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Aluen and lechecraft: magic and the supernatural in Layamon's Arthuriad

ABSTRACT: In his *Brut*, the poet Layamon rewrites the origin myth of Britain according to his own literary purposes. While drawing on the work of his predecessors, Geoffrey of Monmouth and Wace, the English author employs supernatural devices far more freely. The interference of the magical universe in the historical-heroic narrative intensifies in the Arthurian section of the text, particularly in regard to the presence of the mysterious *aluen* in the story of the British monarch. The impact of these supernatural creatures appears to have been added by Layamon to characterize the figure of Arthur in a positive way, as someone who will be remembered for his exceptionalism in comparison to other kings depicted in the poem. A systematic examination of the vocabulary used at key points in the Arthurian journey enables us to identify the ways in which the poet explores aspects of the magical and the marvellous in order to imbue the figure of the British king with messianic characteristics, thus distancing him from historical reality.

ABSTRACT: Nel *Brut*, lungo poema in versi semi-allitteranti, Layamon rielabora il mito fondativo della storia britannica secondo i propri fini letterari. Pur riprendendo elementi dell'opera dei predecessori, Geoffrey di Monmouth e Wace, l'autore inglese utilizza molto più liberamente gli elementi sovranaturali. In particolare, nella sezione arturiana del testo si moltiplicano gli interventi dell'universo magico nella narrazione storico-eroica, soprattutto in relazione alla presenza delle misteriose *aluen* nella vicenda del re britannico. L'influenza di queste creature magiche sembrerebbe essere stata inserita da Layamon per caratterizzare in senso positivo la figura di Artù, che si segnalerà nel suo regno per la straordinarietà rispetto ad altri re descritti nel poema. Un'analisi sistematica del lessico utilizzato nei momenti significativi del percorso arturiano consente di individuare le modalità attraverso cui il poeta esplora gli aspetti del magico e del meraviglioso per caricare la figura del re britannico di caratteristiche messianiche, allontanandolo dalla realtà storica.

KEYWORDS: Brut, Layamon, Arthur, magic, elves, fairies, marvellous
PAROLE-CHIAVE: Brut, Layamon, Artù, magia, elfi, fate, meraviglioso

1. Layamon's Arthur: an introduction

A long epic poem in semi-alliterative verse, Layamon's *Brut* occupies a central role in the history of the English language and its literature.¹ Written between 1185 and 1205,² the *Brut* is the first epic poem composed in the vernacular following the Norman Conquest. However, while it represents the first version of the legendary history of Britain in English, the same history had been previously narrated in Latin prose by Geoffrey of Monmouth, in his *Historia Regum Britanniae* (ca. 1136), and in French verse by Wace, in his *Roman de Brut* (1155). Among the numerous episodes, reported in more than sixteen thousand verses, some were to acquire immense importance in successive literary developments. The narrative begins with the adventures of Brutus, the eponymous founder of Britain, after his escape from Troy, and ends with the death of Cadwallader, the last of the British kings with a serious claim over the dominions in that region that will eventually become England. Many historical events are depicted, including the conflict between Belin and his brother Brenne, their reconciliation, and their conquests of France and Rome; Caesar's invasion of Britain, Cassibellamus' resistance, and several other conflicts between the Romans and the Britons; the coming of the Saxons to the island, who are seen as cruel enemies; and the reigns of Vortigern, Uther and, most importantly, Arthur.

The life and deeds of King Arthur are, indeed, crucial narrative sections that make up approximately about one quarter of the narration in all three oldest versions of the *Brut* narrative – Geoffrey's, Wace's, and Layamon's. Arthur's reign is introduced by a thorough description of his ancestry: from the treacherous murder of Constance, the monk-king, by the usurper Vortigern, to the reign of his father, Uther. Arthur's reign is then described in detail, with emphasis placed on his battles against Saxons, Scots, and Romans, as well as his broader accomplishments and final conflict against his treacherous nephew, Mordred. The supernatural motifs which, for many, are inextricably connected to the Arthurian lore, including mythical places such as Avalon and the figure of Merlin, did not play a particularly prominent role. The three authors appeared to share one primary goal, which was to establish a convincing relationship to the historical reality and lay the groundwork for a British foundational myth.

¹ The *Brut* is extant in two variant versions, which differ significantly from one another. The longest version of the poem is found in London B.L. Cotton Caligula A. IX, while London B.L. Cotton Otho C. XIII witnesses the shortest one. For a long time, the text included in MS Caligula was thought to be antecedent of MS Otho; however, the manuscripts both date back to the end of the 13th century. Recent studies have ruled out any connection between the two manuscripts: MS Otho and MS Caligula are not copies of the same codex, but rather witnesses from two competing traditions. For an in-depth study of MS Caligula see Ker (1963); for MS Otho see Bryan (1999). For a lexical analysis of both manuscripts see Elseweiler (2011).

² For a detailed discussion on the dates of composition, see Le Saux (1989: 8); Corsi Mercatanti (1984: 306).

