

## “Fantoum & fairye”

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‘FANTOUM AND FAYRYȜE’:  
VISIONS OF THE END OF ARTHURIAN BRITAIN

*Victoria Flood*

This article explores the role of the phantom in relation to legendary historical constructions of place. It takes as its focus *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (hereafter *SGGK*) and the first component romance of the bipartite *Awntyrs off Arthure at the Terne Wathelyn* (hereafter *Awntyrs A*).<sup>1</sup> Unlike the other English Gawain romances, which typically trace the extension of Arthur’s insular kingdom to the north and the west through the deeds of his knight Gawain,<sup>2</sup> these are concerned not with the growth of Arthurian power but its decline.<sup>3</sup> In their imaginings of insular *impe-*

<sup>1</sup> *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn N. Davis (Oxford, 1967); *The Awntyrs off Arthure at the Terne Wathelyn: An Edition based on Bodleian Library MS. Douce 324*, ed. R. Hanna III (Manchester, 1974).

<sup>2</sup> For the most recent discussion of the relationship between regional and insular conquests and the Gawain romances see A. Byrne and V. Flood, ‘The Romance of the Stanleys: Regional and National Imaginings in the Percy Folio’, *Viator* 46 (2015), 327–51.

<sup>3</sup> I understand *Awntyrs A* as an episode which might be read in relative isolation to *Awntyrs B*, which concludes, as is conventional, with the expansion of Arthur’s empire into territories surrounding Carlisle, although in the form in which the work survives, the two tales were clearly intended to be read in relation to one another. Whether we might understand the two tales as originally of separate origin, as does Hanna, ed., *Awntyrs off Arthure*, pp. 17–24, 47–48; ‘The Awntyrs off Arthure: An Interpretation’, *Modern Language Quarterly* 31 (1970), 275–97 [queried most notably by H. Phillips, ‘The Awntyrs off Arthure: Structure and Meaning: A Reassessment’, *Arthurian Literature* XII (1993), 63–88]; or as one, *Awntyrs A* clearly treats a distinct adventure. For discussion of the ‘connectedness’ of the two tales, see A. C. Spearing, ‘The Awntyrs off Arthure’, in *The Alliterative Tradition in the Fourteenth Century*, ed. B. S. Levy and P. E. Szarmach (Kent, Ohio, 1981), pp. 183–202. Spearing suggests that we might regard *Awntyrs A* and *B* as ‘a diptych, where each leaf is complete in itself’ (p. 186), the two tales governed ‘not [by] unity, but connectedness’ (p. 197). See further, A. C. Spearing, ‘Central

*rium* and its limits, both romances draw on a dominant medieval discourse explicitly concerned with place: political prophecy. A long tradition informed by Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae* (c. 1138), and its prophetic seventh book, the *Prophetiae Merlini*, political prophecy in England is for the most part concerned with the movements of insular political power rather than religious revelation.<sup>4</sup> It is, however, ascribed to a number of prophetic authorities alongside Merlin, which include among their number saints and even the Virgin Mary. The phantoms with which this article is concerned function as another distinct category of prophetic authority, on some occasions held to be synonymous with the fairy, and on others aligned with souls returned from purgatory.<sup>5</sup> This material presents a salient reminder of the porous division between the sacred and the secular in Middle English romance. I suggest that both romances make use of longstanding purgatorial systems of representation, which provide a model for the interventions of phantoms in imaginings of the movements, and the limits, of earthly power.

### *Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century Analogues*

The political situation of the phantom is not unique to medieval Arthuriana. It is a staple of classical epic, which finds a precedent familiar to medieval authors, both sacred and secular, in Book VI of the *Aeneid*, where the shade of Anchises prophesies to Aeneas a succession of Roman emperors, and the attendant fortunes of Rome.<sup>6</sup> The motif recurs throughout the Middle Ages, including the *Vision of Charles the Fat* (c. 888), an apocalyptic prophetic endorsement of the accession of the future Louis III,

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and Displaced Sovereignty in Three Medieval Poems', *Review of English Studies* 33 (1982), 247–61 (pp. 248–52); A. C. Spearing, *Medieval to Renaissance in English Poetry* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 121–42.

- 4 For the most recent book-length studies of political prophecy in medieval Britain, see V. Flood, *Prophecy, Politics and Place in Medieval England: From Geoffrey of Monmouth to Thomas of Erceldoune* (Cambridge, 2016); A. Llion Jones, *Darogan: Prophecy, Lament and Absent Heroes in Medieval Welsh Literature* (Cardiff, 2013); L. A. Coote, *Prophecy and Public Affairs in Later Medieval England* (York, 2000).
- 5 For a discussion of the relationship between fairies and prophecy, see H. Cooper, *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to Shakespeare* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 187–97; H. Cooper, 'Thomas of Erceldoune: Romance as Prophecy', in *Cultural Encounters in the Romance of Medieval England*, ed. C. Saunders (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 171–87.
- 6 Virgil, *Volume 1: Eclogues, Georgics, Aeneid I–VI*, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough, rev. G. P. Goold (Cambridge, Mass., 1999), VI. 680–892; J. Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, trans. A. Goldhammer (London, 1984), pp. 24–25.

delivered by his uncle and grandfather from purgatory. This ‘politicisation of the Otherworld’, as Jacques le Goff has termed it, is an extension to the realm of political affairs of the privileged knowledge of the returning dead regarding the afterlife, and the consequences of the moral behaviours of the living.<sup>7</sup> This was a condition which imbued the phantom with a certain level of authority, an authority which was equally assumed in relation to visions of the political future. While certainly the Arthurian corpus is not without precedent in its engagements with this trope, the high medieval history of purgatory and the purgatorial phantom nonetheless stands in a notable relationship to the writing of political and Arthurian marvels. Early concepts of purgatory and the purgatorial phantom feature in Latin *mirabilia* of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, most notably in the works of Walter Map, Gerald of Wales and Gervais of Tilbury, three significant names both for the historian of insular romance and of purgatory.<sup>8</sup>

We find a prime example of the politically prodigious and prophetic function of the phantom, held in an explicit relationship to the movements of territorial power, in Walter Map’s account of the Saxon thane Eadric Silvaticus, in *Distinctio II* of his *De Nugis Curialium* (*Courtiers’ Trifles*). Eadric abducts his wife from among a spectral company identified as *fata* (fairies), encountered by night in a forest in Herefordshire. He has children with the fairy, and enjoys a period of prosperity, prior to his breaking of a prohibition, which prompts his wife to vanish with all their children except one, a holy man named Alnoth. The fairy’s wording of the prohibition to Eadric is clearly prophetic: ‘a die uero illa decides a felicitate, meque sublata detrimento frequenti deficies, diemque tuum inopportunitate tua preuenies’ (‘but from that day you will fall away from happiness, and

<sup>7</sup> Le Goff, *Birth of Purgatory*, pp. 118–22.

<sup>8</sup> For broader discussion of history and romance during this period, see L. Ashe, *Fiction and History in England, 1066–1200* (Cambridge, 2007); G. Spiegel, *Romancing the Past: The Rise of Vernacular Prose Historiography in Thirteenth-century France* (Berkeley, 1993); D. H. Green, *The Beginnings of Medieval Romance: Fact and Fiction, 1150–1220* (Cambridge, 2002). For histories of purgatory in the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries, see Le Goff, *Birth of Purgatory*; C. W. Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336* (New York, 2017), pp. 279–317. I do not follow Le Goff in suggesting that purgatory is an invention of the late twelfth century (for critique of this see Bynum, *Resurrection*, p. 280), but certainly, this period saw a particular evolution of the concept, marked by a pronounced interest in the state of the soul between the death of the body and the Last Judgement. This shift is discussed also by C. S. Watkins, *History and the Supernatural in Medieval England* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 170–201. For a survey of attitudes towards the dead in the Middle Ages, see J.-C. Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages: The Living and the Dead in Medieval Society*, trans. T. L. Fagan (Chicago, 1994).

when I am gone you will fail with constant loss [or defeat], and through your own lack of consideration [or relentlessness] anticipate your day of doom').<sup>9</sup> Prophecy here functions as a historical gloss, and its terms appear to relate to Eadric's political fortunes as much as his domestic ones. Eadric was a genuine historical figure, one of the last Englishmen to hold land in the March before the Norman Conquest, and a sometime rebel against, and ally of, William I. (William 'Bastardus' even makes a brief appearance in the anecdote, to admire the beauty of Eadric's wife.) History does not record whether Eadric broke his final vow to William, although the tale strongly suggests that it was remembered that he did.

