

## King Alfred and the Eighteenth-Century Mirror of Princes

Kirsten Ogilby

University of Copenhagen

In 1709, Thomas Hearne (1678–1735) published his edition of Sir John Spelman’s 1678 *Aelfredi Magni, Anglorum Regis Invictissimi Vita Tribus Libris Comprehensa* – the *Life of Alfred the Great*. Like the rest of Hearne’s work, the *Life of Alfred the Great* touches on the early medieval period in England, but is largely based on Latin chronicles and antiquities.<sup>1</sup> His work, being largely curatorial, and centred on translation of the Latin and collating known works, is often overshadowed by the philological achievements of contemporary Old English scholars such as George Hickes (1642–1715), Humphrey Wanley (1672–1726), and, to a lesser extent, Elizabeth Elstob (1683–1756). However, in the decades following Hickes’s death, Hearne’s edition of Spelman’s work found a popular audience. This fulfilled Elstob’s wish in the preface to her edition of Ælfric’s homily on St Gregory’s birthday: that Old English be enjoyed by a broader populace which liked ‘a play, a romance, a novel’.<sup>2</sup> Hearne’s work was used thereafter as the base for creative work on Alfred’s life through the long eighteenth century. This article focuses on two early pieces: Richard Blackmore’s *Alfred: An Epick Poem* (1723), and Thomas Arne, James Thomson, and David Mallet’s *Alfred: A Masque* (the first edition in 1740, and the second in 1751). Both these pieces juxtapose the figure of Alfred with the crown prince at the time, Frederick of Hanover (1707–51), in an eighteenth-century version of the medieval genre of the ‘mirror of princes’.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> There are a few exceptions to this – notably, Hearne’s work on the antiquities of Glastonbury contained a copy of *The Battle of Maldon*.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Elstob, *An English-Saxon Homily on the Birthday of St. Gregory* (London: W. Bowyer, 1709), p. iv.

<sup>3</sup> See Hans-Joachim Schmidt, ‘The Use of Mirrors of Princes’, in *A Critical Companion to the ‘Mirrors for Princes’ Literature*, ed. by Noelle-Laetitia Perret and Stéphane Péquignot (Leiden: Brill, 2022), pp. 473–513.

The transformation of Alfred, king of Wessex (r. 871–99) from a historical figure into a figure in popular culture serves as not only a useful window into eighteenth-century conceptions of the Middle Ages but also reveals *which* elements of the early medieval period in England were seen as important. The popularity of Alfred, and the manner and audience to which he was presented gives useful insight into how the Middle Ages served as a historical angle from which to comment on eighteenth century concerns and debates. As De Certeau argues in *The Writing of History*, all history is essentially a modernism: the choice of narrative, the construction, citation, presentation of sources alter the past even as it tries to recreate it.<sup>4</sup> There is no organisation of historical material that can recall the past perfectly; nor would a complete and perfect recreation of the past be exempt from the narrative filter of human perception.<sup>5</sup> Looking at Arne, Thomson, and Mallet's *Alfred: A Masque*, and Blackmore's *Alfred* allows us to see the eighteenth-century imprint on the medieval; the use of history to tell eighteenth-century narratives. This article examines how the dissolution of ideas of sacral monarchy, and anxieties regarding the regent's status as de-facto head of the Anglican Church, regardless of personal conviction, lead to a shift in the use of King Alfred as a foundational figure in histories of England.

King Alfred's enormous popularity in the Victorian era, recently and thoroughly explored in Joanne Parker's *'England's darling': The Victorian cult of Alfred the Great*, has its roots in the preceding century, which saw Alfred enter popular British culture through plays, paintings, history books, and poetry.<sup>6</sup> Much as the Anglican Church sought a sense of continuity in the face of rupture through embracing religious medievalism and searching for Anglican doctrine among Old English texts, the British monarchy sought to create a sense of

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<sup>4</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 136.