Nonetheless, while heavily indebted to Geoffrey's composition, both Wace and Layamon worked extensively on their texts, expanding and re-adapting episodes and scenes for their own literary purposes. In particular, Layamon's *Arthuriad* includes new information and approach. When Arthur enters the scene in the English *Brut*, the atmosphere becomes infused with heroic and martial overtones: he is portrayed as a fierce warrior, a king focused on his wars of expansion. Moreover, when compared with Geoffrey's and Wace's depiction, Layamon employs magical components with much more freedom: Arthur appears as a figure surrounded by supernatural elements, cast in a role that cannot be simply captured in a conventional historiographical narrative. His character is mythologized: the most relevant prophetic passages of the poem centre on him,³ he is constantly associated with Merlin – adviser, prophet and magician – and, furthermore, the most significant moments of his reign are marked by the presence of various magical creatures, which the poem identifies as *aluen*, 'elves' or 'fairies'. The King Arthur depicted by Layamon is a figure who, as Dalbey pointedly describes, has «one foot in the world of men and one foot in the world of fairies».⁴

The supernatural is a catalyst for the king's birth and accompanies him throughout his entire existence until his death, appearing at several key moments. Thus, this paper will focus on each of these moments, analysing how this marvellous aspect defines Arthur's journey on earth and his role as a king. Arthur is welcomed by magical creatures at birth; his armour is described as being built by an elven blacksmith; a magical presence surrounds Loch Lomond, where the king chases and then graces the Scottish rebels; and finally, Avalon, the mysterious island where the dying king is led to be healed of his wounds, is a place populated by fairies.

2. A magically influenced birth

Arthur's life is defined by magical involvement from the start. The story leading to his birth is well-established by Geoffrey:⁵ during a feast, King Uther sees the beautiful Igera – Ygerne in following versions – and immediately falls in love with her, even though she is the wife of one of his thanes, Gorlois, Duke of Cornwall. Offended by the

³ The *Brut*'s *Arthuriad* is characterized by the presence of two symbolic dreams. Besides the famous dream that Layamon transposes from Geoffrey's and Wace's narration, in which Arthur, just before his crucial battle against the Romans, dreams of a fight between a dragon and a bear (ll. 12768–88), the English author adds a second prophetic dream: completely autonomously, he makes an original and creative use of animal symbology to describe the emotional state of Arthur, just before Mordred's betrayal (ll. 13981–14015). For an in-depth analysis of these two dreams, see O'Sharkey (1978: 347-362); Tiller (2016: 22-40) and, also, Bria (2017: 19-25).

⁴ Dalbey (2016: 2).

⁵ See Geoffrey of Monmouth (*Hist. Reg. Brit.* VIII 137-138).

obvious designs of the king, Gorlois storms out of court and, while establishing himself in Dimilioc castle, he carefully places Igera in Tintagel's stronghold, a safe location on the coast. Laying siege to both forts, Uther manages to isolate Gorlois, but is unable to reach the woman. Moved by the king's passion,⁶ Merlin willingly offers his *medicamina* or magic herbs to alter the king's appearance in order to look and act just like Gorlois, thus convincing Igera that she is spending the night with her husband. Gorlois then dies on the battlefield and Uther can immediately marry the woman.

A magical deception is placed at the centre of the episode. Geoffrey does not hesitate to decry the duplicity leading to Uther taking advantage of Igera's ignorance: «Deceperat namque illam falsa specie quam assumpserat, deceperat etiam ficticiis sermonibus quos ornate componebat» [Igera was deceived by his false appearance and also by the lies he wove so well].⁷ On the contrary, Wace takes care to describe the 'courtesy' in the king's attitude, in an attempt to mitigate the deceitfulness of Uther's actions.⁸ Similarly, Layamon presents the episode as morally ambiguous, without referring to consent on Ygerne's part, yet it seems the English poet is invested in presenting Arthur's birth as part of a bigger design. In Layamon's *Brut*, Merlin states that Uther can never win the faithful Ygerne if not for his magical skills, then explicitly foretells a glorious future designed for the fruit of this union.⁹ Thus, Merlin is willing to perform any act necessary for this birth to occur. Here, Layamon defines Merlin's interference as *ġinne*:

Ah longe is æuere, þat ne cumeð nauere
þat he heo biwinne bute þurh mine ginne

⁶ See Geoffrey of Monmouth (*Hist. Reg. Brit.* viii 137): «Qui comperta anxietate quam rex patiebatur pro ea commotus est super tanto amore ipsius» [When he saw how troubled the king was on her account, Merlin was moved by Uther's great passion].

⁷ Geoffrey of Monmouth (*Hist. Reg. Brit.* viii 137). Text and translation of the *Historia Regum Britanniae* are quoted from the edition by Reeve and Wright (2007). Text and translation of the *Roman de Brut* are quoted from Weiss's revised edition of the text (2002).

⁸ See Wace (*Rom. de Brut*, ll. 8565-96).

