous publisher of the poems of both Coleridge and Southey, the other was the work of Henry James Pye, Poet Laureate from 1790 until his death in 1813. The appearance of both of these poems right at the very end of the eighteenth century was no coincidence, and they serve as the perfect end-point for this study. As Lynda Pratt has demonstrated, Alfred's appearance as the subject of epic poetry made its own statement about the king's legacy: 'an epic on Alfred', she writes, 'offered a coalescence of a national subject (the Anglo-Saxon king) with a nationalistic genre (the epic), and therefore an end-product which was the cultural embodiment of Britishness.'⁵¹⁰ This is important: these epics don't demonstrate a tentative 'figuring out' of Alfred's role, or any

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid., 96.

⁵¹⁰ Pratt, 'Anglo-Saxon Attitudes', 146.

overtly partisan posturing – they are confident statements on the king’s role as the national figurehead.

As Pratt goes on to explain, there were significant differences in how Cottle and Pye chose to represent their versions of Alfred. As poet Laureate, Pye is understandably the most overtly nationalistic of the two poets and more classical in his style. King Alfred is Aeneas-like in his military domination and the significance that is made of his victory at Edington. He is a founding monarch, establishing the British equivalent of Rome in his defeat of the Danes. And ‘British’ is the operative word, as Alfred proves himself not only the leader of the Anglo-Saxons, but also native Britons, Welsh, Scots and Irish, with a confidence and forcefulness never before seen in Alfredian literature. The Scots are brought into the fray in the first book, in which Alfred himself travels to the court of King Gregor in search of aid. ‘Thy country’s wrongs are ours’, Gregor proclaims upon hearing Alfred’s troubles, ‘thy foes are mine.’⁵¹¹ In Book II, Scottish fighters prepare to assist England: ‘By manly courage fired, the warriors stand / Impatient to avenge a sister land.’ This and many other instances unite the two kingdoms and demonstrate both a shared national history and destiny. Each of the other constituent countries of the 1801 United Kingdom already functions as if part of one union, with a shared monarch: ‘Each shall protecting Alfred’s glory claim, / And hail him monarch in Britannia’s name.’⁵¹² By the end of Book IV, the battlefield at Edington proudly displays ‘Saxon banners,’ ‘Cambria’s griffin’ and ‘Scotia’s lion.’ Alongside them all, ‘Erin her arms displays with kindred fire.’ The ease of Irish assimilation into Alfred’s army here is worth highlighting in comparison with the uncomfortable suspicion found in John Penn’s

⁵¹¹ Henry James Pye, *Alfred, an Epic Poem* (London: W. Bulmer, 1815), 13.

⁵¹² *Ibid.*, 36-7.

Battle of Eddington from 1796. In Pye's national epic, the position of the Irish is very much an integral part of the destiny of the entire United Kingdom: 'Britain's sister isles in Alfred's cause conspire.'⁵¹³ In victory, the idea of Britain as a united island has been proudly established; it is a single sovereign kingdom defined and protected by the sea which surrounds it: 'All round our isle the azure billow blows.'⁵¹⁴

Joseph Cottle's *Alfred*, in contrast, is more of a legacy of the affable Alfred; a man remarkable for his emotional empathy and role as an exemplary human being. The extent of the king's suffering is comparable with that of both the original masque and John Home's *Alfred, a Tragedy* from 1778: 'But royalty / Now came, and with it, cares, whose crushing weight / Bent him to earth.'⁵¹⁵ Nevertheless, Alfred is undoubtedly presented as the figurehead of the nation. 'It is unnecessary to expatiate', Cottle claims in his Preface, 'on the well-known character of Alfred. By the general concurrence of mankind, he has been ranked among the most illustrious of commanders, legislators and monarchs; distinguished in private life for everything which was amiable, and in public for all that was great; the admiration of other countries, and the peculiar glory of our own.'⁵¹⁶ Despite the sentimentalised conception, Alfred's chief role as source of national aggrandisement is in Cottle's epic identical to that of Pye's.

As is clear, two of the most prevalent and previously competing forms of the Alfred character – the sentimental and the military – have not disappeared by the end of the

⁵¹³ Ibid., 100.

⁵¹⁴ Ibid., 138.

⁵¹⁵ Joseph Cottle, *Alfred, an Epic Poem* (London: Longman and Rees, 1800), 86-7.

⁵¹⁶ Ibid., i.

eighteenth century. There are still vast differences in representation of the monarch across the two epics. ‘What the two poems actually reveal,’ Lynda Pratt writes, ‘is that at the turn of the eighteenth century there was no consensus about what made either a national epic, or a patriotic poet – that any idea of a coherently structured, unified national cultural consensus was a myth.’⁵¹⁷ Pratt’s conclusion is precisely why it is wrong to claim that the figure of Alfred became in any way monolithic, and encourage us to question the terminology of ‘cult’ that has become so dominant when describing Alfred’s legacy. There was no stable version of Alfred because he had come to represent something itself in a state of flux – the nation itself. And debates over what Britain meant to different people in the nineteenth century, as exemplified by these two epic poems, necessarily go far beyond the figure of Alfred. But unlike the periods looked at in the other chapters of this thesis, Alfred is not being deployed here as a revolutionary, as well as a loyalist symbol. Alfred does not symbolise a *lost* Britain, justifying calls for change or reform, he symbolises the ideals of the current status quo. The genre of both these works is of critical importance, because although they return to the same story as the mid-century masques, their significance as literary works is vastly different. Cottle’s may lack the *nationalistic* verve of Pye’s offering, but there is no questioning that at the most fundamental level these are both *national* poems, intended to be representative of the nation itself and accessible and inspirational to all Britons. It should not be overlooked that the role which the figure of King Alfred is given provides the consensus between both poems. Cottle and Pye’s ideas on Britishness may differ, but between them they demonstrate that whatever Britishness was, it could be found, exposed and celebrated through the figure of King Alfred the Great.

⁵¹⁷ Pratt, ‘Anglo-Saxon Attitudes’, 156.

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There is something akin to schizophrenia in the multiple versions of Alfred that were produced in the period considered by this thesis. My study has attempted to organise this seemingly chaotic mix of genres, writers, time periods, national and global events, geographic locations and imaginative ideals - all interconnected yet also individual - into a cohesive narrative of change and continuity. Every one of the literary Alfreds I have considered is simultaneously typical and individual; at one and the same time an imitation and an original. To accurately describe representations of King Alfred in the eighteenth century, it has been necessary not only to understand the king's own life, nor merely the details of the historical developments of his legacy, but also the intricacies of each individual work in their eighteenth-century contexts. It has been an extraordinarily difficult task to make sense of a phenomenon so mobile and diverse.

Yet it has been possible to identify distinct patterns amongst the flux - possible to identify similarities across literary works that have clear and logical causes. To make these similarities accessible to future scholars has been the aim of the distinct chapters of this thesis. Through scrutiny of these clusters of Alfred texts, it has been possible to bring into focus the ways in which the figure of Alfred developed not only in tandem with major social, political and cultural changes, but also in response to very specific and localised stimuli. Texts like those of Home, Fuller and O'Keefe demonstrate that the Alfred myth wasn't just a tumbling snowball, gradually picking up momentum in a single direction before eventually

breaking loose in the avalanche of the 'cult' – it was a dynamic, responsive, agile phenomenon capable of sudden and energetic changes of direction.

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