

“The Play of Elves”: Supernatural Peripheries and Disrupted Kingship in Layamon’s *Brut**

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ABOUT the same time that Robert de Boron introduced the sword and the stone into the Arthurian mythos, the English poet Layamon used a different means to mark out the young Arthur for kingship.¹ He had shadowy *aluen* (elves) attend the future king’s birth and portend his reign. The elves resurface at two other key points in Layamon’s telling of the Arthurian story. They haunt the eerily preternatural Loch Lomond, where Arthur pursues and then pardons the Scottish rebels. Finally, they dwell on the Island of Avalon, where the dying Arthur is carried to be healed of his wounds, and from which his eventual return is prophesied. Layamon’s elves, as peripheral figures, transcend the definite categories otherwise so prevalent throughout his *Brut*. Yet, despite their peripherality, the elves are inextricably woven into the narrative of the text’s most central figure. Arthur has one foot in the concrete world of military power, and the other in a realm of preternatural outsiders. Previous scholarship has

used this duality as a basis for psychoanalytic readings of the text.² In this essay, I propose a different approach.

Eric Stanley has noted that Layamon “exemplifies what good and bad kings are and do, but he does not assess kingship theoretically.”³ Arthur’s involvement with the elves, however, reveals Layamon developing a sophisticated critique of kingship in which the ideal king lies at the periphery rather than at the centre of society. In what follows, I argue that Layamon uses Arthur to undermine contemporary models of kingship and paradigms of kingly power. The preternatural Arthur is mythologised — consigned to a consciously literary sphere. This Arthur promises a restored society. The military Arthur, by contrast, succumbs to the patterns of violence and brutality that characterise both his predecessors and his successors. Previous scholarship has argued that the *Brut* looks to a golden future, and uses the prophecies of Arthur’s return to inspire hope, action, and change.⁴ I argue that Layamon’s project is as much concerned with the present as it is with the future. The text associates its ideal king with the peripheral realm of folklore, thereby liberating him from temporal and historical processes. The text’s power lies in its reconfiguration of the present moment of its original readers. Arthur, as a literary figure, is as much present now as he ever has been or ever will be. The text is, therefore, more than consolation for present misfortune. It refigures the marginalised English audience, imbuing them with a social agency and responsibility that derives from vernacular literary and narrative traditions rather than from the power of the king.

Priest, Poet, and Paradox: Layamon’s Contradictions

Layamon’s *Brut* is an epic born from the interstices. It emerges from a nexus of cultural, linguistic, and political intersections. Its author was a priest of Anglo-Saxon descent, and yet it demonises the Saxon conquerors of Britain. Its immediate source was French courtly verse, but its audience was made up of the lower, marginalised classes. It was written

in Worcestershire, in Norman England, close to the Welsh Marches, but its language and style are resolutely English and its heroes Celtic. It draws stylistically from a poetic tradition that survived only orally (if it survived at all), and uses a dialect that must have been nearly obsolete at the time, intelligible only within the near vicinity of its composition.⁵ It is an enormous text, spanning some 16,096 lines; and yet, someone went to the incredible expense and effort of preserving it in at least three manuscripts.⁶ It steps into a void, lacking any contemporary English literary context or precedent. Jane Roberts pithily encapsulates the situation: “[s]uddenly, as if from nowhere, there appears the first great telling of the story of Britain in English.”⁷ The *Brut* is, in short, a text rife with contradictions — a text that has stimulated and vexed scholars ever since Frederic Madden rendered it widely accessible to the modern world in his edition of 1847.⁸

The *Brut* is largely an early Middle English translation of Wace’s *Roman de Brut*, which was itself an Anglo-Norman verse rendition of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s Latin *Historia Regum Britanniae*. All three texts naturally share much in common. They tell how Aneas’ great-grandson, Brutus, leads a contingent of Trojan survivors to the Island of Britain (then known as Albion) to establish a new civilisation. Numerous kings come and go from that time on, conquering and being conquered, overthrowing and being overthrown. The high point in the story is the reign of King Arthur. Geoffrey was the first writer to provide a beginning-to-end account of Arthur’s life and rule, which caught the imagination of both continental and insular writers for centuries to come. Wace’s *Arthuriad* is more or less faithful to Geoffrey’s, but with some significant additions, one of the most notable being the Round Table.⁹ Layamon expands further upon Wace, usually introducing dialogue and dramatising scenes that Geoffrey and Wace were both content to summarise.