⁹ Merlin reveals as such (*Brut*, ll. 9404-18): «And neoðeles he scal aȝe þa hende Ygærne; /on hir he scal streonen þat scal wide sturien;/ he scal streonien hire on vænne swiðe sellichne mon. / Longe beoð æuere, dæd ne bið he næuere; / þe wile þe þis world stænt, ilæsten scal is worðmunt; / and scal inne Rome walden þa þæines. / Al him scal abuȝe þat wuneð inne Bruttene. / Of him scullen gleomen godliche singen; / of his breosten sculle æten aðele scopes; /scullen of his blode beornes beon drunke. / Of his eȝene scullen fleon furene gleden / ælc finger an his hond scarp stelene brond. / Scullen stan walles biuoren him tofallen; beornes scullen rusien reosen heore mærcen. / Þus he scal wel longe liðen ȝeond londen, /leoden biwinnen and his laȝen sette». [And nonetheless he shall have the noble Ygerne; on her he shall beget one who will rule far wide; he shall beget on her one extraordinary man. As long as forever be, he will never die; while this world stand, his glory shall last; and he will rule noble lords in Rome. All who live in Britain shall bend to him. Minstrels shall splendidly sing of him; noble poets shall eat from his breast; heroes shall be drunk of his blood. Sparks of fire shall fly from his eyes; each finger on his hand be as sharp as a steel blade. Walls of stone shall fall before him; heroes shall tremble, banners shall fall. Thus, for a long time, he shall go around the lands, conquering peoples and setting his law.] *Brut's* text is quoted from Barron-Weinberg (1995); if not otherwise stated, translations are mine.

for nis na wimmon treowere in þissere worlde-riche (*Brut*, ll. 9401-03).

[But as long as forever lasts, nothing will come of it, that he will never win her except through my magic scheme; for there is no truer woman in this world.]

In Middle English, *ġinne*, derived from Old French *engin/gin*,¹⁰ denotes an ingenious or clever skill, a skill in magic or occult science; however, it is also a means of effecting a purpose, a scheme. Merlin's actions are here presented as ingenious and useful.¹¹ Despite the fact that his activities are not without ambiguity, his magic is regarded as beneficent and clever. Later on, Layamon describes it as a *lēchecraft*:

Ah al þin iwille wel scal iwurðen;
for ich con swulcne lechecraft þe leof þe scal iwurðen,
þat al scullen þine cheres iwurðen swulc þas eorles,
þi speche, þi dede imong þere duȝeðe,
þine hors and þine iwede, and al swa þu scalt ride.
Þenne Ygætne þe scal iseon, a mode hire scal wel beon. (*Brut*, ll. 9447-53)

[But your every wish will soon be fulfilled; for I know some magic arts such that will be very welcome to you; so that your whole appearance will become similar to the noble lord, your talk, your way of acting among your thanes, your horse, your clothes and you will ride just like him. When Ygerne will see you, she will be happy in her soul.]

In Old English, *lāce-cræft* meant specifically «the art of medicine or surgery»;¹² in the Middle English period, in addition to this meaning, the noun is also used to denote a form of magic.¹³ Thus, Layamon here renders specifically the «nuvel medecinemenz» mentioned by Wace and Geoffrey's magical herbs.¹⁴ A *lēchecraft* is a magical intervention which finds its origin in the natural world; it is a medical type of magic, with a therapeutic function. In Layamon's vision, Merlin's arts, however ambiguous they may appear, would seem to have a positive value; the main purpose of *lēchecraft* is of a beneficial type.¹⁵

Indeed, so beneficial that following this magical deception orchestrated by Merlin, in the detailed depiction offered by Layamon,¹⁶ Arthur's birth is marked by another super-

¹⁰ See *AND* s.v. *engin*: «native wit, intelligence; ingenuity, skill; magic power; cunning, contriving; ruse, trick; fraud, deceit; craft, art; craftsmanship».

¹¹ Due to his ambiguous function as a sage, prophet and magician, Merlin plays a primary role among the magical and supernatural actors in the *Brut*: he does not simply arrange the magical means resulting in Arthur's birth, he also dictates Vortigern's decline and he works as a prophetic companion and help for Uther. In contrast to the magicians who serve Vortigern, Layamon portrays Merlin as having actual wisdom, and his actions frequently mix magical ritual with Christian practise.

¹² See *ASD* s.v. *lāce-cræft*.

¹³ See *MED* s.v. *lēchecraft*: «The art or science of medicine and/or surgery; also used in pl.; also magic».

¹⁴ See Wace (*Rom. de Brut*, l. 8702); Geoffrey of Monmouth (*Hist. Reg. Brit.* VIII 137).

¹⁵ Saunders (2010: 227-228).

¹⁶ This is contrary to Geoffrey and Wace's versions. In relation to Arthur's birth, Geoffrey (*Hist.*

natural mediation: the presence of the *aluen* transforms the birth of the future king into a prodigious event.