The fairy's prodigious function for Walter rests not only on her ability to prophesy (an ability found in a particular association with the medieval fairy, like the phantom) but her uncertain materiality, which, alongside her propensity to vanish, points to the ephemerality of worldly success. Walter draws on the uncertain Augustinian position on demonic corporeality, not least as this relates to the uncertainty of demonic procreation.<sup>10</sup> Eadric's wife is also identified as a succubus and appears in a sequence of tales about the demonic, of a type with a number of early fairy narratives recorded in twelfth- and thirteenth-century *mirabilia*.<sup>11</sup> The prophetic, and prophetically authorising, power of demons finds one of its most influential treatments in the account of the prophet Merlin's incubus father in Book VI of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia* – and Walter may well have understood his tale within a Galfridian framework, concerned as it is with historical and territorial change.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the authorising power of the demonic in relation to prophecy became even

<sup>9</sup> Walter Map, *De Nugis Curialium: Courtiers' Trifles*, ed. and trans. M. R. James, revised by C. N. L. Brookes and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 1983), pp. 156–57. Hereafter *De Nugis*. All translations given from *De Nugis* are based on James, Brookes and Mynors, with my modifications.

<sup>10</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, trans. H. Bettenson (London, 2004), p. 638. For discussion of the high medieval influence of Augustine's position on demonic bodies, see C. W. Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity* (New York, 2001), pp. 102–03; D. Elliott, *Fallen Bodies: Pollution, Sexuality, and Demonology in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, 1998), pp. 128–29.

<sup>11</sup> For an overview of this material, and its relationship to the development of the figure of the female fairy as we encounter her in late medieval romance, see L. Harf-Lancner, *Les Fées au Moyen Âge: Morgane et Mélusine, La Naissance des Fées* (Paris, 1984), pp. 129–54.

<sup>12</sup> Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*, ed. M. D. Reeve and trans. N. Wright (Woodbridge, 2005), VI. 544–50. For the relationship between Galfridian prophecy, history and territorial change, see Flood, *Prophecy, Politics, and Place*; S. Echard, "For Mortals are Moved by these Conditions": Fate, Fortune and Providence in Geoffrey of Monmouth', in *The Fortunes of King Arthur*, ed. N. J. Lacy (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 13–28 (pp. 19–22).

more pronounced in the years following Geoffrey: from Robert de Boron onwards, Merlin himself emerges as a proto-Antichrist saved only by the piety of his mother.

However, for Walter, the uncertain body of the phantom is first and foremost informed by the uncertain bodily status of the returning dead, as a related category of *fantasma* (phantom):

A fantasia, quod est aparicio transiens, dicitur fantasma; ille enim aparencie quas aliquibus interdum demones per se faciunt a Deo prius accepta licencia [...]. Et quid de his fantasticis dicendum casibus, qui manent et bona se successione perpetuant, ut hic Alnodi et ille Britonum de quo superius, in quo dicitur miles quidam uxorem suam sepellisse reuera mortuam, et a chorea redibuisse raptam...?

(Phantom [*fantasma*] is derived from fantasy [*fantasia*], that is, a passing apparition, for the appearances which occasionally demons make to some by their own power (first receiving leave of God) [...]. But what are we to say of those visionary [*fantasticis*] cases, which endure and perpetuate themselves in good succession, as this Alnoth and [tales] of those Britons told above, in which a knight is said to have buried his wife, in reality dead, and to have recovered her by snatching her out of a dance...?)<sup>13</sup>

Walter presents as an analogue to the tale of Eadric that of a knight of Brittany, which appears elsewhere in *De Nugis*, who recovers his dead wife from a fairy dance and has sons with her, the descendants of whom endure in Walter's own time.<sup>14</sup> It is perhaps no coincidence that Walter's discussion of the fairy's (im)materiality is contemporary with a revived theological interest in the somatomorphic corporeality of the soul as it endures the pains of purgatory – at once spectral and embodied. As Caroline Walker Bynum observes of the phenomenon, as we find it in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries:

It has sometimes surprised modern scholars that the “in-between” period of purgation was imagined by poets and visionaries in such strikingly somatic terms or that theologians insisted that the separated soul in purgatory experienced corporeal fire. ... [Yet] preachers, hagiographers and schoolmen saw nothing fundamentally inconsistent in depicting the bodily tortures of disembodied spirits, although they sometimes admitted it was odd.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> *De Nugis*, pp. 160–61.

<sup>14</sup> This episode appears in its full form in *De Nugis*, pp. 344–45.

<sup>15</sup> Bynum, *Resurrection*, p. 281.

The curious precedent of the somatomorphic soul appears to have informed representations of other phantasmatic constructions. Like the wife of the knight of Brittany, Eadric's wife is similarly (although less securely) associated with the dead in a variant version of the tale in *Distinctio* IV, which concludes (in a departure from the fuller version in *Distinctio* II) that the fairy vanished when her husband taunted that he had caught her from among the dead.<sup>16</sup> That the conflation between fairies and the dead is distasteful to fairies themselves suggests Walter's awareness of an absolute categorical differentiation between the two, even as the above passage muddies this. Walter constructs an analogy between, rather than an identification of, the fairy and the souls of the dead: one becomes a way of imagining the other.<sup>17</sup>

This analogy appears to have been relatively commonplace in this period, and it finds a pronounced articulation in the association of the fairy Otherworld with purgatory. As Aisling Byrne notes, in this correspondence we might more fruitfully assume 'points of congruity' than 'complete identification'.<sup>18</sup> Yet in places this affinity is very close indeed, and fairyland, and its inhabitants, appear to be drawn in line with purgatorial imaginings. One of the most influential manifestations of this is the late twelfth- and thirteenth-century reception of the account of Arthur's seemingly paradoxical healing from his mortal wounds on the island of Avalon. The motif is first found briefly in Geoffrey's *Historia* and was elaborated in Geoffrey's later life of Merlin, the *Vita Merlini* (c. 1155), where Morgan le Fay (in her earliest iteration) presides over Arthur's treatment. Writing of the discovery of Arthur's grave at Glastonbury Abbey in 1191, Gerald of Wales reflects on the legend of Avalon, drawing directly on Geoffrey's *Vita*:

Propter hoc enim fabulosi Britones et eorum cantores fingere solebant, quod dea quaedam phantastica, scilicet et Morganis dicta, corpus

<sup>16</sup> *De Nugis*, pp. 348–51. This material is suggestive of a breakdown of the division between Walter's accounts of the returned dead and other categories of *mirabilia*, suggested by previous scholars of the text, for which see S. Gordon, 'Monstrous Words, Monstrous Bodies: Irony and the Walking Dead in Walter Map's *De Nugis Curialium*', *English Studies* 96 (2015), 379–402 (p. 388). This distinction is rooted in the titles of Bodleian Library, MS 851, which distinguish between fairy narratives as *apariciones* (apparitions) and revenants as *prodigia* (prodigies). However, the bodily status of the revenant appears to be far less problematic for Walter than the status of the dead returned by fairies.

<sup>17</sup> This is the same analogy in place in the Middle English romance, *Sir Orfeo*. See further, R. Firth Green, *Elf Queens and Holy Friars: Fairy Beliefs and the Medieval Church* (Philadelphia, 2016), pp. 163–67.

<sup>18</sup> A. Byrne, *Otherworlds: Fantasy and History in Medieval Literature* (Oxford, 2015), pp. 73–74.

Arthuri in insulam detulit Avallonium ad ejus vulnera sanandum. Quae cum sanata fuerint, redibit rex fortis et potens, ad Britones regendum, ut ducunt, sicut solet.