One of the central problems posed by the *Brut* is how to reconcile the rigid but conflicting categories that so thoroughly suffuse the text. While Marie-Françoise Alamichel observes that “[t]he universe of the *Brut* is all in black and white, with the pagans and evil on the one hand and the Christians and good on the other,” the very existence of the

text itself relentlessly frustrates such rigid classification.¹⁰ The most obvious contradiction is the difference between the author's cultural identity and the identity of the text's heroes. The Celtic Britons are celebrated as the rightful rulers of the Island of Britain; by contrast, Layamon's Saxon ancestors are reduced to savage, treacherous, uncivilised conquerors. Further, the language and style of the text are rooted in the Anglo-Saxon poetic tradition, despite the text's uncompromising denigration of the people who produced that tradition. The poet's *modus operandi* is to establish ostensibly fixed categories within the narrative while simultaneously disrupting them by writing the narrative.

More recent readings of the *Brut* have yielded a portrait of its author as a critical, careful thinker whose work exposes the complex underpinnings of cultural exchange and appropriation in something approximating a postcolonial society. The narrative Layamon retells had already acquired a substantial political charge as a counterpoise to the dominant Anglo-Norman historiography of the early twelfth century. Anglo-Norman historians interpreted the Conquest of 1066 as the latest in a series of divinely ordained punishments of Britain.¹¹ Kenneth Tiller has argued that Geoffrey, in flagrant opposition to his contemporaries, substitutes military power for divine providence as the driving force in his *Historia*. Victory in battle was therefore no longer demonstrative of divine approbation. In Geoffrey's telling, "history itself becomes absorbed into the power-plays of rulers and their conquests."¹²

The subversiveness of Geoffrey's text was somewhat mitigated by its composition in Latin and its dedication to members of the Norman nobility. Layamon's vernacular adaptation of Geoffrey's narrative, however, invited the subjugated English to embrace a model of history that potentially delegitimised Norman rule. Tiller consequently argues that the *Brut* is nothing less than "the first post-Colonial historical text in English."¹³ Kelley Wickham-Crowley similarly finds Layamon to be an "anthropologist, a sympathetic translator and recorder of British/Welsh myth and history."¹⁴ Daniel Helbert even goes so far as to compare the poet with Karl Marx, inasmuch as both Layamon and Marx share an "intention to not merely interpret the world, but to

change it.”¹⁵ All these observations underscore an important paradox. Layamon’s framing of opposite categories — Briton and Saxon, pagan and Christian — reveals an acute sensitivity to the dynamics of intercultural encounters. The poet is keenly attentive to boundaries and what lies between them.

Readings such as these have typically focused on the *Brut* either as historiography or as political prophecy — two genres from which it draws extensively. Critics, however, have said less about the generic fusion that emerges from the intersection of the mundane with the marvellous. Much that is typical of the romance is present in Layamon’s sources, such as the giants who inhabit Albion before the Trojans, and the giant of Mont St Michel. Nevertheless, one of Layamon’s most striking (and strikingly understudied) innovations is the addition of what Cyril Edwards describes as “a deliberately constructed elfin framework” to the Arthurian narrative.¹⁶ In the cases considered thus far, Layamon’s text disrupts the categories that his narrative establishes. The elves, however, are different. The elves, as peripheral figures, channel Layamon’s disruptiveness into the narrative fabric of the *Brut* itself.

Layamon is notoriously vague about the nature of his *aluen*. For over half a century, scholars have debated whether the elves amount to evidence that Layamon used Celtic or Germanic sources that Geoffrey and Wace did not. The debates have proved inconclusive. Barron and Weinberg maintain that the word *aluen* itself is simply too generic to yield any details, used as it was to denote classical creatures such as dryads, nymphs, and the like.¹⁷ Edwards identifies the similarity between the elves at Arthur’s birth and the fairy godmother characters so ubiquitous in folklore.¹⁸ Françoise le Saux notes that such creatures are common enough in the folklore of the day, and thus the elves in the *Brut*, “whatever their exact origin, were part of general medieval culture.”¹⁹ The elves’ significance for the *Brut*, then, lies in their status as peripheral figures, rather than in their origin in any single cultural folkloric tradition.