Scholars have different views on the function and identity of these entities in the poem. According to Barron and Weinberg, the word *aluen* has too wide-ranging a meaning to enable specific interpretations; in Middle English, it could be used to denote both ‘elf’ and ‘fairy’, and Layamon appears to use it to indicate dryads, nymphs, and other generic supernatural entities.¹⁷ Edwards observes a connection between the creatures appearing at Arthur’s birth and the fairy godmothers seen in the folklore of different countries.¹⁸ Hence, Barron and Weinberg usually translate *aluen* with ‘fairies’, except when referring to particular situations.¹⁹ Corsi Mercatanti adopts a similar strategy in her Italian translation, further noting that, even though elves appear in several cultures, they were never part of a specific literary tradition which established a precise definition.²⁰

In the Middle English period, there is attestation of a subtle differentiation in the meaning of *elf* (pl. *elves*) ‘elf, nightmare, spirit’ and *elve* (pl. *elven*) – *alve(n)* in the West Midlands – ‘elf’ or ‘fairy’.²¹ In the Old English period, two forms were attested, a masculine one, *ælf* (‘elf, genius, incubus’), and a feminine one *ælfen* which, instead, is used to gloss over names of classical creatures such as ‘nymphs, dryads, naiads’.²² There are allusions to *elves* in *Beowulf*, associated with orcs and giants as the monstrous progeny

Reg. Brit. VIII xx) notes simply that Uther and Igerna had a son and a daughter, named Arthur and Anna: «Progenueruntque filium et filiam. Fuit autem nomen filii Arturus, filiae uero Anna». Similarly, Wace (*Rom. de Brut*, ll.8815-22): «La nuit ot un fiz cunceü / E al terme ad un fiz eü. / Artur ot nun; de sa bunté / Ad grant parole puis esté. / Emprés Artur fu Anna nee / Une fille, que fu dunee / A un barun pruz e curteis, Loth aveit nun, de Loeneis». [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, a daughter who was bestowed on a noble and courteous baron, Loth of Lothian].

¹⁷ See Barron -Weinberg (2001: xxxvii).

¹⁸ See Edwards (2002:81).

¹⁹ Thus, for instance, the creatures welcoming Arthur at his birth and the beautiful women leading him to Avalon are ‘fairies’ but his armour is made by an ‘elvish’ smith. See Barron-Weinberg (1995: 495; 543; 733).

²⁰ See Corsi Mercatanti (1998: 403).

²¹ See *MED* s.v. *elf*: «A supernatural being having magical powers for good or evil; a spirit, fairy, goblin, incubus, succubus, or the life» compared with *MED*, s.v. *elve*: «An elf or fairy (of either sex)».

²² Leiden MS. Voss Lat. Quarto 106, f. 10r, provides a list of glosses for the feminine form *ælfinne* and a series of compound words so that Nymphs are associated with *ælfinne eadem. & muse* ‘elves and, similarly, muses’, Oreades with *duun.ælfinni* ‘mountain-elves’, Dryads with *uudu.ælfinne* ‘wood-elves’, Hamadryades with *uater.ælfinn* ‘water-elves’, Maiades with *feld.ælfinne* ‘field-elves’ and finally Naiades with *sae.ælfinne* ‘sea-elves’ (See Meritt 1945: 61). A similar list can be found also in the Antwerp-London Glossaries – Antwerp, Plantin-Moretus Museum, MS 16.2 and London, British Library Add. 32246, f. 21r (edited by Porter 2011: 8-44) – from the eleventh century; here however *Oriades* are *muntælfen*, *Amadriades* are *wylde elfen* and *Castalidas* are *dunelfen*. For an overview of Old English elf glosses, see also Goodrich, 2015: 432-438.

of Cain;²³ they also appear in medical texts and charms as a cause of disease and pain,²⁴ in onomastics (Ælfred, Ælfric), in toponyms (Alvedun in Lancashire) and in some compound words, such as *ælf-scȳne* meaning ‘beautiful, shining like an elf’.²⁵ This use was attested in *Genesis A* and in *Judith*, referring to Sarah and Judith, seemingly denoting both their beauty and dangerousness.²⁶ Hall, who focuses on reconstructing Anglo-Saxon beliefs about elves, looks at these earliest occurrences and comes to the conclusion that, in Early Medieval England, elves were a component of a three-part conceptual system: perceived as human-like supernatural beings, they were linked to causing pain – mostly internal – but aligned with the human in-group in opposition to monstrous beings;²⁷ moreover, they were thought of as prototypically male, despite occasionally displaying effeminate traits.

Therefore, it is not surprising that, within the cultural heritage of folkloric origin, elves and fairies always appear as indeterminate creatures, with an indecipherable nature.

Ygærne wes mid childe bi Vðer kinge,
 al þurh Merlines wīzel, ær heo biwedded weore.
 Ðe time com þe wes icoren; þa wes Arður iboren.
 Sone swa he com an eorðe, aluen hine iuengen;
 he heo bigolen þat child mid galdere swiðe stronge:
 heo ȝeuen him mihte to beon bezst alre cnihten;
 heo ȝeuen him anoðer þing, þat he scolde beon riche king;
 heo ȝiuen him þat þridde, þat he scolde longe libben;
 heo ȝifen him, þat kinebern, custen swiðe gode
 þat he wes mete-custi of alle quike monnen;
 þis þe alue him ȝef, and al swa þat child iþæh. (*Brut*, ll. 9606-16)

[Ygerne was with child by King Uther, before being married, thanks to Merlin’s magic. When the appointed time came, then Arthur was born. As soon as he came to earth, fairies received him; they enchanted the child with very powerful magic: they gave him strength to be the best of knights; they gave him a second gift, he shall be a powerful king; they gave him a third gift, he shall live a long life; they gave him, to this royal child, such excellent qualities as to be the most generous of all living men. This the fairies gave him and so the boy grew up.]