(As a result the credulous Britons and their bards invented the legend that a fantastic sorceress called Morgan had removed Arthur's body to the Isle of Avalon so that she might cure his wounds there. According to them, once he has recovered from his wounds this strong and all-powerful king will return to rule over the Britons in the normal way.)<sup>19</sup>

Gerald invokes *phantasmata* in relation to Morgan, '*dea phantastica*', an imaginary or visionary goddess or sorceress, associated with the erroneous beliefs of the Britons in the inventions of their bards concerning the loss and restoration of Arthur's (or rather, the Britons') pan-insular rule. Gerald's account proved to be influential and circulated in various reworkings, including an anecdote in Gervais of Tilbury's *Otia Imperialia* (c. 1209–14), which refers to the ministrations of '*Morganda fatata*' (the fairy Morgan) and the '*fabulose*' (storied, as opposed to historical) belief of the Britons in Arthur's return from Avalon.<sup>20</sup>

Rejections of the legend must be situated in the broader context of anxieties among Latin historians about Galfridian '*fabula*' as antithetical to historical truth, of which Merlinian prophecy, Arthur's return and Avalon were understood to be representative. This rejection is as likely to have been political as historiographical – even authors who rejected the reality of Arthur's return drew on other elements of Galfridian history and prophecy in their works.<sup>21</sup> As I have written elsewhere, allusions to fairy and fantasy here serve to negate the possible political meanings of the legend of Arthur's return, responding to English anxieties about (a largely fabricated) Welsh Arthurian messianism.<sup>22</sup> In accounts of the Avalon legend, the phantasmatic and the prophetic are presented as synonymous with the false. In terms of historical language use, we might understand this as part of a broader conceptual movement, which by the fourteenth and fifteenth

<sup>19</sup> J. S. Brewer, J. F. Dimock, and G. F. Warner, ed., *Giraldi Cambrensis Opera*, 8 vols (London, 1861–1891), IV, p. 49; Gerald of Wales, *The Journey through Wales and Description of Wales*, ed. and trans. L. Thorpe (Harmondsworth, 1978), p. 286.

<sup>20</sup> Gervais of Tilbury, *Otia Imperialia: Recreation for an Emperor*, ed. and trans. S. E. Banks and J. W. Binns (Oxford, 2002), pp. 428–49.

<sup>21</sup> J. Crick, 'The British Past and the Welsh Future: Gerald of Wales, Geoffrey of Monmouth and Arthur of Britain', *Celtica* 23 (1999), 60–75. See also A. Putter, 'Latin Historiography after Geoffrey of Monmouth', in *The Arthur of Medieval Latin Literature: The Development and Dissemination of the Arthurian Legend in Medieval Latin*, ed. S. Echard (Cardiff, 2011), pp. 85–108 (pp. 85–93).

<sup>22</sup> V. Flood, 'The Legend of Arthur's Return from Avalon: Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Development of the Legend', *Arthuriana* 25 (2015), 84–110.



centuries saw ‘fairy’ applied as a synonym for lie in Middle English. For example, in the Laud *Troy Book* (c. 1400), Ilium is understood to be of such beauty that were the author to describe it any further, it would be beyond belief: ‘Man wolde wene that men did lye, / And holde it all for fairie.’<sup>23</sup>

However, in the writings of the same twelfth- and thirteenth-century authors, the Avalon legend, and its fairies, are associated not just with false prophecy but the phantom body of Arthur. In *De Principis* Gerald writes of notions of Arthur’s body as ‘*quasi phantasticum*’, carried away ‘*per spiritus*’, and immune to death. This possibility is denied by Gerald, but the language he uses is telling. Taking this association one stage further, in another anecdote in *Otia*, Gervais draws on a Sicilian legend of Arthur’s court within Mount Etna, elsewhere identified as a gateway to purgatory.<sup>24</sup> Like the somatomorphic souls of purgatory, Arthur’s wounds heal and re-open continually (‘*vulneribus quotannis recrudescentibus*’). Whether or not Gervais understood Etna to be Avalon remains uncertain (he certainly borrows from Geoffrey of Monmouth’s description of Avalon in the *Vita Merlini*),<sup>25</sup> but the anecdote is suggestive of an understanding of a conceptual relationship between Avalon and an earthly purgatory, and the Arthurian phantom held in conjunction with fairy, prophecy, and a curious (im)materiality.

### Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

I present twelfth- and thirteenth-century Latin *mirabilia* not as sources of *SGGK* or *Awntyrs A* (the influence of *De Nugis* in particular is very uncertain – it survives in a single fourteenth-century manuscript). Rather I understand these materials to be indicative of a broader conceptual framework, with deep-rooted cultural associations that appear also in late-medieval romance. Nonetheless, it is possible that the *Gawain*-poet may have known some of this material (if we understand it as part of his Latinate context).<sup>26</sup> Gerald of Wales’s account of Morgan, for example, sits interestingly with the Green Knight’s reference to Morgan in his second and final encounter with Gawain:

<sup>23</sup> J. E. Wülfing, ed., *The Laud Troy Book: A Romance of Around 1400 AD*, Part 1 (London, 1902), p. 279.

<sup>24</sup> Le Goff, *Purgatory*, pp. 202–05.

<sup>25</sup> For discussion of this source relationship, see Byrne, *Otherworlds*, pp. 126–27. For discussion of the limits of Gervais’s understanding of purgatory in his treatment of this material, see Le Goff, *Purgatory*, p. 204.

<sup>26</sup> For a brief note on the Latinity of the *Gawain*-poet, see H. Cooper, Introduction, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Oxford, 1998), p. xii.

Morgne þe goddes;  
 Þefore hit is hir name;  
 Weldez non so hyȝe hawtesse  
 Þat ho ne con make ful tame. (2452–55)

Although the *Gawain*-poet's immediate source is probably the prose *Lancelot*, the reference to 'Morgan the goddess', who like the high medieval *fata* is associated with the state of kingdoms (bringing low the 'hyȝe hawtesse' of Camelot), might also be read as a translation of Gerald's '*dea phantastica*'.<sup>27</sup> Notably, the author of the prose *Lancelot* appears to have had interests in common with Gerald: the *Lancelot*-author writes that belief in Morgan's status as a goddess ('*Morgue la dieusse*') was held only by mad people (for Gerald, the Britons), who did not realise that her knowledge was acquired through the study of sorcery and enchantment.<sup>28</sup> The source of Morgan's abilities is positioned similarly in *SGGK*, where the Green Knight reports that Morgan derived her knowledge, explicitly associated with clerical magic, from Merlin: 'koyntyse of clergie, bi craftes wel lerned, / Þe maystrés of Merlin mony hatz taken' (2447–48).<sup>29</sup> The Green Knight's reference to Morgan the 'goddess', student of Merlin, is aligned with a broader discourse associating the fairy simultaneously with the prophetic and (however paradoxically) the false or phantasmatic, which we might trace back to early representations of the Avalon legend.

However, the phantom with whom the *Gawain*-poet's Morgan is associated is not Arthur in Avalon but the Green Knight. Upon his arrival in Camelot, the Green Knight inspires wonder:

Al studied þat þer stod, and stalked hym nerre  
 Wyth al þe wonder of þe worlde what he worch schulde.  
 For fele sellyez had þay sen, bot such neuer are;  
 Forþi for fantoum and fayryȝe þe folk þere hit demed.  
 (237–40)

<sup>27</sup> For discussion of this source relationship, see M. W. Twomey, 'Morgain la Fée in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: From Troy to Camelot', in *Text and Intertext in Medieval Arthurian Literature*, ed. N. J. Lacy (London, 1996), pp. 91–116 (pp. 96–98); A. Putter and M. Stokes, ed., *The Works of the Gawain Poet* (London, 2014), pp. 759–60. For notice of the phrase as common to Gerald of Wales and the prose *Lancelot*, see Tolkien and Gordon, ed., *SGGK*, p. 129.

<sup>28</sup> For the discussion of the relationship between the knowledge of the Arthurian fairy and the magician, see Harf-Lancner, *Les Fées au Moyen Âge*, pp. 416–20 (esp. pp. 418–19, for discussion of the representation of Morgan in the prose *Lancelot*).

<sup>29</sup> For reading of the romance's magic in the clerkly tradition of Merlin, see Putter and Stokes, *Works of the Gawain Poet*, p. 760.

