# Tolkien and Laȝamon

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## Cover Page Footnote

Christopher Tolkien called his father's unfinished poem in Old English alliterative meter, *The Fall of Arthur* "one of the most grievous of his many abandonments." [1] Tolkien's "abandonment" of the poem is all the more perplexing in that "it was read and approved by E.V. Gordon, and by R.W. Chambers, Professor of English at London University, who considered it to be 'great stuff—really heroic, quite apart from its value as showing how the *Beowulf* metre can be used in modern English.' "[2] In his detailed analysis of the poem, its many drafts, and Tolkien's notes, Christopher shows how his father drew upon several medieval texts, including Malory's *The Tale of the Death of Arthur*, the English stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, the French *Mort Artu*, the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, and Laȝamon's *Brut* as he composed his Arthurian tale . I would argue, however, that while the influence of Laȝamon's *Brut* on Tolkien's handling of the Arthurian theme is, as Christopher noted, clearly evident in certain details of language and plot in *The Fall of Arthur*, its influence is also apparent in *The Lord of the Rings*, from the standpoint of language, the depiction of faerie, and in the character of Aragorn, who shares important characteristics with Laȝamon's Arthur.

There are several linguistic reasons why Tolkien would have been particularly drawn to Laȝamon. Christopher Tolkien notes that his father owned "a very fine copy of the rare and costly" 1847 edition of the work by Sir Frederick Madden. [3] This edition included texts of the two surviving manuscripts of the *Brut,* Cotton Caligula A.IX, and Cotton Otho C. XIII, both of which were written "in the dialect of the Central West Midlands," [4] according to *Brut* scholar and translator Donald G. Bzdyl. The precise geographical origin of the *Brut*'s dialect has been identified by W.R.J. Barron and S.C. Weinberg, who note that the manuscripts "show sufficient traces of the south-west Midlands dialect to show that the original was written in Worcestershire." [5] In a letter to W.H. Auden from 1955, Tolkien wrote "I am a West-midlander by blood (and took to early west-midland Middle English as a known tongue as soon as I set eyes on it…)[6] In his biography of Tolkien, Humphrey Carpenter notes the young Tolkien's desire to somehow connect with his mother's family's past through the study of Middle English texts. Referring to Tolkien's first contact with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* which Tolkien would later translate, Carpenter writes, " Tolkien was delighted by the poem and also by its language, for he realized that its dialect was approximately that which had been spoken by his mother's West Midland ancestors." [7] The identity of the author of the 14th-century *Sir Gawain and the*

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[1] *Christopher Tolkien,* "The Poem in Arthurian Tradition,*" in J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fall of Arthur,* ed. Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013) 122.

[2] Humphrey Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000) 171.

[3] Sir Frederick Madden, K.H., *Laȝamon's Brut, or Chronicle of Britain; a Poetical semi-Saxon paraphrase of The Brut of Wace* (London: Published by the Society of Antiquaries of London, 1847; rpt New York: AMS Press, 1970). Christopher Tolkien erroneously refers to the author as Sir Francis Madden. See *"*The Unwritten Poem and its Relation to the Silmarillion" in *The Fall of Arthur,* 147.

[4] Donald G. Bzdyl, Introduction to *Lawman's Brut: A History of the Britons*, trans. Donald G. Bzdyl (New York: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1989) 12.

[5] W.R.J. Barron and S.C. Weinberg, introduction *to Layamon's Arthur: The Arthurian Section of Layamon's Brut*, ed. and trans. W.R.J. Barron and S.C. Weinberg (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2001) xiii.

[6] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, Revised and expanded edition, ed. Humphrey Carpenter with the assistance of Christopher Tolkien (Boston: HarperCollinsPublishers, 2023) Letter 163, 311.

[7] Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography*, 43.

*Green Knight* is unknown. As for Laȝamon' s *Brut*, the poet provides the briefest of biographical and geographical information in the opening lines of the poem:

> An preost wes on leoden,   Laȝamon wes ihoten;
> he wes Leouenaðes sone   —liðe him beo Drihten!
> He wonede at Ernleȝe,   at aeðelen are chirechen
> vppen Seuarne staÞe   —sel Þar him Þuhte—
> onfest Radestone;   Þer he bock radde
>
> There was a priest in the land who was called Laȝamon;
> he was the son of Leovenath—God be merciful to him!
> He lives at Areley, by a noble church
> on the banks of the Severn—he thought it pleasant there—
> close to Redstone; there he read books.[8]