Here, the spell previously performed by Merlin is identified as *wīzel*, from the OE

²³ See *Beowulf* (ll. 111-14).

²⁴ See, for instance, *Metrical Charms*: 7.

²⁵ Moreover, even the *DOE*’s definition (s.v. *ælf-scȳne*) highlights the ambiguity of the term: «radiant or fair as an elf, beautiful; has also been understood as ‘delusive as an elf’ (taking *scȳne* as ‘flickering’) or ‘divinely inspired’».

²⁶ See *Genesis A* (l. 1827; l. 2731) and *Judith* (l.13). For a thorough analysis see Hall (2007: 88-94) and also Gherardini (2017: 301).

²⁷ Hall (2007: 66-74) interprets the allusions to the monstrous nature of the elves in *Beowulf* as a sign of views most likely associated with early Christianisation demands.

wīgle,²⁸ which in the Middle English period was used to denote a stratagem or an act of deception employing supernatural or demonic means.²⁹ Thus, *wīzel* represents magic as a mechanism apt to deceive. Nonetheless, Merlin's magical ploy is juxtaposed to the beneficial work of the fairies: they charm the child («*heo bigolen*») with «*galdere swiðe stronge*» 'very powerful magic'. *Bigālen* (OE *begalan*) and *gālder* (OE *galdor*) clearly share the same root; in the Old English period *galdor* denoted a poem or a song, but also some sort of incantation, enchantment or charm, indicating thus a magical intervention that needs to be uttered or sung.³⁰

Layamon then lists all the benefits derived from the fairies' involvement, all the gifts these creatures bestowed to the future king: strength to overcome all other warriors, and the ability to reign authoritatively, and with longevity and generosity. Here, stylistic choices – such as the use of anaphora and the presence of internal rhymes – echo some of the rhetorical strategies typical of poetic charms.³¹ The presence of these fairies seems to have been added by Layamon to positively characterize the birth of a child who will become an extraordinary sovereign.³² Furthermore, the *aluen*'s magical involvement sets Arthur apart from any other monarch described in the poem. Despite witnessing moments of war and brutality, with his reign following the cyclic rise and fall in fortune typical of Layamon's vision of history, Arthur, in fact, is not entirely depicted as a temporal king.

²⁸ See *ASD*, s.v. *wīgle*: «divination, heathen practice».

²⁹ See *MED* s.v. *wīzel*: «a stratagem or trick devised through demonic or supernatural means; also, an act of sorcery; also magic; a ruse, trick; ingenuity, trickery [...]». It is interesting to note that *wigeles* are often the tricks contrived by the deceiver *par excellence*, the devil, as in *Ancrene Riwe*: II, 523-524.

³⁰ See *MED*, s.v. *gālder* «magic, enchantment» and *DOE*, s.v. *galdor* «1. poem, song; 2. incantation, charm; spell; *galdor* (a)galan 'to chant an incantation, to sing a charm'»; similarly, *DOE* s.v. *galan*: «to sign, enchant, call». It appears that the term originally used to denote any form of powerful utterance; it could even be used in an ecclesiastical context. On this, see Arthur (2018: 24-44). After the Benedictine Reform, because *galdor* became associated with forbidden heathen practises, negative connotations were incorporated in its meaning, as seen in, for instance, in the *Canons of Edgar*. In the law code authored by Wulfstan, Christians are invited to: «*ælcne hæþendōm mid ealle adwæscē and forbeode wilweorþunga and licwīglunga and hwata and galdra and manweorðunga and þa gemearr, þe man drifð on mistlicum gewīglungum*» (Fowler 1972: 4) [extinguish any form of heathen practice, and forbid worship around wells, and necromancy, and diviners, and incantations, and the worshipping of human beings, and any error that is practised in different forms of sorcery]. Nonetheless, occurrences attesting the older neutral meaning can be found also in the late Old English period as in *Lacnunga* (I, XXVI) where charms are equated with prayers: «*sing nygon / siðan in þ(æ)t eare þis galdor 7 'Pater n(oste)r' æne*» (Pettit 2001:14) [sing this charm nine times into the ear and the Our Father once] (Translations are mine). A thorough analysis on the etymological evolution of *galdor/galdru* in relation with medical practices and religion can be found in Kesling (2020: 171-174 and 182-184). Associating the term to the beneficial role of the *aluen*, here the local priest Layamon seems not at all concerned with his predecessor's preoccupations, but *gālder* seems to have no later attestation than in his poem. On the relationship between charms and the act of singing, see also Tornaghi (2010: 441-443).

³¹ See *Metrical Charms*: 2, 4, 8, et. al. For an analysis of the rhetorical strategies used in the metrical charms, see Weston (1985: 176-186).