Medieval elves and fairies are quintessential outsiders. Helen Cooper notes that they are “unassimilable” since they “occupy that dangerous borderland that cannot be controlled by human will and

is not susceptible to the normal operations of prayer.”²⁰ C. S. Lewis similarly describes them as “marginal, fugitive creatures” that “intrude a welcome hint of wildness and uncertainty into” the medieval universe.²¹ The elves are out of place; they are at home neither in Christian theology nor the practical politics of kingship and military power.²² Elves and fairies are typical of the romance as a genre, whether or not their existence was believed.²³ Tiller notes that Layamon’s inclusion of them “fuses motifs associated with history and romance.”²⁴ Edwards likewise concludes that Layamon is “grafting on to the *Historia* some motifs which by the late twelfth and early thirteenth century had become common.”²⁵ Layamon’s appropriation of the elves, however, is more than the simple interpolation of elements from contemporary heroic tales into the Arthurian narrative. The juxtaposition of historical and folkloric, realistic and romantic modes reinterprets Arthur’s role in the Galfridian narrative of British history, and reshapes the significance of that history for its readers. Comparison of the three elfin episodes in the *Brut* with their sources in Wace’s *Roman de Brut* and Geoffrey’s *Historia* reveals Layamon’s simultaneous valorisation of Arthur as myth and denigration of Arthur as man.

Elfin Episodes: Geoffrey, Wace, and Layamon

Arthur’s story, stretching from his notoriously sordid conception at Tintagel to his eventual departure for the Island of Avalon, constitutes almost a quarter of Geoffrey’s *Historia*. Kristen Lee Over argues that Geoffrey’s *Arthuriad* is a microcosm of the *Historia* as a whole. In particular, “Arthur’s conception ... reiterates that success and glory in Britain’s cyclic history follow, if not stem directly from, betrayal and deception.”²⁶ Even during Arthur’s reign, force and violence are the rule of the day. In Over’s words, “wealth and pomp can only simulate what Geoffrey prioritises both narratively and descriptively as proper political power — military victory.”²⁷ Wace closely follows Geoffrey’s text. Layamon’s *Brut* also retains the infamous story of Arthur’s con-

ception. Merlin uses a spell to disguise Uther as Igraine's husband Gorlois, Duke of Cornwall. Uther sneaks into the fortress at Tintagel and sleeps with Igraine. Layamon's account of Arthur's birth, however, indicates that this Arthur is not subject to the same dark cycle his inauspicious origins might suggest.

Geoffrey and Wace both let Arthur's birth go by with barely a mention. Geoffrey recounts it after Uther's troops have successfully taken Tintagel. Uther and Igraine "progenueruntque filium et filiam. Fuit autem nomen filii Arturus, filiae uero Anna" ["brought forth a son and a daughter. The name of the son was Arthur, and the name of the daughter was Anna"].²⁸ Wace is similarly brief, writing of Igraine: "La nuit ot un fiz cunceü / E al terme ad un fiz cü, / Artur ot nun; de sa bunté / Ad grant parole puis esté. / Emprés Artur fu Anna nee" ["She had conceived a son that night and in due course bore him. His name was Arthur: his greatness has been celebrated ever since. After Arthur, Anna was born"].²⁹ Layamon takes a decidedly different approach: "Ʒe time com Ʒe wes icoren; Ʒa wes Arður iboren. / Sone swa he com an eorðe; aluen hine iuengen. / heo bigolen Ʒat child; mid galdere swiðe stronge." ["When the chosen time had come, Arthur was born. As soon as he came upon the earth, the elves took him. They enchanted the child with very strong magic"] (ll.9608–9610).³⁰ Arthur, the central figure in the text, receives the kingly virtues of nobility, strength, generosity, and longevity from the most shadowy and vague of peripheral figures.

The elves also obscure Arthur's relations with his own family. At the syntactic level, the passive "Ʒa wes Arður iboren" avoids mention of both his father Uther and mother Igraine. This is followed by eight lines of elven intervention before we are finally told that "[æ]fter Arður wes iboren; Ʒeo ædie burde / heo wes ihaten Æne. Ʒat ædien maiden" ["After Arthur, a noble lady was born. She was named Anna, the noble maiden."] (ll. 9617–18). Details of their relation are omitted; only the temporal sequence of their births appears. Grammar, as much as narrative, extricates Arthur from his family and anchors him among preternatural outsiders.

The intervention of the elves “[s]one swa he com an eorðe” effectively severs Arthur from his father’s deception and treachery. Arthur’s reign, although permeated with violence, is not simply business as usual for the Island of Britain. Concerning Arthur’s kingdom, “ne mihte nauere nan man; bi-þenchen of blissen. / þat weoren in æi þeode. mare þan i þisse. / ne mihte nauere mon-cunne; nan swa muchel wunne. / swa wes mid Arðure; & mid his folke here” [“Never could anyone imagine that there was joy in any nation greater than there was here. Nor could anyone comprehend how much happiness there was amidst Arthur and his people”] (ll. 11342–45). The elves disrupt the patterns of kingship that have prevailed up to this point.