The Green Knight is described in common with the *fata* and *fantasma* pairing of high medieval *mirabilia*, rendered in Middle English ‘fantoum and faryʒe’.<sup>30</sup> As recorded in the *MED*, this phrase is applied with varying tonal registers in works roughly contemporary with the *Gawain*-poet. John Gower, for example, uses it to comic effect in his *Confessio Amantis* when describing reactions to apparent phantoms which turn out to be decidedly material;<sup>31</sup> and it assumes a more clearly moralistic onus, although similarly invoking the transitory, ephemeral or false, in the roughly contemporary Vernon manuscript lyric beginning ‘Whon Men beoþ’ (c. 1390), which contains a warning of the vanities of the world: ‘Þis world [...] nis but fantum and feiri’ (28).<sup>32</sup> While the connotations of deception are certainly apt, in that the Green Knight’s arrival in Camelot is revealed at the end of the romance as a conceit of Morgan, the romance is also engaged in the ways in which this particular ‘fantoum’ might point to broader revelatory truths, including the transience of the Arthurian kingdom.

<sup>30</sup> The influence of this construction is also felt in French romance roughly contemporary with the *Gawain*-poet. In Jean d’Arras’s *Mélusine*, the serpentine fairy founder of the house of Lusignan is charged by her husband: ‘Hee, tresfaulse serpente, par Dieu, ne toy ne tes fais ne sont que fantosme ne ja hoir que tu ayes porté ne vendra a bon chief en la fin’ (‘Ah! you deceitful serpent, by God you and your deeds are nothing but phantoms, nor will any heir you have borne ever come to a good end’). Jean d’Arras, *Mélusine, ou La Noble Histoire de Lusignan*, ed. Jean-Jacques Vincensini (Paris, 2003), p. 692; Jean d’Arras, *Melusine; or, the Noble History of the House of Lusignan*, trans. D. Maddox and S. Sturm-Maddox (State College, PA, 2012), p. 191. For discussion of the relationship of the romance to twelfth-century analogues, including Walter Map, see Harf-Lancner, *Les Fées au Moyen Âge*, pp. 119–78. For a brief discussion of the romance in relation to contemporary imaginings of purgatory, see S. Sturm-Maddox, ‘Crossed Destinies: Narrative Programs in the *Roman de Mélusine*’, *Melusine of Lusignan: Founding Fiction in Late Medieval France*, ed. D. Maddox and S. Sturm-Maddox (Athens, Georgia, 1996), pp. 12–31 (p. 26).

<sup>31</sup> He wende al hadde ben a jape  
Of faierie, and sore him dradde [...]  
And thanne him thoghte wel ynouh  
It was fantosme

(John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*: Volume 3, ed. R. A. Peck, with Latin translation by A. Galloway (Kalamazoo, 2004), V. 5002–03, 5010–11).

This is a comic episode – and the terms are used to convey Bardus’s disbelief at the very real ape and serpent, which have emerged from the pit in the place of the senator. This is tonally distinct from the use of juxtaposition in *SGGK*. ‘Fairie’, *MED* <<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary>> last accessed 3 June 2020

<sup>32</sup> ‘Fantom’, *MED* <<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary>> last accessed 3 June 2020.

The phrase also must be understood in explicit relation to the uncertain, phantom, materiality of the medieval fairy. Gawain responds to the peculiar physicality implicit in being of ‘fantoum and fayryze’ when, defending his instinct to flinch beneath the Green Knight’s axe at the Green Chapel, he observes that the Green Knight has a different type of body than his own: ‘Bot þaȝ my hede falle on þe stonez, / I con not hit restore’ (2282–83). As Michael W. Twomey has suggested, we might read Gawain’s anxieties about bodily integrity in relation to a vein of late-medieval popular piety, concerned with the ways in which the somatomorphic soul might prefigure the wholeness of the resurrected body, and the vexed question of the resurrection of a body fragmented at death.<sup>33</sup> The Green Knight appears to possess a type of somatomorphic physicality, and his decapitation and the restoration of his head is potentially more than an illusion. It is of a type with the perpetual opening and healing of the wounds of Arthur in Avalon, who – we read in Gerald and Gervais – is himself rendered phantom.<sup>34</sup> None of this is to imply that the Green Knight is a spirit temporarily released from purgatory, rather that, like the medieval fairy, or Arthur in Avalon, his representation draws on the precedent of the purgatorial spirit.

We might understand the Green Knight’s function, in common with the phantasmatic fairy or returning spirit, as explicitly portentous, and while the Green Knight is not prophetic, he signifies in a prophetic framework of meaning. Although the romance has been associated by critics with imaginings of the Last Judgement, its affinities with secular historiographical and prophetic models, including the Galfridian, are far more pronounced.<sup>35</sup> The opening of the poem traces a *Brut* in miniature, drawing on content from Geoffrey’s *Historia*, and potentially, Dares Phrygius’s *De Excidio Troiae*, which appears as a familiar prequel to the *Historia* in insular

<sup>33</sup> M. W. Twomey, “‘Hadet with an aluisch mon’ and “‘britned to noȝt’”: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Death, and the Devil’, in *The Arthurian Way of Death: The English Tradition*, ed. K. Cherewatuk and K. S. Whetter (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 73–93 (pp. 85–86).

<sup>34</sup> See above, pp. 154–56.

<sup>35</sup> For a brief discussion of the poem’s apocalypticism, see S. Pierson Prior, *The Fayre Formez of the Pearl Poet* (East Lansing, 1996), p. 191. This is in keeping with the apocalyptic interests of the poet in *Pearl*, if we understand these authors to be one and the same. As this is beyond the Arthurian interests of this article, I omit further consideration of *Pearl*, where, moreover, the function of the otherworldly interlocutor is governed by a distinctly different set of generic conventions and expectations. For a discussion of apocalyptic judgement in *SGGK*, read in line with the other works of the *Pearl*-poet, see further S. L. Clark and J. N. Wasserman, ‘The Passing of the Seasons and the Apocalyptic in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*’, *South Central Review* 3 (1986), 5–22 (pp. 5–8, 14).

manuscripts.<sup>36</sup> The poet's opening allusion to the fall of Troy, and the deeds of a traitor, 'þe trewest on erthe' (4), is plausibly informed by the representation in Dares (and related traditions) of Aeneas or Antenor, who resolve to betray Troy, and in so doing, save a remnant of the Trojan line; or, alternatively, as Neil Cartlidge has recently argued, Paris, whose abduction of Helen begins the Trojan War.<sup>37</sup> The exile of the Trojans from the fallen city is a fitting prologue to the events of Geoffrey's *Historia*, and the *Gawain*-poet traces the journey of the Trojans across Europe, including Brutus's colonisation of Britain (14–15), as found in the first book of the *Historia* (I. 451–60). Here the treacheries of the Trojan past repeat in a new geographical context:

Where werre and wrake and wonder  
Bi syþez hatz wont þerinne,  
And oft boþe blysse and blunder  
Ful skete hatz skyfted synne. (16–19)

Unrest is a potential in place from the very moment of the island's settlement, and is offered by the *Gawain*-poet as the defining feature of its history:

Ande quen þis Bretayn watz bigged bi þis burn rych,  
Bolde bredden þerinne, baret þat lofden,  
In mony turned tyme tene þat wroʒten.  
Mo ferlyes on þis folde han fallen here oft  
þen in any oþer þat I wot, syn þat ilk tyme. (20–24)

The long-lived 'ferlyes' (marvels) of the island are contextualised by the 'tene' (mischief) wrought in 'mony turned tyme' (times past) by the 'bolde' of Britain, descended from Brutus ('þis burn rych'). In the context of the Trojan betrayal and the *translatio imperii* with which it is associated, we might understand this in relation to the translation of insular power (its movement between different political-national

<sup>36</sup> For the uses of Dares in Wales, with reference to England also, see H. Fulton, 'Troy Story: The Medieval Welsh *Ystoria Dared* and the Brut Tradition of British History', *The Medieval Chronicle* 7 (2011), 137–50.