³² According to Church (2018: 21-22), the fairies' presence in this description also serves the purpose of further distancing Arthur from his father's deceptions.

Rather, he presents features of a messianic sovereign and the main indication of this role is the involvement of magical figures several times throughout his life.

3. An ‘elvish’ armour

Just before the crucial battle of Bath against the Saxon Childric, the poet lingers on the description of Arthur’s armour while he’s in the process of dressing:

þa he hafde al iset, and al hit isemed,
þa dude he on his burne i broide of stele
þe makede on aluisc smið mid aðelen his crafte;
he wes ihaten Wygar þe Witeze wurhte.
His sconken he helede mid hosen of stele,
Calibeorne his sweord he sweinde bi his side of him;
hit we iworht in Avalun mid wizelefulle craften. (*Brut*, ll. 10539-48)

[When he had organized everything and all was as it should be, then he put on the steel-woven mail-armour, that an elvish blacksmith had made with his noble art; his name was Wygar, who forged Witege. He protected his legs with steel stockings; Caliburn, the sword, hung from his side; it had been forged in Avalon with magical arts.]

Armour description is a motif common to epic and romance – Layamon’s representation is very similar to the description proposed by Geoffrey and by Wace³³ – but the English poet inserts a number of details unique to his depiction: here, the armour is forged by an *aluisc* ‘elvish’ blacksmith, whose name might change depending on how one chooses to interpret line 10545. In fact, the referent for the pronoun *he* could be either *smið* or *burne*. Hence, *wygar* could be the name of the blacksmith, or the name of the armour; Allen interprets it as meaning ‘spear, lance’, connecting it with OE *wīg-gār*, thus favouring the association with the name of the smith. The line, however, is ambiguous and could have different meanings.³⁴ Madden, the first commentator on the text, speculates that there must have been some confusion regarding the legendary smith Wayland, when this sentence was originally conceived.³⁵ More recent translators³⁶ identify the blacksmith as *Wygar*, with *Witeze* being the name of the armour. It is true that *witeze*, as a variant of *wītīe*, could indicate both a prophet, a soothsayer or a wise man, and in the *Brut* itself, it is sometimes used to describe Merlin (for instance l. 8908 and l. 8940). However, in

³³ See Geoffrey of Monmouth (*Hist. Reg. Brit.* ix 147) and Wace (*Rom. de Brut*, ll. 9273-9300).

³⁴ See Allen (1995: 447). The scholar further notes: «The line therefore may mean: (a) ‘he (the smith) was called Wigar, who made Witeze’; (b) ‘he was called Wygar, the skilful smith’; (c) ‘it was called Wygar, which Witeze made’». While Barron and Weinberg (1995: 543) interprets it as (b). This translation favours Allen’s interpretation (a).

³⁵ See Madden (1847: 376-377).

³⁶ Allen (1995: 447); Barron-Weinberg (1995: 543); Corsi Mercatanti (1998: 137).

this case, it would seem more appropriate to associate it with the verb *witġen* (OE *wġtan*) which means «to protect (sb., sth., oneself), keep safe; defend (a castle, hill, etc.), ward off attack against; also, keep watch over (a body); also provide protection; [...]to protect (sb., sth., or oneself from sb. or sth.); also, shield».³⁷ Thus, *Witeze*, translated as ‘Protector’, appears to be a fitting name for an armour.

Magical arts («wizelefulle craften») come into play also in the forging of Arthur’s sword, here named Caliburn. Layamon choses an adjective, *wġzelfulle*, that just like the previous *wġzel*, would seem to characterise magical abilities as deceptive artifices.³⁸ This same adjective occurs in the poem two other times: in l. 1439, Bladud, one of the first kings in the history of Britain, attempted to fly with a robe made of feathers: «Mid wizeful his fluhte tæih him to þon luft» [With his magic flight, it took him through the air]; in l.15804, instead, it is used to describe the deceptions brought about by the Anglo-Saxons (now called English) in order to conquer the British dominions under the rule of king Cadwathlan: «Þa comen Englisce men mid heore ufele craften; heo weore wizefulle and þis lond al biwunne» [Then came the Englishmen with their evil arts; they were full of magic treacheries and won all this land]. Hence, these magical qualities in the king’s military attire appear to be a single occurrence in the entire poem, purposefully inserted by Layamon to give Arthur his own distinctive quality.

4. An eerie lake

The fairies or elves reappear when Arthur’s campaign against the rebellious Scots leads him to Loch Lomond, a place characterized by a peculiar beauty. Geoffrey and Wace describe how, after Arthur defeated the Saxons, the rebellious Scots and Picts who fought with them fled towards Moray. They seek refuge at Loch Lomond, a strange lake containing sixty islands and fed by sixty rivers, where eagles gathered and cried out whenever something marvellous was going to happen to the kingdom of Scotland.³⁹ Layamon transposes Wace’s description but adds his own characterization of the place: he defines the loch as *selcouth* ‘portentous, wonderful’, inhabited by evil creatures («uniuele þingen») and sea-monsters (*nikeres*); this is a place where elves play a crucial role:

Þat is a seolcuð mere iset a middel-ærde
mid fenne and mid ræode, mid watere swiðe bræde,
mid fiscen and mid feozelen, mid uniuele þingen.
þat water is unimete brade - nikeres þes baðieð inne;

³⁷ See *MED* s.v. *witġen*.