Nevertheless, there is a distinct duality in Arthur’s persona. Alamichel accordingly describes Layamon’s king as “an ambivalent being with conflicting traits.”³¹ On the one hand, Layamon applies distinctly Christological and Eucharistic imagery to depict Arthur as a wise and generous saviour. On the other hand, Arthur is, as Alamichel notes, “a hard, even pitiless man dreaded by his entourage.”³² He is as capable of incredible violence and cruelty as the Saxon invaders he repels. Like Geoffrey’s Arthur, Layamon’s is driven mad by the sight of blood and laughs in the midst of slaughter. His imperialistic ambitions to conquer Rome eventually lead to the disintegration of the realm he leaves behind while on his campaign. Alamichel reads the ambivalence in Arthur as emblematic of the character’s psychology, but it has further implications for the text’s statement about history and kingship. The mythic Arthur is a saviour. As a mythic figure, he escapes the historical exigencies that produce the brutality of the military Arthur. The intersection of periphery and centre redeems a mythologised Arthur from the sins of Uther.

The elves reappear when Arthur’s campaign against the Scottish rebels takes him to Loch Lomond. Geoffrey and Wace both have Hoel, Arthur’s Breton cousin, remark on the beauty of the place. Geoffrey writes that “explorat Hoelus situm praedicti stagni ammiraturque tot flumina, tot insulas, tot rupes, tot nidos aquilarum eodem numero adesse” [“Hoel examined the nature of the foresaid body of water, and marvelled that so many rivers, so many isles, so many cliffs, and so

many eagles' nests were present in equal number"].³³ According to Wace, "Tut ad a merveille tenu / Quanque il ad illuec veü" ["Whatever he saw there he considered extraordinary"].³⁴ Layamon, however, describes the location in much darker terms. It is "a seolcuð mere; iset a middel-ærde / mid fenne & mid ræode" ["a strange lake set in this middle-earth, with marshland and reed"] (l. 10849–50), filled "mid uniuiele þingen" ["with wicked things"] (l. 10851). More pointedly, he states that "nikeres þer ba[ð]ieð inne. / þer is æluene ploze; in atteliche pole" ["water monsters swim therein; there is the play of elves in that hideous pool"] (ll. 10852–53). Here the elves imbue the physical geography with a sense of preternatural menace. Alamichel accordingly reads "this land of darkness, this disquieting and agonizing place" as an image of Hell.³⁵

The earlier beneficence of the elves appears to have evaporated, but the events that unfold at Loch Lomond make the situation more complex. Henri Lefebvre argues that peripheral paths outside towns and villages are neither "perceived as lying within nature [nor] as outside it" when they are not in use.³⁶ Rather, "people animate these paths and roads, networks and itineraries through accounts of mythical 'presences,' genies and good or evil spirits."³⁷ Layamon's characters, however, come to occupy the haunted space at the same time as its preternatural inhabitants, and their behaviour is affected accordingly.

Arthur initially drives the Scottish rebels into Loch Lomond and, after killing a good number of them, decides to starve out the survivors. At dawn on the third day, a procession of Scottish clergy and women approach the king in his encampment. In one of Layamon's most heart-rending speeches, the women plead for the lives of the survivors. They remind Arthur that he is a Christian, and yet has treated them worse than the pagan Saxons had: "Heo us duden swiðe wa; & þu us dest al swa. / þa heðene us hatieð; & þe Cristine us sari makieð. ... / We beoð under uote; a þe is al þa bote" ["(The Saxons) caused us great woe, and you are doing exactly the same; the heathen hates us, and the Christian creates sorrow for us. ... We are underfoot. The only remedy is in your hands."] (ll. 10934–35, 42). There, in the ominous shadow of the elf-haunted Loch Lomond, Arthur is uncharacteristically moved

to compassion and pardons the traitors. Mercy and menace are juxtaposed. If the play of elves has an impact on human affairs in this episode, then it is a decidedly propitious one.

Nearby is another wondrous pool, this one four-cornered. Geoffrey and Wace both state that nobody knows whether it is the work of nature or human artifice. For Geoffrey, it may have been “siue hominum arte siue natura constitutum” [“established either by the skill of men or by nature”].³⁸ Wace’s Arthur states that “Jo ne sai se huem l’enginna / U nature l’apareilla” [“I don’t know whether man contrived it or nature created it”].³⁹ Layamon, on the contrary, confidently affirms “alfene hine dulfen” [“elves dug it”] (l. 10978). The pool has another peculiar characteristic, common to all three texts. Four types of fish inhabit the water, but each stays in its own corner. No one ever born has been wise enough to understand “what letted þene fisc; to uleoten to þan oðere. / for nis þer noht bitwenen; buten water clæne” [“what hinders the fish from swimming to the other corners, for there is nothing separating them but clear water”] (10984–85). Alamichel describes the lake as “the very image of dispersion,” and takes it as a mirror of Arthur’s divided psychology.⁴⁰ Once again, however, Layamon’s adaptation of his sources involves the elves disrupting otherwise fixed boundaries. The fish cannot leave their corners, but the elves created the whole lake.