<sup>5</sup> Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, ACLS Humanities E-Book (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), pp. 44–49.

<sup>6</sup> Simon Keynes, 'The Cult of King Alfred the Great', *ASE*, 28 (1999), 225–356; Joanne Parker, *'England's Darling': The Victorian Cult of Alfred the Great* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009).

continuity through similar measures.<sup>7</sup> During the seventeenth and early eighteenth century, the British royal line was deposed during the Civil War, reinstated, and suffered several succession crises. First, during the Glorious Revolution in 1688, when James II (r. 1685–88) was deposed in favour of his (protestant) daughter Mary II (r. 1689–94) and her husband, William of Orange (r. 1689–1702); and later in 1714, when Queen Anne (r. 1702–14) died without surviving heirs, leaving the throne to George I (r. 1714–27) and the House of Hanover.

Alfred, as a historical figure, was offered up first by Spelman and Hearne, and later by Thomson, Mallet and Blackmore, as an antidote to this narrative of disjunction. It is worth briefly examining the presentation of Hearne and Spelman's work on King Alfred, firstly, to have a sense of why King Alfred became such a locus of royal medievalism. Although Thomson, Mallet, and Blackmore transformed Alfred according to their own political opinions and religious and commercial pressures, the preceding scholarship on Alfred had already rendered him uniquely appropriate as a vehicle to comment on English kingship.

John Spelman's (1594–1643) enormously influential 1678 work on Alfred was dedicated to Charles II, 'Dei Gratia Magnæ Britanniaë, Franciaë, & Hibernia Regi, Fidei Defensori, &c'.<sup>8</sup> It was published posthumously – as Spelman had died in 1643 – with a translation and a preface likely provided by the translator, Christopher Wase.<sup>9</sup> King Alfred had particular significance to the Stuart line;

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<sup>7</sup> Hugh Magennis, 'Not Angles but Anglicans? Reformation and Post-Reformation Perspectives on the Anglo-Saxon Church, Part 1: Bede, Ælfric and the Anglo-Saxon Church in Early Modern England', *English Studies*, 96.3 (2015), 243–63.

<sup>8</sup> John Spelman, *Ælfredi Magni Anglorum Regis Invictissimi Vita Tribus Libris Comprehensa a Clarissimo Deo. Johanne Spelman, Henrici F. Primum Anglice Conscripta, Dein Latine Reddita, & Annotationibus Illustrata Ab Ælfredi in Collegio Magnæ Aulæ Universitatis Oxoniensis Alumnis* (Oxford: e theatro Sheldoniano, 1678), p. 2: 'King by God's grace of Great Britain, France, and Scotland, Defender of the Faith'. Charles II (1630–85) had a claim to the French throne through his mother, Henrietta Maria of France (1609–69), though calling him king of France is, by any stretch, a rather generous statement.

<sup>9</sup> Patrick V. Day, 'Rectifying a Chronicle of Contradictions: The Political Context of Abraham Wheelock's 1643 Anglo-Saxon Chronicle', *Explorations in Renaissance Culture*, 43.1 (2017), 81–107 (p. 87).

both Abraham Wheelock and Spelman sought to link the Stuart reign to ideas of sacral kingship.<sup>10</sup> Spelman offered a regnal line which traced royal descent from Alfred down through David I (1082–1153) and Robert the Bruce of Scotland (1274–1329) to Henry VIII (1491–1547). As Patrick Day argues, this emphasises the mixed Scottish and English descent of the Stuarts, linking them doubly to Alfred, both by virtue of descent from Henry VIII, and through their connection to Scotland.<sup>11</sup> Wase's Stuart Restoration dedication of the text to Charles II, then, serves as a reiteration of the thesis of the edition: Charles II was rightful leader of both Britain and the English Church, and part of an unbroken line of divine kingship stretching back to King Alfred.