³⁸ See *MED* s.v. *wġzelfulle*: «Magic; ingenious, cunning; also, deceitful».

³⁹ See Geoffrey of Monmouth (*Hist. Reg. Brit.* ix 149) and Wace (*Rom. de Brut*, ll. 9420-9448).

per is æluene ploze in atteliche pole. (*Brut*, ll. 10849-53)

[That lake, set in that country, is a portentous one, with ferns and reeds and a very wide expanse of water, with fish and birds and many other creatures. The lake is very wide – sea-monsters immerse themselves in it; there is the ploy of the elves in that hideous pool.]

The presence of the elves here can be read negatively, as if these creatures were the cause of the threatening atmosphere surrounding the loch.⁴⁰ Indeed, this place has also been interpreted as an image of Hell.⁴¹

However, the supernatural influence, in this episode, is not necessarily interpretable as evil or negative, due to what will happen shortly thereafter: once the Scotsmen are scattered among the many mountains situated in the water, Arthur's army destroys the majority of them, then waits patiently on the shore for them to starve. Yet, at dawn on the third day, a procession of Churchmen and Scottish women approaches the monarch (ii. 10913-10919), pleading for mercy and reminding him of his position as a Christian king (ll. 10934-42). Moved by the women's pleas, Arthur ultimately pardons the surviving rebels.

According to Church, who compares Arthur's behaviour here with his attitude at court (where the king is unforgiving in the face of the errors of his entourage), the presence of the elves has a decidedly propitious impact on human affairs.⁴² The *aluen* of Loch Lomond, like the *aluen* at Arthur's birth, serve to reinforce the difference between the mythologized figure of the king – a messianic ruler – and the other monarchs depicted in the poem. When inhabiting the centre of court life, Arthur is a brutal and conquering king, much like his predecessors. If, on the other hand, he is in peripheral territory, surrounded by magic, he moves away from history and approaches myth.

⁴⁰ For instance, Allen (1995: 278) and Barron-Weinberg (1995: 559) usually render in translation *aluen* as 'fairies' and, similarly, Corsi Mercatanti (1998:159) translates into Italian as the equivalent 'fate'; here, however, they all chose to translate as, respectively, 'elvish creatures', 'elves' and, in Italian, 'elfi' suggesting the negative connotation usually associated with the 'masculine' elves.

⁴¹ See Alamichel (1993: 316).

⁴² Church (2018: 21-24) draws from Alamichel (1993: 308) analysis on Layamon's portrayal of Arthur as an ambivalent figure: «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 capable of incredible violence and cruelty as the Saxon invaders he repels». Church uses Layamon's description of Arthur being driven insane by the sight of blood and enjoying himself in the midst of slaughter as a clear example of this ambivalence. Furthermore, Arthur's imperialistic desires to take Rome are clearly characterised as the driving force behind his realm's dissolution. While Alamichel interprets Arthur's ambivalence as a reflection of the character's psychology, Church sees additional implications about how Layamon sees history and kingship: Arthur needs to be a saviour because as a messianic leader he can escape the historical requirements that demand the ferocity of his military counterpart.

5. A king's death

The *aluen* re-emerge, as a matter of fact, at the end of Arthur's mortal life. In both Geoffrey and Wace, it is a single proposition that informs the audience about Arthur's fatal wounds and his voyage toward Avalon to be treated.⁴³ Due to a twelfth-century affiliation with the Welsh *aval* 'apple' – a fruit symbolising immortality –, Avalon is named *insula pomorum* in Geoffrey's *Vita Merlini*; it represents a mystical and otherworldly island, where death has no place.⁴⁴ Unlike his source material, Layamon version, directly designate this *locus amoenus* as the dwelling place of the *aluen* when Arthur delivers a farewell speech:

And ich wulle uaren to Aualun, to uairest alre maiden,
to Argante þere queen, aluen swide sceon;
and heo scal mine wunden makien alle isunde,
al hal me makien mid haleweize drenchen. (*Brut*, ll. 14278-81)

[And I will go to Avalon, to the fairest of all the maidens, to Queen Argante, the most beautiful fairy, and she will make all my wounds safe, she will heal me with curative potions.]

Thus, among the oldest sources of Arthur's lore, only Layamon specifies the presence of fairies (*aluen*) in Avalon. Argante, the queen and most beautiful of them, with her role as a healer and her connection with water, can be a reference to the figure of Morgan in Geoffrey's *Vita Merlini*.⁴⁵ However, this character has little to do with Morgan le Fay, another figure invested with many different meanings and featured in the subsequent tradition.⁴⁶

Argante will be able to treat Arthur with «haleweie drenchen» 'curative potions'. The adjective used here, *hāle-weie*, is particularly interesting in the context of magical practices. In the Middle English period it occurs several times; according to *MED*, it denotes «a sweet healing liquid, used either as potion or lotion»; however, when used with *drench(e)*, it can indicate 'a potion' or 'a medicinal antidote'. In the Old English period,

⁴³ Geoffrey (*Hist. Reg. Brit.* xi 178) notes: «Sed et inclitus ille rex Arturus letaliter uulneratus est; qui illinc ad sananda uulnera sua in insulam Auallonis euctus» [The illustrious king Arthur too was mortally wounded; he was taken away to the island of Avallon to have his wounds tended]. Similarly, ll. 13275-78 of the *Roman de Brut* reads: «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].