The categories of Christian and pagan, Briton and Saxon, that otherwise permeate the text break down in the ambivalent presence of the elves in the northern reaches of Arthur’s kingdom. Here Arthur appears in his capacity as peacemaker rather than conqueror. Christopher Cannon has argued that Layamon frequently utilises the genre of the *chorographia*, conflating land and history in a “merging of map and narrative.”⁴¹ Cannon does not address the depiction of Loch Lomond, but it corresponds with his analysis all the same. The haunted geography and the events that take place in it are intimately interwoven. Arthur’s behaviour there contrasts sharply with the savage punishment he metes out to brawlers at the Yuletide feast at his London court where he says, in a passage absent from Layamon’s sources: “Nimeð me þene ilke mon; ... / & doð wiððe an his sweore; & drazeð

hine to ane more. ... / þer he scal ligger. ... / and nimeð al his nexte cun; þa ze mazen iuinden. / and swengeð of þa hafden; mid breoden eouwer sweorden” [Bring to me that very man, and put rope on his neck, and drag him to a moor; ... there he shall lie ... and seize all his nearest kin that you can find, and lop off their heads with your broad swords] (ll. 11394–95; 11396–98). At Loch Lomond, the king heeds the women’s pleas for their relatives. At court, Arthur has the brawlers’ female relatives disfigured (ll. 11399–400). The disparity could hardly be more severe. The king is compassionate in the outer reaches of his kingdom, surrounded by an uncanny elven landscape. He is a merciless tyrant at home.

Lefebvre argues that “social space ‘incorporates’ social actions.”⁴² In his theory, “the spatial practice of a society is revealed through the deciphering of its space.”⁴³ The contrast between Loch Lomond and London exposes the violence inherent in a society oriented around earthly kingship. The elves at Loch Lomond, like the elves at Arthur’s birth, serve to solidify the difference between Arthur and the other kings in the chronicle. Arthur is most unlike his predecessors when he is most associated with the elves — that is, when he is most peripheral. He is most like his predecessors, however, when he gazes out with a conqueror’s eye from the centre of his realm. Arthur is the messianic king of prophecy when he is with the elves. When he is not with them, he is Uther’s son.

Finally, the elves appear at the close of Layamon’s *Arthuriad*. Like Geoffrey and Wace, Layamon has Arthur mortally wounded in the battle against his nephew, Mordred, at Camlann. In all three texts, Arthur is borne away to the Island of Avalon to recover from his wounds. Geoffrey states in his spare prose that “ille rex Arturus letaliter uulneratus est; qui illinc ad sananda uulnera sua in insulam Auallonis euectus” [“the king, Arthur, was fatally wounded; he was taken from that place to the Island of Avalon for the healing of his wounds”].⁴⁴ Wace’s account is more poignant: “Arthur, si la geste ne ment, / Fud el cors nafrez mortelment; / En Avalon se fist porter / Pur ses plaies mediciner” [“Arthur, if the chronicle is true, received a mortal wound to his body. He had himself carried to Avalon, for the treatment

of his wounds.”].⁴⁵ Layamon alone gives Arthur a departing speech, and only Layamon mentions elves on the island. Arthur says, “And ich wulle uaren to Aualun; to uairest alre maidene. / to Argante þere quene; aluen swiðe sceone” [“And I will go to Avalon, to the fairest of all maidens, to Argante, the very beautiful queen of elves”] (ll. 14278–79). A small boat approaches from the sea, carrying two women. They take the king and bear him away. Layamon tells us the Britons believe that Arthur “wunnien in Aualun; mid fairest alre aluen” [“dwells in Avalon, with the fairest of all elves”] (l. 14292).

Conclusion: The Peripheral King

The elves that so dramatically marked Arthur’s birth also mark his departure. Just as they set him apart from any of his predecessors, they also close off his story, separating him from any of his successors. Layamon’s *Arthuriad*, unlike Geoffrey’s, is therefore not a microcosm of British history. There was a fleeting moment of utopian happiness on the Island, and — for Layamon — it did not emerge from the usual patterns of violence and warfare, treachery and deceit. If Layamon’s *Arthuriad* is not a microcosm of the chronicle, then what is it? Layamon’s *Brut* still ends up much the same way as Geoffrey’s *Historia*. Some two thousand lines after Arthur’s departure, Cadwallader, the last of the British kings, flees to the continent to escape the Saxon invaders. He gives up his kingdom and makes a pilgrimage to Rome, while the Saxons consolidate their control of Britain, now England.