With the deposition of the Stuarts, as well as the somewhat dubious scholarship of the regnal lists which linked Alfred to that royal house, this connection was left largely behind in the long eighteenth century.<sup>12</sup> It was not entirely abandoned, however: Hearne's decision to include a dedication in the *Life of Alfred* was a politically charged choice. It was addressed to 'the prince' (leaving open the question of *which* prince) and opened 'I Here present unto Your Highness a Repaired Image of one of your Ancestors'.<sup>13</sup> Hearne went on to emphasise how the prince, 'deriving from [Alfred] in Bloud derive withall a Genuine Capacity of all Royall Endowments' and will 'represent unto the World a more lively Figure of Him than by any other can be given'.<sup>14</sup> I say Hearne: lacking Spelman's original preface (if any existed) and taking into account the total divergence from Wase's Latin preface, the preface is likely Hearne's, or at least heavily edited by him. Hearne, refusing to swear to the Hanovers, even to the point of losing his job and access to the Bodleian, left the preface nebulously dedicated.<sup>15</sup> Given that Alfred had been tied to the Stuart lineage in preceding

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<sup>10</sup> Day, 'Rectifying a Chronicle', pp. 83–84.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>12</sup> Ronald G. Asch, 'The Crisis of Sacral Monarchy in England in the Late Seventeenth Century in Comparative Perspective', in *Monarchy Transformed*, ed. by Robert Von Friedeburg and John Morrill (Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 319–46 (p. 341).

<sup>13</sup> John Spelman, *The Life of Aelfred the Great*, ed. by Thomas Hearne (Oxford: Printed at the Theater for Maurice Atkins at the Golden-Ball in St Paul's Church-Yard, London 1709), p. i.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. iii.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Hearne, *The Life of Mr. Thomas Hearne, of St. Edmund's Hall, Oxford; from His Own MS. Copy, in the Bodleian Library. Also an Accurate Catalogue of His Writings and Publications*,

scholarship, and that Hearne placed an emphasis on blood descent, the preface, even scrubbed of recognisable names, was still most likely intended as a defence of Stuart kingship (although one which provided plausible deniability if Hearne was outright accused of Jacobitism).

Despite the Stuart associations, Hearne's Alfred proved too compelling a figure for historians and writers to abandon. While Alfred's fame within historical circles stretched back to Archbishop Matthew Parker's (1504–75) work, with songs on Alfred circulating as early as 1570, Hearne's work sparked new interest in the matter.<sup>16</sup> Hearne's easily accessible version of Alfred's life saw the idea of Alfred as a model for kings made available to amateur historians, playwrights, and writers with a looser interest in historical source material – or limited access to the originals.<sup>17</sup> One such playwright was the poet and physician Richard Blackmore (1654–1729), of whom Alexander Pope wrote:

All hail him victor in both gifts of song,  
Who sings so loudly, and who sings so long.<sup>18</sup>

Modern scholarly opinions of Blackmore largely concur with Pope's assessment. Clare Simmons writes of his 1723 work, *Alfred: An Epick Poem*, that: 'critics have yet to discover a redeeming feature in the twelve tedious cantos of rhyming couplets'.<sup>19</sup> Still, as Joanne Parker notes, the value of Blackmore's work is not in the quality of rhyme alone, but as a piece of political writing: 'read in the context of pro-Hanoverian propaganda, the poem is fascinating in its attempt to make the foreign Frederick (George II's eldest son and the poem's dedicatee) a more acceptable prospect to his potential subjects. The poem was also clearly intended

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*from His Own MS. Copy, Which He Designed for the Press. To Which Are Added, Several Plates of the Antiquities, &c. Mentioned in His Works. Never Before Printed* (Oxford: Printed at the Clarendon-Press for J. and J. Fletcher in the Turl; and J. Pote at Eton, 1772), p. 24.

<sup>16</sup> Keynes, 'Cult of King Alfred', pp. 240–45.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 246–47.