In *The Road the Middle-earth*, Tom Shippey notes that the locale described by Laȝamon would have been familiar to Tolkien: "At some stage he must also have noted that the stream by which the poet lived—it is a tributary of the Severn—was the River Gladdon." [9]

The connection between language, story and place was of great importance to Tolkien. In an oft-quoted passage from a letter to editor Milton Waldman, Tolkien lamented "I was from earliest days grieved by the poverty of my own beloved country; it had no stories of its own (bound up with its tongue and soil)…Of course there was and is the Arthurian world, but powerful as it is, it is imperfectly naturalized, associated with the soil of Britain but not with English…" [10] In her article "J.R.R. Tolkien and The Matter of Britain," Verlyn Flieger takes issue with this statement: " …Tolkien's distinction between 'the soil of Britain' and 'English,' contrasting a landmass with a language, seems arbitrary in light of the many-layered culture that English has become. The Celtic Arthur is no more or less 'naturalized' than the Anglo-Saxon Alfred or the Angevin Henry II."[11]  But Tolkien had a point: the earliest references to Arthur from the 6th century poets Aneirin and Taliesin were composed in a Brythonic language which by the 11th-century had evolved into the Welsh of the *Mabinogion*,[12] and  most Arthurian literature before Malory was written in Romance languages: Welsh clerics Gildas, Nennius, and

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[8] Barron and Weinberg base their text of the *Brut* on the oldest of the two extant manuscripts, the British Library Cotton Caligula A.ix, as edited by G.L. Brook and R.F. Leslie for the Early English Text Society, and note that the text "has been checked throughout against the Madden edition."*Layamon's Arthur, vii-viii;* xi. The original text and the translation of this passage are from Barron and Weinberg.

[9] Tom Shippey, *The Road to Middle-earth: Revised and Expanded Edition* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003) 348. Eilert Eckwall uses a different spelling for this body of water in *English River-Names*:  "Gladder Brook, Wo [Worcestershhire] Falls into the Severn in Areley Kings." (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1928) 173.

[10] J.R.R. Tolkien, *Letters*, Letter 131, 203.

[11] Verlyn Flieger, "J.R.R. Tolkien and The Matter of Britain," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*, Issue 87, vo. 23, no. 1 (Summer/Fall 2000) 52.

[12] See Alan R. Thomas, "The Welsh Language," in *The Celtic Languages*, ed. Donald Macaulay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 251-345 and Kenneth Hurlstone Jackson, "Arthur in Early Welsh Verse," in *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages*, ed. Roger Sherman Loomis (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1959) 12-19.

Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote in Latin[13], and the 12th century romances of Chrétien de Troyes and Wace were in dialects of Old French. Although Wace's *Roman de Brut,* written in octosyllabic couplets and completed in 1155, was the main source for Laȝamon's *Brut,* Laȝamon used both rhyme and alliterative verse and "…was the first poet to tell of Arthur and the British past in English, and as far as we know, the first poet to write a long narrative poem in English since the Norman conquest." [14]

Composed between the mid-12th-century and the early 13th century, the Middle English *Brut* nonetheless had a distinctive Anglo-Saxon resonance. C.S. Lewis noted that in comparison to the *Roman de Brut* of Wace, "Its very language,—still more its metre and phraseology, which both descend from Anglo-Saxon verse—make it inevitably sterner, more epic, more serious." [15] Citing a passage recounting the wounded Arthur being borne away in a boat to the isle of Avalon,

> 'And ich wulle varen to Avalun      to vairest alre maiden
> to Argante Þere queen,      alven swiðe sceone ,
> and heo scal mine wunden      makien alle isunde,
> al hal me makien   mid haleweiȝe drenchen…'
>
> 'And I will go to Avalon,  to the fairest of all maidens
> to Argante the queen,  an elf most fair,
> and she shall make whole my wounds
> make me all whole with healing draughts…'

the earliest account of this episode in literature, Christopher Tolkien  points out that "the metre is heir to the ancestral form seen in *Beowulf* (and indeed in *The Fall of Arthur*) …while the vocabulary is almost wholly Old English." [16] Gwyn Jones, fellow medievalist and friend of Tolkien, was among the first critics to stress the linguistic originality of the *Brut*: "Layamon was an intensely English poet. His subject was British history….his source-book was Norman-French, but his spirit, manner and style were English, in the sense that *Beowulf* and *Brunanburh* were English…one assumes that he rejected French influence… because he was the willing heir of an older, more native tradition."[17] Rosamund Allen and E.G. Stanley also note Laȝamon's

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[13] Gildas's *De Excidio Britanniae*, composed in the mid 6th century, is "the only early work covering the phase  of British history commonly assigned to Arthur." Nennius was active in the early 9th century and compiled the *Historia Brittonum,* "which was used by Geoffrey of Monmouth and has figured largely in attempts to reconstruct a historical Arthur." Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, the basis for many subsequent Arthurian works, was completed circa 1138. See  *The New Arthurian Encyclopedia*, ed. Norris J. Lacy (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1996).