Over has argued that Geoffrey’s conclusion is not as bleak for the British as it may initially appear. In the medieval mind, after all, fortune’s wheel is ever turning. The story of the chronicle has principally consisted of the cyclic rise and fall of kings. In Over’s words, Geoffrey’s “*Arthuriad* ... recreates in its conclusion the very bleakness required to call forth another Brutus or another Arthur.”⁴⁶ But this is precisely the sort of reading that Layamon’s elves preclude for the *Brut*. Arthur’s reign is not simply another revolution of Fortune’s wheel. Most of Layamon’s other kings follow the same cyclic patterns as Geoffrey’s,

but his Arthur inescapably stands apart from the rest. Arthur is most like his predecessors when he is immersed in the practical requirements of kingship. He is most unlike them when he is most closely associated with the elves, and it is with the elves that he now remains.

Layamon's Britons may hope for the king's eventual return (ll. 14291–93), but Arthur can only serve as a national saviour when he is a mythic figure and not a historical reality. The hope of Britain is truest to Arthur when it is a hope rather than a fulfilment. Geoffrey's readers must await the next conqueror in the cycle, but Layamon's readers have witnessed the cycle broken by the king who is present as a myth but absent as a reality. Layamon concludes his epic with an aphorism: "beo heonne-uorð also hit mæi. / i-wurðe þet iwurðe; i-wurðe Godes wille" ["Let it be henceforth as it will; let what happens happen; let God's will be done"] (ll. 16095–96). A peripheral king, one who haunts the imagination rather than ruling from the centre, offers a concrete security that transcends the instabilities of historical fortune.

Security of this kind is Arthur's greatest achievement, but it is not the achievement of an ordinary human king. Prior to Arthur's conception, Layamon's Merlin prophesies the heroic feats and victories of the coming king in a passage absent from Wace's text. He describes Arthur in grand, mythic language: "of his ezene scullen fleon; furene gleden. / ælc finger an his hond; scarp stelene brond" ["Sparks of fire shall shoot from his eyes, each finger on his hand a sharp steel brand"] (ll. 9414–15). The prophecy contains another particularly striking image: "of him scullen gleomen; godliche singen. / of his breosten scullen æten; aðele scopes. / scullen of his blode; beornes beon drunke" ["Minstrels shall sing wonderfully about him. Noble bards shall eat from his breast, and warriors shall become drunk with his blood"] (ll. 9411–13). The image has obvious Eucharistic overtones: the extraordinary king will nourish his people. He shall feed and sustain them by way of *gleomen* and *scopes* (minstrels and bards) for generations to come: "þe wile þe þis world stænt; ilæsten scal is worð-munt" ["as long as the world stands, his glory shall endure"] (l. 9408). His glory endures by way of songs and stories that embody the mythic qualities Merlin so vividly evokes. It does not endure by way of the king's continued

life or reign. Arthur's situation, alive with the elves but absent from his kingdom, defines the present moment in which the tales appear. The endurance of Arthur's glory and capacity to nourish his people therefore presuppose his absence.

The human Arthur is just as given to violence as any of the other British kings. The mythic, and therefore literary, Arthur transcends it. Tiller argues that Layamon's other great addition to the Arthurian story, Arthur's dream of his downfall, "provides a counter-statement to the vision of Arthur presented in two significant Merlinian prophecies."⁴⁷ The demythologised imagery of the vision "dramatizes an erosion of the Arthurian poetic tradition."⁴⁸ In this way, Tiller argues, the dream "suggests that the figure of the prophecies may be a fictional construct and that the prophecies themselves are to be doubted."⁴⁹ There is certainly no doubt that the bleakness of the vision stands opposed to the earlier celebrations of the mythologised hero. Tiller's reading, however, also sharply diverges from readings of the *Brut's* prophetic sections by Wickham-Crowley and Helbert. Wickham-Crowley, for instance, reads the *Brut* as a call "to make of the present that future which prophecies such as Merlin's promised."⁵⁰ She argues that Layamon, as a priest, "would have been familiar with preaching as a means to communicate morality and ethical behaviour," and so "he may have recognised a common goal between what he did as a preacher and what prophecy involved."⁵¹ Helbert interprets Layamon as a specifically anti-colonial writer who uses prophecy as "not just a prediction of the future" but as "a catalyst for the creation of that future."⁵²

The reading I have advanced here, based on the peripherality of Layamon's elves, offers a viable resolution to the debate. The demythologising that takes place in Arthur's dream of his downfall need not discount Merlin's prophecies. On the contrary, it further supports the division between the king as a historic figure and the king as a mythic figure. The prophecies of Merlin refer to the myth insofar as they describe Arthur's literary legacy, but the dream of the downfall refers to the historic figure in that it foretells the events that bring about the king's demise.