<sup>18</sup> Alexander Pope, *The Dunciad: In Four Books*, ed. by Valerie Rumbold, Longman Annotated Texts, rev. ed. (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 187.

<sup>19</sup> Clare A. Simmons, *Reversing the Conquest: History and Myth in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990), p. 27.

as a didactic work for the benefit of the prince himself – demonstrating to him the value and antiquity of the British system of constitutional monarchy’.<sup>20</sup>

Blackmore’s *Alfred* was a small part of his enormously varied and productive writing career. As Valerie Rumbold points out in her annotations to Pope’s *Dunciad*, Richard Blackmore ‘could hardly be accused of writing for hire’.<sup>21</sup> He was born in 1674, in Wiltshire, the son of the wealthy attorney Robert Blackmore.<sup>22</sup> In addition to being a prolific poet, he was also a doctor. The success of his initial epic offering from 1695, *Prince Arthur*, an epic poem in ten books (to be followed by *King Arthur*, a twelve-book continuation in 1697) led to his appointment as Physician-in-Ordinary to William III (and later Queen Anne) and knighting. *Prince Arthur* is a fairly transparent encomium of William’s victories in the Glorious Revolution, and *Alfred* followed the same model of arguing for continuity between the British past and present, in particular with regards to the line of kingship.

The story of the poem is not Hearne’s version of Spelman, or even that of Asser’s *Life of King Alfred*. Though it takes as its main plot Alfred’s journey to Rome on pilgrimage as a young man, it branches off from the narrative of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* almost immediately. Alfred journeys to Italy from Africa over the sea, and is swept up in a terrible storm. He is washed up on the coast of Namibia, where he befriends the pagan king Halla, before journeying on. During his travels, he meets a Spanish hermit who was tutor to the princes of Spain before being cast out by the ‘lallites’,<sup>23</sup> is near tempted to his ruin by the daughter of the king of Sicily, and is given a tour of Heaven and Hell. Finally, he returns to England in order to roust the Danes in a final, triumphant battle, marries the daughter of the Danish chief, and:

[Takes] to fair *Eboracum* the Road,  
The City chosen for his Chief Abode.

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<sup>20</sup> Parker, *England’s Darling*, p. 62.

<sup>21</sup> Pope, *Dunciad*, p. 187.

<sup>22</sup> Flavio Gregori, ‘Blackmore, Sir Richard (1654–1729)’, in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. by B. Harrison and H. C. G. Matthew (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>23</sup> That is, Lollards – though by the eighteenth century this had become a catch-all term for heretics, rather than referring to the fourteenth- and sixteenth-century religious movement.

And now attend[s] with a noble Train  
The British Monarch from *Cunetio's* Plain  
D[oes] to the Banks of spreading Thames retreat  
And ma[kes] *Augusta* his imperial Seat.<sup>24</sup>

The future, Alfred has already been prophetically assured, is secured: from his line will eventually come 'Fred'rick, just and bright'.<sup>25</sup>

Blackmore's poem, however, remains anxious about this bright future. It goes out of its way to describe the fates of those who stray from Christian doctrine, or oppose English colonial ambition – the king of India and his subjects burn among 'Fiends' and 'raging Flames'.<sup>26</sup> The tutor to the Spanish princes, after furnishing them with a lengthy speech on the value of Christian mercy and good governance, is ousted from his position by the 'lallites', who compose tortuous 'Works of ingenious Cruelty, for those who would not Christian Liberty betray, / And yield the Church to Arbitrary Sway'.<sup>27</sup> *Alfred*, thematically, is plagued with contradiction and anxiety over the subject matter. Fredrick, 'just and bright', will inherit the throne, but the Spanish court, well-guided by the hermit, still falls to deception, heresy, and internal schism.