[14] Rosamund Allen, Introduction to Lawman, *Brut*, ed., trans., Rosamund Allen (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992) xxxiv.

[15] C.S. Lewis, Introduction to *Selections from Laȝamons Brut*, G.L. Brook, ed.(Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963) viii.

[16] Christopher Tolkien, "The Unwritten Poem," in *J.R.R. Tolkien, The Fall of Arthur*, 146-147. The cited text is from the manuscript Cotton Caligula A ix in the Madden edition.

[17] Gwyn Jones, Introduction to *Wace and Layamon: Arthurian Chronicles*, trans. Eugene Mason (London: Dent, 1962) xi. Rosamund Allen also draws attention to the poet's avoidance of French terms: "Lawman

deliberate avoidance of French-derived terms, which Stanley argues reflects the poet's view of history: "The reluctance shown by him to use French words must have been conscious…his antiquarian sentiments seem to have led him to the creation of an idiom in tune with his love of the English past…"[18] While Tolkien did not make a conscious attempt to avoid using French loan words in his work (which would have been nearly impossible in any case given the way that modern English has evolved) his love of Anglo-Saxon language, literature and history influenced his literary creations which "…reflect a past whose future might have been unblemished by the invasion of 1066." [19] From a motion put forward at the St. Edwards School Debating Society in 1910, to comments made in his correspondence as late as 1968, Tolkien made it clear that "he resented the impact on Old English of the French spoken by the Normans who conquered England in 1066." [20]

Laʒamon's love of England's pre-Norman past is reflected not only in the metre of the *Brut* and the scarcity of French-derived words, but also in the use of archaic vocabulary. "Archaic or archaistic: either the genuine idiom of its late twelfth-century origins, or the idiom of a past age recreated by Laʒamon …" [21] An example of this archaism as noted by Françoise H.M. Le Saux is the presence of 411 compound nouns in the *Brut*, 228 of which are not found in Old English, and 261 that "are not used in the work of any other Middle English writer… " leading Le Saux to conclude that " Laʒamon must therefore have created some himself. [22] In other words, Laʒamon, "a poet interested in both history and archaic verse," made a deliberate choice to "archaize his own poem." [23] Tolkien also purposely used archaic language, both in his translations and in his creative work: Tom Shippey notes that he borrowed the term *dwimmerlaik* from Laʒamon.[24] Tolkien addressed the use of deliberate archaisms in translations of Anglo-Saxon texts in his essay "On Translating Beowulf," in which he warned against "colloquialism and false modernity."[25] Curtis A.Weyant refers to these guidelines for translation as "originalist"

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uses very few French-derived words in the *Brut*, even though he was translating from a French poet," Allen, xxvii.

[18] E.G. Stanley, "Laʒamon's Antiquarian Sentiments," *Medium æveum* 38, no. 1 (1969): 33. https//www.jstor.org/stable/43627501. Rosamund Allen writes: "Lawman uses very few French-derived words in the *Brut*, even though he was translating from a French poet," Allen, xxvii.

[19] Gerald Seaman, "France and French Culture," in *J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia: Scholarship and Critical Assessment*, Michael D.C. Drout, ed., (New York and London: Routledge, 2007) 218-219.

[20] The *King Edward's School Chronicle* records the motion made by Tolkien on 4 November 1910: "This house deplores the occurrence of the Norman Conquest." Scull and Hammond also cite a letter from March 20, 1968 to Amy Roland from the Christie's catalogue *Autograph Letters and Printed Books, including First Editions* (London: 19 May, 2000) in which "Tolkien wrote that perhaps the most unfortunate result of the Norman Invasion was the 'adulteration' of English with a 'large Franco-Latin ingredient largely floating about like oil…'" Christina Scull and Wayne G. Hammond, *The J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide: Reader's Guide* (London: HarperCollinsPublishers, 2006) 464.

[21] Barron and Weinberg, xiv.

[22] Françoise H.M. Le Saux, *Laʒamon's Brut: The Poem and its Sources*, Arthurian Studies IX (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1989) 191.

[23] Thomas A. Bredehoft, *Early English Metre* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2005) 119.