<sup>37</sup> For an overview of the arguments surrounding the identification of the traitor in lines 2–3, and the suggestion of Paris, see N. Cartlidge, 'Who is the Traitor at the Beginning of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*?', *Arthurian Literature* XXXIV (2018), 22–51. Cartlidge's thesis sits intriguingly with the broader prophetic contexts of the Troy legend. In a number of late-classical and medieval sources (excluding Dares), Hecuba (then pregnant with Paris) dreams, prophetically, of the prince as a flame who will burn Troy to ashes, an allusion which may be echoed in line 2 of *SGGK*. See Cartlidge, pp. 40–42.

groups). This is the structuring concept of Geoffrey's *Historia*, and of insular historiography more broadly; as well as the *Prophetiae* and subsequent English prophetic tradition.<sup>38</sup>

It is perhaps no surprise, then, that the *Gawain*-poet's description of battles and unrest as 'ferlyes' draws on a conventional feature of Middle English Galfridian prophecy. We might note, for example, the *Prophecy of Merlin* in Magdalene College, Cambridge, MS 1236 (c. 1460), a partially nonsensical re-working of the anti-English alliance of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Prophetiae Merlini* 110, which positions war and dissension in relation to 'wonders':

When Goneway shall on Curtays call,  
Then Wallys shall rayke and hastely ryse;  
Then Albeon Skottlonde shall to hem fall;  
Then waken wonders in every wyse. (7–10)<sup>39</sup>

Political prophecy was a mainstream component of English literary culture by this period – as recognisable in its conventions as was Arthurian romance. The cues here invoked would almost certainly have been intelligible to the early audience of the romance. War and wonder are similarly a feature of the late fourteenth-century prophecies ascribed to another fairy interlocutor, the fairy mistress of Thomas of Erceldoune, in the romance which bears Thomas's name. Here we see the close relationship between marvels and true prophecies of insular battles. The prologue to *Thomas of Erceldoune* in the Lincoln Thornton manuscript (Lincoln Cathedral MS 91) presents its contents – a series of prophecies relating to the wars between England and Scotland – as one of the greatest marvels ever witnessed:

I sall 3ow telle als trewe a tale,  
Als euer was herde by nyghte or daye:

<sup>38</sup> For discussion of the fall of kingdoms as a structuring principle of insular historiography, with a particular focus on Geoffrey of Monmouth and his intellectual inheritance, see R. W. Hanning, *The Vision of History in Early Britain: From Gildas to Geoffrey of Monmouth* (New York, 1966). See also above n. 14. Political pessimism is a feature of Virgilian history and prophecy as well. Anchises's prophecy in *Aeneid* VI is as pessimistic as it is optimistic about Roman futures and is as concerned with rebellion and untimely death as it is with the imperial conquests of Aeneas's descendants; for example, in his account of the revolt and punishment of the sons of Lucius Junius Brutus (*Aeneid*, VI. 817–22); and Rome's grief over the untimely death of Augustus's heir, Marcellus (*Aeneid*, VI. 867–86).

<sup>39</sup> J. M. Dean, ed., *Medieval English Political Writings* (Kalamazoo, 1996), p. 10. Cf. *Prophetiae* 110: 'Cadualarus Conanum uocabit et Albaniam in societatem accipiet' ('Cadualadrus will summon Conanus and make Scotland his ally').

And þe maste meruelle ffor owttynne naye,  
That euer was herde by-fore or syene. (3–6)<sup>40</sup>

Although we might understand this allusion to the marvellous as a gloss on Thomas's fairy encounter, the prologue is more concerned with the martial nature of the prophecies and does not mention the fairy. The marvels prophesied are future battles; marvellous both in their ferocity and as the stuff of true prophecy.

While, unlike Thomas's fairy, the Green Knight's speech is not prophetic, it is certainly portentous and operates in a close relationship to the pessimistic patterning of British history established by the prologue. The pessimistic martial wonders of the prologue find a counterpart in the encounter between Gawain and the Green Knight at the Green Chapel. As Gawain flinches at the fall of the axe, the Green Knight observes: 'Þou art not Gawayn,' quoth þe gome, 'þat is so goud halden, / þat neuer arþed for no here by hylle ne be vale' (2270–71). Gawain's courage is positioned not in relation to the episodic adventures of Arthurian romance but the battles of Arthurian and British history and prophecy, as outlined in the prologue. Gawain has never fled an enemy army, and yet he flinches at the axe. The exchange of blows undercuts the confidence, and stability, of the Arthurian trajectory of conquest. The adoption of the girdle by the Arthurian court, as a misappropriated token of Gawain's chivalric adventure, cannot but contain the residue of this broader significance: the possibility not only of chivalric but of regnal failure.

Certainly, the end of the Arthurian kingdom appears to be made explicit in the conclusion of the romance, which departs the scene of Arthur's hall with a reiteration of the opening lines of the prologue. This is framed as a reminder of the many 'ferlyes' of Britain which have followed from the fall of Troy, here re-cast as 'aunte rez' in common with Gawain's encounter with the Green Knight:

Syþen Brutus, þe bolde burne, boþed hider fyrst,  
After þe segge and þe asaute watz sesed at Troye,  
iwysse,  
Mony aunte rez here-biforne  
Haf fallen suche er þis. (2524–28)

In terms of its relationship to the broader corpus of Arthurian history and romance, Gawain's encounter with the Green Knight has been suggestively situated by Ad Putter within the twelve years of peace that followed

<sup>40</sup> J. A. H. Murray, ed., *The Romance and Prophecies of Thomas of Erceldoune* (London, 1875).

Arthur's insular conquests in Geoffrey's *Historia*, 'unused storytime', which from Wace onwards appears as a time of marvels.<sup>41</sup> Notably, the other English Gawain romances conventionally begin with an allusion to Arthur's insular conquests, a claim consolidated, or at least made explicit, through the individual adventures, and marvellous encounters, of his knights. Yet in its framework of meanings, the *Gawain*-poet does not present an 'auntere' typical of the Gawain romances, and in many respects his representation of the Arthurian marvellous has much more in common with the troubled days of the fall of Troy. In its interest in territorial and historical limits, the poem inverts the extension of Arthurian *imperium*. It is one of the few Gawain romances where an antagonistic element or elements (the Green Knight and Morgan) remain unassimilated by the Arthurian community, threats which are never neutralised. This is because these elements are in many respects inassimilable: they function as an embodiment of the forces of history and prophecy and point towards the kingdom's end. *SGGK* is inscribed with an awareness of the inexorable teleology of the broader Arthurian cycle, or history, which extends beyond the scope of, and conditions how we read, the individual chivalric adventure or episode.<sup>42</sup>

But what of the phantom himself? The Green Knight, as the alter ego of Bertilak of Hautdesert, is understood to act 'þur3 my3t of Morgne la Faye' (2446). The precise nature of his existence remains uncertain, and indeed, as James Wade has observed, the capacity for over-signification, and the multiplications of possible meanings, is a distinct feature of the supernatural universe of the text.<sup>43</sup> We do not know whether the Green Knight is transformed, or created, by Morgan (although certainly some measure of clerical magic is implied), simply that he is dispatched by her as a 'wonder', to test the wits of Camelot, and to scare Guinevere to death:

Ho wayned me þis wonder your wyttez to reue,  
 For to haf greued Gaynour and girt hir to dy3e  
 With glopnyng of þat ilke gome þat gostlych speked  
 With his hede in his honde bifore þe hy3e table. (2459–62)

<sup>41</sup> A. Putter, 'Finding Time for Romance: Mediaeval Arthurian Literary History', *Medium Ævum* 63.1 (1994), 1–16 (p. 6). Putter and Stokes suggest that the poet's allusion to the particular wonders of the reign of Arthur (23–29) might be understood as a reference to the 'merveillouses aventures' that occupy this period in the prose *Lancelot: Works of the Gawain Poet*, p. 605.

<sup>42</sup> For a discussion of the awareness of Arthurian decline in Middle English Arthuriana, see J. Whitman, 'Envisioning the End: History and Consciousness in Medieval English Arthurian Romance', *Arthuriana* 23.3 (2013), 79–103 (with reference to *SGGK*, pp. 84–87).

<sup>43</sup> J. Wade, *Fairies in Medieval Romance* (New York, 2011), pp. 32–35.