Given the focus on paganism in the introduction to the poem, the heavy emphasis it places on Christian heresies seems misplaced. It exists, however, in continuation of Blackmore's other work and personal concerns. The mirror of princes, as a genre, is designed first of all to serve as an instruction to princes and rulers – though, as Hans-Joachim Schmidt argues, these books and poems often saw wide circulation and also contained 'discussion of political issues which were not enshrined in mere personal morality'.<sup>28</sup> The advice given to princes was also advice directed at the nation. Blackmore, as a theological writer, was deeply

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<sup>24</sup> Richard Blackmore, *Alfred An Epick Poem. In Twelve Books* (London: Printed by W. Botham, for James Knapton, 1723), p. 448.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 287 and 292.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 278–83.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>28</sup> Schmidt, 'The Use of Mirrors of Princes', pp. 473–74.

concerned with the rise of dissenting movements to the Church of England in the eighteenth century.<sup>29</sup>

The epic poem *Alfred* was predated by Blackmore's *Letters of Religion between Theophilus and Eugenio* (1720), a tract in the epistolary format featuring Theophilus (lit. 'Friend of God') explaining virtue to Eugenio (lit. 'well-born' or 'noble'.) The letters were followed by *Modern Arians Unmask'd* (1721). In *Arians*, Blackmore argues stridently against what Robert Ingram terms 'the prevailing heresy of England in the first half of the eighteenth century,' the non-trinitarian beliefs being put forwards by theologians like William Whiston.<sup>30</sup> Blackmore compared the 'Modern Arians' directly to the banned practice of Catholicism, arguing that they 'maintain[ed] Opinions no less absurd in Religion' than the Catholic doctrine of the eucharist, 'for which our pious Reformers, to their immortal Honour, renounced the Communion of that Church'.<sup>31</sup> *Alfred's* lengthy interlude dealing with heretics infiltrating an otherwise pious court – a common contemporary anti-Catholic trope – extends the parallel made between the practice of Catholicism and dissenting movements in *Arians*. *Alfred* was written not only as an assurance of Prince Frederick's right to rule, but also as a general warning regarding the contemporary state of British religion.

As a tract about the dangers of heresy, *Alfred* makes its point quite emphatically. As a medievalist text, it is remarkably unconvinced of its own core argument: that English antiquity is as valuable and worthy as the Greek or Roman one. Authority, in *Alfred*, still comes from Rome, centring Roman Britain in an early medieval narrative set after the end of the Roman empire.

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<sup>29</sup> Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837*, rev. ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 19.

<sup>30</sup> Robert G. Ingram, 'How Heterodox Was Benjamin Hoadly?', in *Religious Identities in Britain, 1660–1832*, ed. by William Gibson and Robert G Ingram (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 71–90 (p. 69).

<sup>31</sup> Richard Blackmore, *Modern Arians Unmask'd Idolatry Fix'd upon Them; Their Criminal Manner of Subscribing to Articles of Faith; Their Insincerity and Double-Dealing: Greater Difficulties on the Arian, than on the Orthodox Side; The Doctrine of the First Pernicious to the Commonwealth: The Orthodox Persuaded to Exert Themselves in Opposition to This Spreading Heresy. By Sir Richard Blackmore, M. D.* (London: Printed at the Bible and Crown in the Poultry, near Cheapside, for John Clark, 1721), p. 6.

York is not allowed to be *Ebor*, *York*, or the period-appropriate *Jorvík*, but retains its anachronistic Latin name, *Eboracum*, – just as Alfred is from *Cunetio*, dwells in *Augusta*, and must go to Italy before assuming his empire-building destiny, just as Aeneas did.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, at a narrative level, the poem imposes the structure of the *Aeneid* onto the English Middle Ages. Despite these attempts to appeal to a literary audience which valued Classical poetry as the pinnacle of the form, *Alfred* saw much less success than the earlier *King Arthur*, and has, as mentioned above, not fared well posthumously.<sup>33</sup> It shares, however, several notable features – the comparison of King Alfred to Frederick of Wales, the future succession of kings being shown to Alfred – with a far more popular work which was written twenty years later.