Geoffrey dedicates his *Historia* to Robert of Gloucester, illegitimate son of Henry I.⁵³ Wace's *Roman de Brut* does not open with a dedication.⁵⁴ Layamon, however, states in his prologue that Wace "hoe zef þare ædelen; Ælienor / þe wes Henries quene; þes hezes kings" ["dedicated (his book) to the noble Eleanor, who was the queen of Henry, the High King"] (ll. 22–23). Layamon's reference to Wace's dedication renders his own lack of royal dedication especially conspicuous. His work, unlike his sources, is not dedicated to a king or noble. Layamon, as a humble parish priest on the Welsh border, instead imbues his epic with a homiletic force and holds out a critique of worldly power *qua* worldly power. No future ruler can possibly make right the endemically wrong system. In the words of the Psalm, "melius est sperare in Domino quam sperare in principibus" ["it is better to hope in the Lord than to hope in princes"] (Psalm 117: 9).⁵⁵ Broad is the way that leads to destruction, and Layamon's kings prove very adept at finding it.

The *Brut*'s prophecies do not work to inspire the rise of a future king; rather, the *Brut* enacts the kind of change that it envisions. Layamon divests worldly rulers of their power to guarantee historical and societal stability, transferring their power instead to the atemporal realm of the mythic and the literary. It is particularly fitting, then, that Layamon's elves cannot be traced to any one cultural tradition. As peripheral figures, they lie outside and are therefore accessible to all of them. Layamon the Saxon poet can write of British heroes, and anyone is invited to read of them. To read or listen to the *Brut* is to participate in its re-envisioning of power. That is the legacy of Layamon's peripheral king, emerging as he does from the fertile intersection between the preternatural and natural worlds, where the play of elves undermines assumed categories.

Notes

* The spelling of the poet's name is notoriously fraught with trouble. British Library MS. Cotton Caligula A ix — the more authoritative of the two extant manuscripts containing the *Brut* — spells the name with the Middle English character yogh. The yogh has long since fallen out of use, and not all modern typefaces support it. Some

earlier scholars transliterated the yogh in the author's name as a "y," and the practice has become commonplace. The transliteration is, however, phonetically inaccurate. Intervocalic yogh typically represents a voiced or voiceless velar fricative, neither of which is phonemic in most dialects of Modern English. For this reason, some recent scholars have preferred to render the name as "Lawman" when use of the yogh is not practical or desirable. Intervocalic yogh and Modern English "w" share a similar place of articulation. "W" represents the voiced labial-velar approximant /w/ and is therefore more accurate than the palatal /j/ represented by "y" in Modern English. Despite these efforts, "Layamon" remains more widely-known and broadly recognisable than "Lawman." I have therefore yielded to the force of tradition and opted to spell the name with a "y." "Layamon" is, after all, not the first English word whose spelling and pronunciation diverge. For a more detailed treatment of the subject, see John Frankis, "Layamon and the Fortunes of Yogh," *Medium Ævum* 73, no. 1 (2004): 1-9.

1. Marsha L. Dutton, "The Staff in the Stone: Finding Arthur's Sword in the *Vita Sancti Edwardi* of Aelred of Rievaulx," *Arthuriana* 17, no. 3 (2007): 3.

2. See Marie-Françoise Alamichel, "King Arthur's Dual Personality in Layamon's *Brut*," *Neophilologus* 77 (1993): 303-319.

3. Eric Stanley, "The Political Notion of Kingship in Lazamon's *Brut*," in *Reading Lazamon's Brut: Approaches and Explorations*, eds. Rosamund Allen, Jane Roberts, and Carole Weinberg, *DQR Studies in Literature* 52 (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi B. V., 2013), 124.

4. See Kelley M. Wickham-Crowley, *Writing the Future: Lazamon's Prophetic History* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002); Daniel Helbert, "'an Arður Sculde zete Cum': The Prophetic Hope in Twelfth-Century Britain," *Arthuriana* 26, no. 1 (2016): 77-107.

5. The relationship between Layamon and the Anglo-Saxon poetic tradition has been subject to debate. David Callander has recently argued that Layamon's work is evidence that the tradition continued beyond the Norman Conquest. Material and historical circumstances have, however, prevented its survival in written form: David Callander, "Lazamon's Dialogue and English Poetic Tradition," *English Studies* 97, no. 7 (2016): 721.