Part of the terror of the Green Knight is his association with demonic cues, which in the context of the wider Galfridian tradition might be understood to authorise prophetic knowledge. This must also be situated in relation to the vexed position of the fairy, the process of ‘satanisation’ that Laurence Harf-Lancner has detected in the representation of fairies from twelfth-century *mirabilia* to Arthurian romance.<sup>44</sup> It is most neatly encapsulated in the romance in the identification of the Green Knight as an ‘aluisch mon’ (681), a term that, as Twomey has observed, might encompass either the fairy or the demonic.<sup>45</sup> It is the very ambiguous ontology of the Green Knight that underlies his function as a terrifying ‘wonder’. It situates him within the familiar prophetic mode outlined above, drawn into a symbolic textual association with the fall of kingdoms, although as portent rather than cause. Yet this passage also draws on a discourse associated with the figure of the purgatorial phantom: the decapitated head which speaks is suggestive of a somatomorphic state of being. The Green Knight’s phantasmatic status functions in direct relation to the authority of his speech: he speaks ‘gostlych’ (as a spirit; or on spiritual matters). This double meaning is significant: the romance appears to be operating in line with a clear conception of the phantom’s verbal (potentially prophetic) authority, which signifies in relation to the privileged knowledge associated with the figure of the phantom in more directly sacred frameworks of meaning.

### *Awntyrs A*

In its engagement with the figure of the phantom, *Awntyrs A* draws not on the purgatorial grammar associated with fairies in the insular and Arthurian tradition but with purgatory directly. The romance incorporates an Arthurian re-imagining of *Pope Gregory’s Trental*, which recounts the post-mortem requests of the pope’s mother, issued from purgatory.<sup>46</sup> It tells of the encounter of Gawain and Guinevere, at the Tarn Wathelyn, in Cumbria, with the ghost of Guinevere’s mother. Its engagement with purgatorial conventions is clear. We might even understand the tarn as a counterpart to St Patrick’s Purgatory, a site romanced in the Middle

<sup>44</sup> Harf-Lancner, *Les Fées au Moyen Âge*, pp. 390–409. For the demonic affinities of the fairy, see further, Firth Green, *Elf Queens and Holy Friars*.

<sup>45</sup> For a discussion of the demonic qualities of the Green Knight, and overview of relevant scholarship on this subject, see Twomey, ‘*Sir Gawain, Death and the Devil*’, in *Arthurian Way of Death*, pp. 89–90.

<sup>46</sup> For discussion of the relationship of the romance to the *Trental* and its Middle English reworkings, see Hanna, ed., *Awntyrs off Arthure*, pp. 24–27.

English *Sir Owein*; or the earthly gateway to purgatory located at Mount Etna in similar medieval accounts, including the Arthurian.<sup>47</sup> In line with the notion of the somatomorphic soul, in *Awntyrs* Gawain understands the ‘goost’, or ‘sprete’ (spirit), to be in possession of a ‘bodi bare’ which suffers the pains of purgatory. He assures Guinevere:

‘Of þe goost,’ quod þe gome, ‘greue you no mare,  
For I shal speke with þe sprete.  
And of þe wayes I shall wete –  
What may þe bales bete  
Of þe bodi bare.’ (100–04)

The ghost possesses an affinity with the revenant also (as if emerged from the grave, she appears ‘biclagged in clay’, 106), and has been associated by at least one critic with the resurrection of the body at the Last Judgement (the somatomorphic soul appears to be understood in relation to the resurrected body).<sup>48</sup> Beyond its eschatological resonances, however, this curiously embodied spirit has a great deal in common with the phantom who speaks to the fate of kingdoms, as we find in *SGGK*. Indeed, the ghost shares certain points of demonic, or quasi-demonic, correspondence with the Green Knight, although this depiction is also a consequence of the conflation of hell and purgatory in the romance. The ghost’s appearance ‘in the lyknes of Lucyfere, layetheste in Helle’ (84) at the tarn, in the midnight darkness of the eclipse, might be read in common with the terror both the Green Knight and the Green Chapel inspire in Gawain, ‘Here myȝt aboute mydnyȝt/ þe dele his matynnes telle!’ (2187–88).<sup>49</sup> We might again recall the ways in which, within a Galfridian framework, the demonic is implicated in, and endorses, political prophecy and portent.

<sup>47</sup> For an account of this tradition, see Byrne, *Otherworlds*, pp. 69–73.

<sup>48</sup> M. Robson, ‘From Beyond the Grave: Darkness at Noon in *The Awntyrs off Arthure*’, in *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance*, ed. A. Putter and J. Gilbert (New York, 2000), pp. 219–36 (pp. 228–29). For discussion of the relationship between the somatomorphic soul and the resurrected body, see Twomey, ‘*Sir Gawain*, Death and the Devil’, in *Arthurian Way of Death*, pp. 85–86. The poem has also been read in relation to representations of the end of the body (which we might term personal eschatology) in the tradition of the *Three Living and the Three Dead*, and the contrast between the living body and the dead invited in medieval double-decker tombs. See Spearing, *Medieval to Renaissance*, p. 125.

<sup>49</sup> While arguments have been entertained for the influence of *SGGK*, or the works of the *Gawain*-poet more generally, upon *Awntyrs*, I address these affinities as shared points of cultural allusion. For an assessment of, and an account of the limits of, this source argument, see Hanna, ed., *Antwyrns off Arthure*, pp. 44–46.

The ghost forecasts a series of consecutive territorial losses, delivered in the guise of political prophecy, drawn – as in the case of the *Gawain*-poet – from the Galfridian historiographical and prophetic tradition. The ghost's prophecy is an expanded reworking of the very brief account of the second part of the career of Arthur, the boar of Cornwall, in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Prophetiae Merlini*. Following Arthur's insular conquests, the relevant passages of the *Prophetiae* conclude: 'Gallicanos saltus possidebit. Tremebit Romulea domus saeuiciam ipsius, et exitus eius dubius erit' ('he [the boar of Cornwall] will occupy the glades of France. The house of Rome will tremble before his rage, and his end shall be unknown') (41–42). As this scene is expanded in the prophecy of the ghost, we read of Arthur's successes in France, followed by his Roman campaign:

Bretayne [Brittany] and Burgoyne [Burgundy] is both in 3our  
bandoun,  
And al þe dussiperes of Fraunce with your dyntes deued.  
Gyan [Aquitaine] may grete þe werre was bigonen;  
There is noȝt lede on lyue in þat londe leued.  
Yet shal þe riche Romayns with you be aurronen,  
And with þe Rounde Table þe rentes be reued;  
Thus shal a Tyber vntrue tymber with tene. (276–82)<sup>50</sup>

However, unlike the prophecy of the boar of Cornwall, which makes no overt reference to the fall of the Arthurian kingdom, the prophecy of the ghost dwells on this at length:

Hit shal in Tuskan be tolde of þe treson,  
And ye shullen turne ayen for þe tyþing.  
Þer shal þe Rounde Table lese þe renoune,  
Beside Ramsey ful rad at a riding;  
In Dorsetshire shal dy þe doughtest of alle.  
Gete þe, Sir Gawayn,  
The boldest of Bretayne;  
In a slake þou shal be slayne,  
Sich ferlyes shall falle.

Suche ferlies shall fal, withoute eny fable,  
Vppon Cornewayle coost with a knight kene.

<sup>50</sup> I here retain the phrase as in Bodleian Library, Douce MS 324 (Bodleian MS 21898), which is emended by Hanna in his edition to 'That shal be Tyber in true tymber you tene', on the basis that 'no Roman ever gives Arthur that much trouble'. Hanna, ed., *Awntyrs off Arthure*, p. 119. However, the allusion plausibly utilises a convention found in roughly contemporary political prophecy as a figure for conquest, for which see below, pp. 170–71.

Sir Arthur þe honest, auenant and able,  
 He shal be wounded, iwys – wopely, I wene.  
 And al þe rial rowte of þe Rounde Table,  
 Þei shullen dye on a day, þe doughty bydene... (291–305)

Although the author is very likely indebted to the account of Arthur's conquests in the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, which include Tuscany, and potentially, the manner of Gawain's death in the same, the formulation of this material owes much to Middle English political prophecy.<sup>51</sup> The ghost's prophecies of the death (or at least the mortal wounding) of Arthur, and the knights of the Round Table, including Gawain, are located in a series of battles cast as 'ferlies'. The romance invokes a strategy in common with Middle English prophecy and the uses of its paradigms by the *Gawain*-poet, similarly concerned with the testing of Arthurian 'renoun'. There is a notable specificity to the ghost's prophecy, here a marked geographical interest, broadly characteristic of political prophecy, which is decisive even as it is allusive – although the situation of Arthur's last battle in Cornwall certainly draws on a long Arthurian historiographical tradition also.