⁴⁴ See Barron-Weinberg (1995: 888); Loomis (1959: 65-66).

⁴⁵ Argante may be a corruption of Morgant, the old French form of Morgan. See Barron-Weinberg (1995:888); Bruce (1911: 65-69).

⁴⁶ Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* has Morgan as one of the people accompanying Arthur in his boat towards the afterlife. Moreover, even Gerald of Wales, in his *Speculum Ecclesiae*, reports that she is the one who leads Arthur's body to Avalon. See Allen (1995: 461).

hāle-wæge occurs only once and the context is unclear; according to the *DOE*'s compilers, it might mean 'health-giving water'. Curiously, this single occurrence is found in the *Metrical Charm 7*, 'For the Water-Elf Disease', in a spell to be uttered out loud in order to heal from this elf-caused disease.⁴⁷

Therefore, the fairies' intervention ensures that the king's defeat is only temporary. Once Arthur's speech is over, a boat, with two sumptuously dressed women, comes from the sea to welcome him and take him to the island where the Britons still believe he is alive.

In the majority of episodes depicted in the *Brut*, Layamon slavishly follows cyclical patterns of rise and fall; however, as seen, Arthur is distinctly different from any other sovereign. Unlike other sections in the poem, Arthur's journey on Earth concludes with an unusual optimistic note, with the hope of a return. This choice is in-line with the imagined character of Arthur drawn by Layamon. As noted by both Church and Dalbey, the English poet develops Arthur's character as a king in comparison with the models of kingship and monarchic power of his time. Layamon's Arthur is not simply a warrior but rather a character linked to the marvellous and supernatural from his birth; he is a mythologized figure who promises a better society.⁴⁸

According to Church, Arthur acts similarly to his predecessors when he performs the practical demands of kingship at court or when fighting, but he is significantly different when associated to the liminal world of the elves and fairies. From this point of view, thus, it is particularly interesting that Layamon chose to end Arthur's mortal life with a clear reference to the supernatural aura that characterised his reign: by alluding to the *aluen* in Avalon and deliberately recalling Merlin's prophecies to emphasise Arthur's salvific role.

Bruttes ileueð ʒete þat he bon on liue,
and wunnien in Aualun mid fairest alre aluen;
and lokieð euere Bruttes ʒete whan Arður cumen liðe.
Nis nauer þe mon iboren of nauer nane burde icoren
þe cunne of þan soðe of Arðure sugen mare.
Bute while wes an witeʒe Mærlin ihate;
he bodede mid worde – his quiðes weoren soðe –
þat an Arður sculde ʒete cum Anglen to fulste. (*Brut*, ll. 14290-97)

⁴⁷ *Metrical Charm 7*, ll. 8-14: «Ic benne awrat betest beadowræda, / swa benne ne burnon, ne burston, / ne fundian, ne feologan, /ne hoppettan, ne wund waxsian, / ne dolh diopian; ac him self healde halewæge, /ne ace þe þon ma, þe eorþan on eare ace». [I have formed the best army against this wound, so that it does not burn, burst, decay rapidly, change colour, throb, enlarge the cut, or aggravate the pain; but he preserves the healing waters, so that the agony does not grow any more than the land does by the sea. It will expand as the Earth expands its ears]. Translation is mine.

⁴⁸ Church (2018) and Dalbey (2016).

[The Britons still believe he is alive and that he lives in Avalon with the fairest of all fairies; and the Britons still await the day Arthur will return. No man born of noble lady can tell more of the truth about Arthur. But a while ago there was Merlin, a prophet who foretold – his words were true – that an Arthur should come again to help the English.]

6. Conclusions

In summary, Layamon expands the Arthurian sections in comparison to Geoffrey and Wace's narratives by purposefully including supernatural elements during significant junctures in the life of the sovereign, meaningful moments in history that function as cement for Arthur's central place in the British foundational myth. It can be said that Arthur serves a dual or ambivalent purpose in Layamon's story: whereas the historical king, a human being, is fallible and doomed to succumb to his own blindness and arrogance, Arthur's role is not limited to historical factuality, nor trapped in a cycle of rise and fall. The presence of the *aluen* and Merlin's magical interventions — be they defined as *lechecraft*, *ginne*, or *wigle* — project Arthur toward his eventual return and his messianic role, setting him apart from the other British kings. With regard to Arthur, therefore, Layamon does not propose the construction of a historiographical, coherent narrative. In closing, the Britons can hope for a possible return; Arthur can serve as a national saviour, provided that he is seen as a legendary figure and not as a historical reality.

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