In the summer of 1740, to celebrate the third birthday of the young Princess Augusta, *Alfred: A Masque* was first performed at Cliveden House in Buckinghamshire. The audience was the Prince of Wales, Frederick, and his wife and family.<sup>34</sup> Though Thomas Arne's (1710–78) name is the one largely attached to the masque – he wrote the musical accompaniment and provided the theatrical connections – the masque itself was written by David Mallet (1705–65) and the poet and playwright James Thomson (1700–48). The masque dealt with the period of Alfred's life where the Danes had him cornered on Athelney, at what was, essentially, his lowest point: the Kingdom of Wessex beset by Danes, and Alfred driven into the far reaches of his own lands, before turning the tide of war and emerging triumphant.

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<sup>32</sup> Blackmore, *Alfred. An Epick Poem*, p. 448.

<sup>33</sup> In the eighteenth century, Old English was seen as a less compelling an artistic medium than even modern English. Thomas Warton, in his *History of English Poetry*, notably claimed that Old English poetry was too 'jejune and intricate' to bother with: Thomas Warton, *The History of English Poetry, from the Close of the Eleventh to the Commencement of the Eighteenth Century. To Which Are Prefixed, Two Dissertations. I. On the Origin of Romantic Fiction in Europe. II. On the Introduction of Learning into England* (London: Printed for, and sold by J. Dodsley, Pall Mall; J. Walter, Charing Cross; T. Becket, Strand; J. Robson, New Bond-Street; G. Robinson, and J. Bew, Pater-Noster-Row; and Messrs. Fletcher, at Oxford, 1774), p. vii.

<sup>34</sup> David Mallet and James Thomson, *Alfred: A Masque. Represented before Their Royal Highnesses the Prince and Princess of Wales, at Clifffden, on the first of August, 1740* (London: Printed for a Millar, over-against St Clement's Church in the Strand, 1740).

By the mid-seventeenth century, high-profile masques that linked patriotic displays of Englishness with encomia of the royal family had become a popular genre. Examples included *Brittania Triumphans* (1638) by Inigo Jones and William Davenant, showcasing the powerful fleet of Charles I (and justifying the incredibly unpopular tax to support this navy), and *The Subjects Joy for the Kings Restoration* (1660) by Anthony Sadler, performed on the occasion of Charles II's return from exile.<sup>35</sup> Medieval – or pseudo-medieval – subject matter had also been used to introduce such themes prior to *Alfred*, notably in John Dryden and Henry Purcell's *King Arthur, or the British Worthy* (1691) which, in addition to featuring a British king fighting heathen invaders, saw 'Britannia rise / In triumph o'er the main' to assert naval supremacy.<sup>36</sup>

In Arne, Mallet, and Thomson's masque, Alfred is given shelter by a shepherd and his wife, who recognise his innate nobility. Despairing at losing England to the Vikings, a hermit, aided by divine spirits, shows Alfred and his wife, Eltruda, a series of visions. Edward III (r. 1327–77) and his wife Philippa and son the Black Prince, Queen Elizabeth I (r. 1558–1603), and William III (r. 1689–1702) all appear before Alfred and Eltruda. The Hermit explains that they are their glorious descendants and details their martial victories against the French and Spanish. After these visions, Alfred receives news that his followers have rallied to fight the Danes and prepares to ride out to join them – but not before the hermit professes that Britain will 'grasp the world: All nations serve thee; every foreign flood, Subjected, pays its tribute to the Thames'.<sup>37</sup>

The figures appear before Alfred, who is imagined as an *incipient* British king. On stage, the kings and queens also appeared before the audience – the Prince of Wales and his wife.. Likewise, Prince Fredrick was 'present' and visible to King Alfred like Edward III and Elizabeth I; an oblique flattery which is not explicitly called out in the text. It was a mirror designed to flatter Frederick, casting him at once as an analogue to King Alfred, and as one of the worthy descendants who carry on Alfred's military legacy, just as he is presented in

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<sup>35</sup> Lauren Shohet, *Reading Masques* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 191.