The tenor of the ghost's prophecy finds a close analogue in the pessimistic vision of *Thomas of Erceldoune*, which includes various accounts of the deaths of the 'bold', 'doughty' or 'gentle' knights of Britain (there meaning the English). Like the ghost's prophecy, the Erceldoune sequence promises a certain specificity in terms of the location and circumstances of its various conflicts:

And j sall telle 3ow tyte and sone,  
 Of Batells donne sythene many a 3ere;  
 And of batells þat done sall bee;  
 In whate place, and how, and whare. (15–18)

A number of further correspondences between the prophecy and *Awntyrs A*, on the level of phrasing, have been noted by Ingeborg Nixon in her edition of *Thomas of Erceldoune*, suggestive of common sources if not indeed a direct source relationship. (My readings of *Thomas* elsewhere suggest that this may be the earlier text of the two, although this has previously been assumed to be *Awntyrs*.)<sup>52</sup> The two appear to have circulated in

<sup>51</sup> For the relation of *Awntyrs A* to the alliterative *Morte*, see Hanna, ed., *Awntyrs off Arthure*, pp. 41–42; Spearing, *Medieval to Renaissance*, p. 136.

<sup>52</sup> Nixon notes that the phrase 'als mydnyght mirk' (172), which is applied to Thomas's journey with the fairy through the Eildon Hills, corresponds to the description of the eclipse in line 76 of *Awntyrs A*. Nixon also sees an affinity between the description of the 1353 murder of William Douglas in *Thomas*:

the same context, and both are found, alongside the alliterative *Morte*, in the Lincoln Thornton manuscript. At the very least, I suggest that we might align both with a common prophetic discourse, fundamental to which was the apparent transparency of its meanings. While political prophecy reads to modern eyes as replete with obscurities, in its immediate historical contexts its meanings were intended to be clear. The historical battles traced by Thomas's fairy are by and large intelligible, and so too are those of the ghost's prophecy.

A similar specificity is also in place in *Awntyrs*, in terms of the temporal relationship between the time of the prophecy and the period in which the prophesied events will unfold. As in *SGGK*, an account of 'a fayre folk in her first age' (54), the events of the romance appear to take place early in the life of the Arthurian kingdom.<sup>53</sup> Suggestive also of the relative youth of the kingdom is the situation of the encounter at the Tarn Wathelyn in the time of Mordred's childhood, as we read in the ghost's prophecy:

In riche Arthures halle,  
The barne playes at þe balle  
þat outray shall you alle,  
Derfely þat day. (309–12)

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And whene he es mane moste of Mayne,  
And hopis beste þan for to spede,  
On a lay lande sall he be slayne,  
Be-syde a waye for-owttyne drede. (453–56)

and the ghost's allusion to Arthur's fall, 'Whan he is in his magesté, moost in his miȝt, / He shal light full lowe on the sesondes' (267–68). Certainly, a similar prophetic register is invoked, although the very formulaic nature of this material, especially as concerns Fortune's wheel (which also appears in the alliterative *Morte*), frustrates direct source analysis. I. Nixon, ed., *Thomas of Erceldoune*, 2 vols (Copenhagen, 1983), II, pp. 23, 70–71. For a dating of *Thomas* to the late fourteenth century, see Flood, *Prophecy, Politics, and Place*, pp. 139–53; and for the composition of *Awntyrs*, c. 1400–1430, see Hanna, ed., *Awntyrs off Arthure*, p. 52.

<sup>53</sup> For the situation of *SGGK* in relation to the events of the *Lancelot-Grail* cycle, see Twomey, 'Morgain la Fée in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', in *Text and Intertext*, pp. 97–98. Although we must take care in arguing from absence, it is notable that neither romance mentions Lancelot and Guinevere's adultery, although it may be treated in the abstract in the ghost's account of her sins and warning to Guinevere in *Awntyrs A*, 213–17 (although if read with the alliterative *Morte* in mind, this might also be understood in relation to Mordred). We might reasonably assume that both romances were understood to belong to the early Arthurian period as it was conceived in the context of the cycle, or Arthurian history, as a whole. Indeed, particularly if read in relation to *Awntyrs B*, as Spearing observes, it is notable that the life of the Arthurian court extends past 'the ghost's prophecy of doom' in *Awntyrs A* ('Awntyrs off Arthure', p. 200), much as, I suggest, *SGGK* does following Gawain's portentous adventure.

The poet's allusion appears to rest on a level of Arthurian inter-textuality, corresponding not simply to the wider Arthurian legend but a specific version of it. The appearance of the 'barne' is preceded by a heraldic identification (a saltire engraved on black, 306–08) of the final enemy of the Round Table – a recollection of the arms disguised by Mordred in the final battle of the alliterative *Morte* (4182).<sup>54</sup>

Prophecies concerning Mordred, and his role in the fall of the Arthurian kingdom, are a feature of the French *Suite de Merlin*, carried over (in reduced form) to Malory's *Morte Darthur*.<sup>55</sup> In *Awntyrs A*, however, this appears to have been employed with the register of Middle English political prophecy in mind. The representation of Mordred in his infancy, held in relation to the future political violence of his adulthood, finds an analogue in a relatively well-established insular prophetic tradition. Prophecies of the military activities of a 'barn' (child) appear in one of the earliest, if not in fact *the* earliest prophecy in the Erceldoune tradition, as we find it in British Library, Arundel MS 56, which tells of the omens and battles which will follow the birth of a 'barn in Kaernervum' (1), Edward II (like Mordred, similarly unnamed, although his identity is clear).<sup>56</sup> Although this version appears to be positive about the insular rule of Edward, the slightly later version of the prophecy found in British Library, Harley MS 2253 positions Edward as a figure of misrule, and, as in both prophecies, he is associated with catastrophic English losses at the Battle of Bannockburn: 'When Bambourne is donged wyth dede men' (10).<sup>57</sup> Of course, unlike the *Reply*, the ghost's prophecy is concerned with a history of military defeat which is legendary rather than near-historical, but it possesses the same level of temporal and locational specificity, and oblique familiarity of its key actors, that we find in

<sup>54</sup> 'Alliterative *Morte Arthur*, Part IV', in *King Arthur's Death: The Middle English Stanzaic Morte Arthur and Alliterative Morte Arthure*, ed. L. D. Benson, Rev. E. E. Foster (Kalamazoo, 1994). For additional analogues, see Hanna, *Awntyrs off Arthure*, p. 120. Heraldry, both real and imagined, is a familiar feature of the Erceldoune tradition, as we find it in the *Romance and Prophecies*, which again presents an interesting, although in this particular aspect speculative, analogue to *Awntyrs A*. In an episode contained uniquely, and imperfectly, in the Thornton manuscript, we read of an encounter between a number of lords, identified by their heraldic standards, including a red lion, a ship and anchor, a wolf and naked child, and a bear (or boar) (579–92). The precise referents intended by the Erceldoune sequence remain uncertain, and it appears to be genuinely futurist.

<sup>55</sup> J. Bliss, 'Prophecy in the *Morte Darthur*', *Arthuriana* 13 (2003), 1–16 (p. 4).

<sup>56</sup> Dean, *Medieval English Political Writings*, p. 12.

<sup>57</sup> Dean, *Medieval English Political Writings*, p. 11. For context, and dating, of the two prophecies, see Flood, *Prophecy, Politics, and Place*, pp. 123–35. Although both manuscripts are dated c. 1340, Arundel appears to preserve an earlier variant.

the utilisation of retrospective prophecy as a contemporary political discourse in late medieval England. The purgatorial phantom issues a clearly recognisable category of political prophecy.