6. Two manuscripts containing the text survive: MS. Cotton Caligula A.ix, and Cotton Otho C.xiii. Both seem to have been based on the same exemplar, which was itself most likely not Layamon's autograph: see *Layamon's Arthur: The Arthurian Section of Layamon's Brut*, ed. W. R. J. Barron and S. C. Weinberg, Exeter Medieval Texts and Studies (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2001), xiii.

7. Jane Roberts, "Getting Lazamon's *Brut* into Sharper Focus," in *Reading Lazamon's Brut*, 445.

8. *Lazamon's Brut, or Chronicle of Britain*, ed. Frederic Madden, 3 vols. (London: Society of Antiquaries of London, 1847).

9. Wace, *Wace's Roman de Brut: A History of the British (Text and Translation)*, ed. Judith Weiss, Exeter Medieval English Texts and Studies (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1999), xxi.
10. Alamichel, "Arthur's Dual Personality," 310.
11. Kenneth J. Tiller, *Lazamon's Brut and the Anglo-Norman Vision of History* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007), 30.
12. Tiller, *Lazamon's Brut*, 69.
13. *Ibid.*, 81.
14. Kelley M. Wickham-Crowley, "Cannibal Cultures and the Body of Text in *Lazamon's Brut*," in *Lazamon: Contexts, Language, and Interpretation*, ed. Rosamund Allen, Lucy Perry, and Jane Roberts, vol. 19, King's College London Medieval Studies (London: King's College London Centre for Late Antique and Medieval Studies, 2002), 351.
15. Helbert, "Prophetic Hope," 100.
16. Cyril Edwards, "Lazamon's Elves," in *Lazamon: Contexts, Language, and Interpretation*, 80.
17. *Lazamon's Arthur*, xxxvii.
18. Edwards, "Lazamon's Elves," 81.
19. Françoise H. M. Le Saux, *Lazamon's Brut: The Poem and its Sources* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1989), 200.
20. Helen Cooper, *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 175.
21. C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 122.
22. Cooper, *The English Romance*, 174.
23. *Ibid.*, 175.
24. Tiller, *Lazamon's Brut*, 185.
25. Edwards, "Lazamon's Elves," 94.
26. Kristen Lee Over, *Kingship, Conquest, and Patria: Literary and Cultural Identities in Medieval French and Welsh Arthurian Romance*, Studies in Medieval History and Culture (New York: Routledge, 2005), 54.
27. Over, *Kingship, Conquest, and Patria*, 60.
28. Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain: An Edition and Translation of De Gestis Britonum (Historia Regum Britanniae)*, ed. Michael D. Reeve, trans. Neil Wright, vol. 69, Arthurian Studies (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2007), 189. Unless otherwise noted, translations from the Latin text are my own.
29. Wace, *Roman De Brut*, 222–23. All translations from the Anglo-Norman text are by Judith Weiss.
30. *Lazamon's Brut*, ed. G. L. Brook and R. F. Leslie, Early English Text Society, Original Series (London: Oxford University Press, 1993), 500, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/LayCal>. Citations are from MS. Cotton Caligula A.ix. Future references

are provided in-text as line numbers. Unless otherwise noted, translations from the Middle English text are my own.

31. Alamichel, "Arthur's Dual Personality," 308.
32. Ibid.
33. Geoffrey, *History of the Kings*, 203.
34. Wace, *Roman de Brut*, 240–41.
35. Alamichel, "Arthur's Dual Personality," 316.
36. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 118.
37. Ibid.
38. Geoffrey, *History of the Kings*, 203.
39. Wace, *Roman de Brut*, 240–41.
40. Alamichel, "Arthur's Dual Personality," 316.
41. Christopher Cannon, *The Grounds of English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 53.
42. Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 33.
43. Ibid., 38.
44. Geoffrey, *History of the Kings*, 253.
45. Wace, *Roman de Brut*, 332–33.
46. Over, *Kingship, Conquest, and Patria*, 52.
47. Kenneth J. Tiller, "Prophecy and the Body of the King in Laȝamon's Account of Arthur's Dream (*Brut* 13984–14004)," *Arthuriana* 26, no. 1 (2016): 27.
48. Ibid., 31.
49. Ibid., 36.
50. Wickham-Crowley, *Writing the Future*, 3.
51. Ibid., 134.
52. Helbert, "Prophetic Hope," 100.
53. Geoffrey, *History of the Kings*, 5.
54. Wace, *Roman de Brut*, 2–3.
55. Robert Weber and Roger Gryson, eds., *Biblia Sacra Iuxta Vulgatam Versionem*, 5th ed. (Nördlingen: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2007), 919 (translation mine).