<sup>36</sup> Henry Purcell and John Dryden, *King Arthur, or the English Worthy*, Act V, at *OperaGlass*, 2015 <<http://opera.stanford.edu/Purcell/KingArthur/libretto.html>> [accessed 18 July 2024].

<sup>37</sup> Mallet and Thomson, *Alfred: A Masque*, p. 44.

Blackmore's poem. It is also, as a mirror, much less interested in instruction than Blackmore's, preferring outright praise.

In 1740 England was at war with Spain, and there were severe ongoing tensions with France which would eventually lead to the Seven Years' War. The play raised the spectres of British royals who had successfully won battles against the Spanish and French, as well as embracing a deeply ahistorical focus on naval power with regards to Alfred's reign which culminates in the assertion that 'they rule the balanc'd world, who rule the main'.<sup>38</sup> British colonial aspiration through naval supremacy was legitimised by showing a version of Britain at its lowest point – a king disguised as a shepherd and a country limited to the marshes in which he is hiding – and then casting the retaking of the country from invaders as part of the same, divinely sanctioned military reversal as Britain's later colonial aspirations.

It is worth noting, here, that there are two main versions of the *Alfred* masque. The original masque was fairly short and written for a small cast: six main players, and various 'bards, soldiers, spirits'.<sup>39</sup> However, the masque was reworked by David Mallet in 1751 as a play for Drury Lane. He expanded the play significantly, adding several new songs and roles.<sup>40</sup> Additionally, large parts of the original were cut. Mallet maintains that of '[Thomson's] part, [he retains] three or four speeches, and part of one song'.<sup>41</sup> The two plays do differ in some regards, one of which is the 1740 version's strong emphasis on Alfred's function as a messianic figure. Corin, the shepherd offering Alfred shelter, describes him as like 'some saint or angel in disguise', and wishes for vengeance on 'those Danish infidels, that war with Heaven and us'.<sup>42</sup> Likewise, at times Alfred approaches comparisons to Christ. He is both king and father to the British people, his life 'held in trust' for them – an exchange he pleads with God to let him make:

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<sup>38</sup> Mallet and Thomson, *Alfred: A Masque*, p. 44.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, advertisement, p. 3.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, advertisement, p. 3.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 6, 9–10.

And hear, eternal Justice!  
If my life can make atonement for them, King of Kings!  
Accept thy willing victim. On my head  
Be all their woes:  
To them be grace and mercy.<sup>43</sup>

The Christ analogy dovetails neatly with the general defence of divine right of kingship Alfred's name carried in the mid-eighteenth century. The King of kings' relationship with his flock is one of sacrifice followed by rightful rule and eternal glory. In mirroring this relationship in the play, Alfred's kingship is set up to carry the same weight of divine preordination and foreshadows a similar trajectory from a dark night of doubt to eternal kingship – though it is an eternal kingship through his prophesied successors, rather than his own return.

Some subtler analogies are also only extant in the 1740 masque. Corin says of Athelney that:

This island is of strength.  
Nature's own hand hath planted round a deep defence of woods,  
The founding ash, the mighty oak;  
Each tree a sheltering grove.<sup>44</sup>

Alfred's island is warded about by a girdle of trees, given by nature. When the play tips over into a celebration of England's naval power in the second act, the oak ships warding Britain at sea, this protection is likewise understood to be bestowed by nature itself: a natural naval supremacy, the right order of things.