### *Arthurian Phantoms in Political Prophecy*

The political prophetic models of which *Awntys A* and *SGGK* make use held a certain resonance in the world beyond the text, in application to more recent political figures and events. So too, does the figure of the prophetic phantom. Although the precise period of composition of both romances is uncertain, both can be broadly aligned with the politicisation of the phantom in imaginings of Britain that we find in the early to mid-fifteenth century. An excellent example of the Arthurian phantom of contemporary (or near-contemporary) political prophecy appears in the early fifteenth-century anti-Lancastrian *Cock in the North*. The prophecy was long-lived and circulated in various forms across England and Wales in English, Latin and Welsh throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Although the earliest manuscript copies date to the mid-fifteenth century, the recognisable political allusions contained in the prophecy suggest an earlier provenance. It takes as its focus the activities of a ‘dede man’ (a figure of the deposed Richard II), identified also by the Arthurian cipher, the boar, and recounts his future conquests across Europe, in the fashion of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s prophecy of the boar of Cornwall, which it extends to Jerusalem.<sup>58</sup> This is a vein of Arthurian messianism associated with the kings of England – drawing on a framework in common with the Avalon legend, although wrested from its putative (I have argued, erroneous) Welsh associations.

The first act of the dead man is a march on London, against the Lancastrian regime identified, in Galfridian terms, as ‘Troy untrue’: ‘Than shall troy untrew tremble þat dayes / ffor drede of a dede man when þay here hym speke’.<sup>59</sup> We might note the allusion to the history of Trojan treachery, and its role in the fall of cities, in place in the prologue to *SGGK*

<sup>58</sup> For associations of Richard II with Arthurian prophecy, see M. Bennett, ‘Richard II and the Wider Realm’, in *Richard II: The Art of Kingship*, ed. A. Goodman and J. Gillespie (Oxford, 1999), pp. 187–204 (pp. 202–03); H. Fulton, ‘Arthurian Prophecy and the Deposition of Richard II’, *Arthurian Literature* XXII (2005), 64–83; Flood, *Prophecy, Politics, and Place*, pp. 145–49. For the most recent discussions of the legend of Richard’s return, see Flood, *Prophecy, Politics, and Place*, pp. 166–70; V. Flood, ‘Political Joachimism and the English Franciscans: The Rumour of Richard II’s Return’, in *Anglo-Italian Relations in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. H. Fulton and M. Campopiano (York, 2018), pp. 128–49.

<sup>59</sup> Flood, *Prophecy, Politics, and Place*, p. 170. My transcription, from British Library, Cotton Roll II. 23.

also.<sup>60</sup> Both may well be indebted to the common influence of Dares and related traditions, but it is possible that there is a direct relationship of this figure to Gawain romance. There is a plausible echo of *Cock in the North* (which circulated widely) in the allusion to ‘Tyber vntrue’ (282) in the ghost’s prophecy of Arthur’s campaigns in *Awntyrs A*, where it is similarly invoked in the context of imperial conquest. Certainly, if not a direct source relationship, there are shared conventions in place. In the pronouncements of the dead man, we might also recall the loaded and terrifying speech of phantoms, as we find them in *SGGK* and *Awntyrs A*. There is a telling parallel on the level of phrasing between the ‘glopnynge’ (terror) of the Green Knight ‘þat gostlych speked’ (2461), intended by Morgan to terrify Guinevere to death; and the ghost of Guinevere’s mother, who addresses her terrified daughter: ‘I gloppen [terrify] and I grete’ (91). Similarly, *Cock in the North* rests on the political significance of ontologically uncertain bodies (here dead and yet animate), which ‘speke’, inspiring dread and revealing terrible truths of the fall of kingdoms. Further, like both romances, *Cock in the North* invokes wonder:

And this a seely and a grete wonder,  
he that is ded and buryed in sight  
shall ryse agyn and lyve in lond.<sup>61</sup>

The appearance of the dead man, like the Green Knight, is wonderful – the seemingly dead rise and live again. The prophecy presents an important chapter in the politicisation of the phantom, and the phantoms of Arthurian romance align convincingly with this broader cultural moment, however broadly or narrowly this might be envisaged.

This is not the first article to associate *SGGK* with politically engaged late-medieval phantoms. I do so not to suggest, as has elsewhere been hypothesised, that the poem is necessarily a product of the period surrounding Richard II’s deposition.<sup>62</sup> Although this potentially sits con-

<sup>60</sup> The allusion to London as ‘new Troy’ refers to the name given to the city by Brutus in *Historia I*, which appears to have seen particular utility in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. See S. Federico, *New Troy: Fantasies of Empire in the Late Middle Ages* (Minneapolis, 2003).

<sup>61</sup> Flood, *Prophecy, Politics, and Place*, p. 170. My transcription, from British Library, Cotton Roll II. 23.

<sup>62</sup> For the possible association of the poem, situated in its Cheshire or NW Midlands context, with political events and actors of the end of the reign of Richard II, see M. J. Bennett, *Community, Class and Careerism: Cheshire and Lancashire Society in the Age of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 233–35; M. J. Bennett, ‘The Historical Background’, in *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, ed. D. Brewer and J. Gibson (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 71–90 (pp. 83–90).



vincingly with the author's historical pessimism, Galfridian pessimism belongs to a long tradition, which was no means specific to the period following 1399. Rather, we might align the poem, post-Ricardian or not, with a vogue for politicised phantoms, which into the later Middle Ages found an explicitly Arthurian articulation. Awareness of this broader vogue allows us to revisit, and reposition, a political analogue for the poem, first posed by Ann Astell, who has explored *SGGK* as a political allegory for the conflict between Richard II and the Earl of Arundel.<sup>63</sup> The pro-Lancastrian chronicler, Thomas Walsingham, writes towards the end of Richard's reign of the appearance to the king of the ghost of Arundel, executed for treason in 1397. Distracted by the terrors of the ghost, Walsingham writes that Richard ceased to be concerned by good governance and became truly tyrannous. His anxiety was increased by rumours of the miraculous restoration of Arundel's head to his body, and Walsingham notes that after decapitation, the body rose to its feet for as long as it took to say the Lord's prayer, before it at last fell to the ground.<sup>64</sup> This offers an intriguing intersection with the representation of the Green Knight – both a phantom and a victim of decapitation who can marvellously restore his own head.

A precise model for the Green Knight or not (if it is a political allegory, it is certainly a well concealed one), the broader interest in politically prophetic and portentous accounts of the returning dead during this period provides significant context for Richard's supposed dream and *Cock in the North* and suggests that by the early fifteenth century we see a fully politicised figure of the phantom, mobilised as a part of pro- and anti-Lancastrian discourses. This must be understood in relation to a process of historiographic reading of the phantom in which Arthurian romance, and its application of Galfridian historical and prophetic models, presents a significant component of the broader cultural field.

<sup>63</sup> A. W. Astell, *Political Allegory in Late Medieval England* (Ithaca, 1999), pp. 121–22. However, the association of wonders with severed heads is also a feature of hagiographic literature from this period, in relation to which *SGGK* has been read. See M.-A. Stouck, 'Of Talking Heads and Other Marvels: Hagiography and Lay Piety in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', *Florilegium* 17 (2000), 59–72; Twomey, 'Sir Gawain, Death and the Devil', in *Arthurian Way of Death*, pp. 89–90.

<sup>64</sup> J. Taylor, W. R. Childs, and L. Watkiss, *The St Albans Chronicle: The Chronic Maiora of Thomas Walsingham II: 1394–1422* (Oxford, 2011), pp. 94–95.

*Conclusion*

Although drawn after the fashion of the purgatorial visitation, the Arthurian phantom is indelibly tied to secular imaginings of place. Localised in an insular historical context (both legendary and political), the phantom functions as a harbinger of territorial loss. We see here the invocation of ghosts not, as perhaps we might expect, as symbols of pastness, but, from the perspective of the internal Arthurian audiences of the romances, of the insular future. This framework also appears to have been understood in the political world beyond Arthurian romance, as a germane literary–political trope for the articulation of futurist hopes and anxieties, similarly engaged with the circumstances of insular rule. Reading across this material, a reflexive relationship emerges between legendary–historical and political discourses. This is not to imply that in *Awntyrs A* or *SGGK* a clear political referent is in mind, beyond the legendary figures of the texts; political prophecy (as counter-intuitive as this might seem) is normally far more direct than this. Rather, the mode of commentary employed is consistent with a common vision of the end of Britain in circulation in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, whether set in the age of Arthur or of Richard.