The favour bestowed by God on England and on Alfred's line is shown to endure across time, through the regnal list. Edward III, 'Belov'd of Heaven,' wields an army 'as if this King had summon'd from on high Heaven's dread artillery to fight his battle!', while still showing 'care paternal' for the public.<sup>45</sup> Elizabeth rousts the 'faithless sons of barbarous zeal', though England after her

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<sup>43</sup> Mallet and Thomson, *Alfred: A Masque*, p. 14.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

reign is ruled by the ‘slave of dreaming monks’.<sup>46</sup> There is an elision of the years between James I and William III, which allows the masque to cast the staunchly Protestant William III as the scourge of Catholicism in England, by ‘Heaven upraise[d]’, as ‘before him flies superstition, flies oppressive Power’.<sup>47</sup> Alfred cheers on English Protestantism and William III, Prince Frederick’s grandfather – about as direct an endorsement of Frederick’s line as possible, and a complete reversal of Hearne’s argument regarding Alfred’s lineage and relationship to the Catholic Stuarts.

When going through these rulers, Thomson and Mallet sweep any mention of the pre-reform church under the rug. Like most contemporary Old English scholars, they are happy to view the English church from Alfred’s time as essentially right-thinking, the same church as the eighteenth-century Anglican Church. Unlike early eighteenth-century Old English scholars like George Hickes and Elizabeth Elstob, they present the legacy of that church as an unbroken continuum, avoiding mention of the Reformation altogether. This suits the disparate goals of the texts. While the circle of scholars surrounding George Hickes was keen to argue for a restoration, to defend the changes made during the Reformation (and their validity against encroaching variant versions of Protestantism), the story of the *Alfred* masque is one of continuity. It papers over the interregnum and various succession crises of the seventeenth and early eighteenth century in favour of a vision of a direct, divinely sanctioned line of kings. Introducing an interlude on the Reformation would run directly counter to the point.

This struggle to present an unbroken royal line characterises both plays. One of the main issues plaguing Blackmore’s vision is that it confidently *suggests* the notion of continuity – as in the masque, Alfred has a dream vision of future England – while undermining the narrative about early English kingship put forward by contemporary historians.<sup>48</sup> Focusing the narrative on what, historically, was Alfred’s journey to Rome to be blessed by the pope jars with the medievalist notion of a proto-Anglican king; insisting on Latin language for

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<sup>46</sup> Mallet and Thomson, *Alfred: A Masque*, pp. 33–34.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 287 and 292.

English cities undermines the idea of a semi-independent early English state ruled by a model of good kingship, instead casting further back to Britain as a peripheral Roman outpost. It conflicts with the post-Reformation narrative in Old English medievalism which focused on a Germanic, proto-Anglican Britain – and more importantly, re-centred British antiquity on Rome, a contentious approach, given the degree to which the succession crisis leading to the Hanover dynasty was tied in with anxiety about Catholic kingship.

A story emphasising the Latin roots of England, focusing on a Germanic king travelling to Italy to genuflect to the pope, while admonishing him to beware heretics, presents a number of contradictions, none of which Blackmore addresses in the play itself. The contemporary historical narrative regarding the period, the literary positioning of the poem as a Classical epic, and the political considerations of the period all being given space in the poem results in a disjointed narrative, uncertain of its own argument. In this sense, it is an excellent distillation of the debates surrounding English national identity during the period, which sought identity from Mediterranean antiquity, while still seeking to distance itself from it.

Meanwhile, Thomson and Mallet present a similar narrative of divinely sanctioned continuity through the British regnal line (with similarly near-hagiographical approaches to kingship). Their model of kingship and nation is a good deal more coherent. England, they argue, has always been ruled by a line of divinely sanctioned rulers, destined to lead England into an age of naval supremacy. Their Alfred emerges from the Somerset fens to lead England to victory, though in a play which spends nearly as much time on the future as the early medieval present; Alfred sees the visions of his descendants, and, in the 1740 masque, defeats the Danes off-stage – the continuity of the royal line is the main thrust of the argument, even the contemporary action. Alfred exists in an atemporal state, in which the present regards the past, which in turn regards the present and finds it all the same: De Certeau's modernist history taken to a recursive extreme in order to assure the audience that everything is as it should be – and always has been.