[24] Shippey, 348.

[25] J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Translating *Beowulf*," in *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1984), 54.

in that Tolkien sought "to maintain in translation the same sense of time-relationship between the translated text and the modern audience as the original piece had with its audience."[26] Tolkien elaborated: "Personally you may not like an archaic vocabulary, and word-order, artificially maintained as an elevated and literary language. You may prefer the lively and the snappy. But whatever may be the case with other poets of past ages (with Homer, for instance) the author of *Beowulf* did not share this preference." [27] In his response to a 1955 letter from British historian Hugh Brogan, who criticized passages of the *Two Towers*, in particular the chapter "The King of the Golden Hall", as "Ossianic." Tolkien wrote a spirited defense of his use of an archaic vocabulary and style, describing the "pain" he felt "when anyone-- in an age when almost all auctorial manhandling of English is permitted…immediately dismisses out of court deliberate 'archaism.'…a real archaic English is far more *terse* than modern; also many of the things said could not be said in our slack and often frivolous idiom." Brogan took particular issue with the speech of Théoden , to which Tolkien responded that having the king of Rohan speak in modern English would result in an "…insincerity of thought, a disunion of word and meaning…a King who spoke in a modern style would not really think in such terms at all …" As for the accusation of "Ossianism," in the overall narrative style, Tolkien explained, "I can see no more reason for not using the much terser and more vivid ancient style, than for changing the obsolete weapons, helms, shields, hauberks, into modern uniform." [28]

For both Tolkien and Laȝamon, language, geography and history are deeply intertwined. Regarding the nomenclature of the *Brut,* Donald G. Bzdyl notes: "he [the narrator] takes pleasure in recording the origin of place-names and complains that the various conquerors of Britain 'alter the old names according to their will, changing the names of the good cities so that no longer does any city in the land retain the name men first gave it.' (3551-3555)"[29] Tolkien's interest in place names as reminder of the past is evident throughout *The Lord of the Rings,* and is perhaps best illustrated by the song, "In the Willow-meads of Tasarinan," chanted by Treebeard, according to Gandalf "the oldest living thing that still walks beneath the sun on this Middle-earth," [30] as he carries Merry and Pippin through the forest. In the song Treebeard recalls the names of places in Beleriand and other lands from the First Age that have long since vanished, and recites the ancient names of Fangorn Forest such as *Ambaróna, Aldalómë and Tauremorna.[31]* As a philologist Tolkien was keenly aware of how place names reflect patterns of migration and conquest, as noted by Rainer Nagel: "As in real-world England, Tolkien has his

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[26] Curtis A. Weyant, " 'A Translator is not Free': J.R.R. Tolkien's Rules for Translation and Their Application in *Sir Orfeo*," *Tolkien Studies* 18 (2021): 69. In "Tolkien's Old English *Exodus* and Philosophy of Translation," a paper delivered at the 58th International Congress on Medieval Studies in May 2023, Perry Neil Harrison demonstrated that Tolkien often preferred using an archaic syntax through genitive constructions to "retaining the word economy of the Old English original," thereby creating "translations that are at once distant and accessible for present-day readers."

[27] J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Translating *Beowulf*,"54.

[28] J.R.R. Tolkien, *Letters*, Letter 171, 328-29.

[29] Bzdyl, 12.

[30] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings:* 50th Anniversary One-volume Edition (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004 [1994] 499.

[31] Ibid, 469.

place-names reflect settlement patterns, with the Breelanders being in the role of the real-world Celts and the hobbits in the role of Angles, Saxons and Jutes." [32]

But what of Arthur and Aragorn? Linguistic issues aside, the parallels between Laȝamon's Arthur and Tolkien's Aragorn are striking. In her essay on the concept of the hero, Verlyn Flieger notes that like Arthur, Aragorn is a "disguised hero, the rightful king."[33] Both heroes lost fathers when they were infants, and are fostered by others for safekeeping, so that they may reach adulthood and fulfill their destinies. Both have mentors with supernatural powers who teach, advise or protect them at various points in their lives: "Gandalf is instrumental in aiding Aragorn in his quest to claim the kingship of Gondor just as Merlin is in aiding Arthur with his ascension to the throne by means of prophecy and counsel."[34] Both heroes are heirs to kingdoms that have been ravaged by war and are bereft of leaders owing to human frailty and greed. The circumstances of their births and childhoods set them apart from other mortals. In Arthur's case, his very conception is the result of intervention on the part of the wizard Merlin, who transforms the lustful Uther Pendragon into the likeness of Gorlois, Ygerne's husband, so that he can sleep with her. In the case of Aragorn, Flieger makes the case that while he is not conceived through unnatural means, "…his half-elven ancestry supplies him with the supernatural origin necessary to the hero figure."[35] Laȝamon's Arthur and Tolkien's Aragorn share another privileged connection with the realm of faerie: they are raised by elves. Laȝamon recounts:

> Þe time come Þe wes icoren;     Þa wes Arður iboren
> Sone swa he come an eorðe,     aluen hine iuengen;
> heo begolen Þat child     mid galdere swiðe stronge:
> Heo ȝeuen him mihte     to beonbezst 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 all quike monnen;
> Þis Þe alue him ȝef,     and al swa Þat child iÞæh[36]

> "The time came that was chosen, then was Arthur born.
> So as soon as he came on earth, elves took him;
> they enchanted the child with magic most strong,
> they gave him might to be the best of all knights;
> they gave him another thing, that he should be a rich king;
> they gave him the third, that he should live long;
> they gave him princely virtues most good,

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[32] Rainer Nagel, *Hobbit Place-names: A Linguistic Excursion through the Shire* (Zurich and Jena:Walking Tree Publishers, 2012) 13.

[33] Verlyn Flieger, "Frodo and Aragorn: The Concept of the Hero," in *Understanding The Lord of the Rings: The Best of Tolkien Critcism*, eds. Rose Zimbardo and Neil D. Isaacs (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2004) 126.

[34] Richard J. Finn, "Arthur and Aragorn: Arthurian Influence in *The Lord of the Rings*," *Mallorn: The Journal of the Tolkien Society*, no. 43 (July 2005):23.

[35] Flieger, "Frodo and Aragorn," 127.

[36] Laȝamon's text is from Barron and Weinberg's edition, 20.

so that he was the most generous of all men alive.
This the elves gave him, and thus the child thrived."[37]


      As Richard Finn astutely notes in his essay on Arthur and Aragorn, this passage in Laȝamon's *Brut,* unique in Arthurian literature, "…certainly brings to mind the upbringing of Aragorn among the elves of Rivendell and Lothlórien. [38] Tolkien's account of Aragorn's childhood and youth is found in Appendix A of *The Lord of the Rings*:

> " But Aragorn was only two years old when Arathorn went riding against the
> Orcs with the sons of Elrond, and he was slain…Then Aragorn, being now
> the Heir of Isildur, was taken with his mother to dwell in the house of Elrond;
> and Elrond took the place of his father and came to love him as a son of his
> own.[39]

The child Aragorn, like the child Arthur, is protected and strengthened through his contact with elves. But his rearing and mentoring by Elrond is recounted in such a way that it seems quite logical and natural; like many orphaned children, Aragorn has a foster parent. This passage is an example of what Verlyn Flieger refers to as "Tolkien's practice of providing realistic bases for what in a true medieval narrative would be frankly marvelous or miraculous." [40]

      When they are adults and must reclaim and defend their kingdoms, Arthur and Aragorn each take up arms that are theirs by birthright, and again, elves contribute to the fulfillment of their destinies. Laȝamon tells us:

> Þa he hafde al iset;    and all hit isemed,
> Þa dude he on his burne    ibroide of stele
> Þe makede on aluisc smið    mid aðelen his crafte;
> he was ihaten Wygar    Þe witeȝe wuhrte
> His sconken he helede    mid hosen of stele.
> Calibeorne his sweorde    he sweinde bi his side;
> hit wes iwohrt in Aualun    mid wiȝefulle craften. [41]

> "When he [Arthur] had duly set all, and it all beseemed,
> then he put on his burny, fashioned of steel,
> that an elvish smith made, with his excellent craft;
> he was named Wygar, the witty wright.

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[37] Wace and Layamon, *Arthurian Chronicles*, 177-78. I prefer Eugene Mason's translation of this passage. Barron and Weinberg translate *aluen* as "fairies," and the adjective *aluisc* as "elvish"; whereas Mason consistently translates *aluen and aluisc* as "elves," and "elvish," which is closest to how Tolkien, in my view, would have translated these terms. Mason overall also uses a more archaic vocabulary, for example, translating the Middle English term *burne* as "burny" rather than "corslet" (Barron and Weinberg , 67) or "mail-coat" (Allen, 270).

[38] Finn, "Arthur and Aragorn," 24.

[39] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings,* 1057

[40] Flieger, 127.

[41] Barron and Weinberg, 66; 68.

> His shanks he covered with hose of steel.
> Caliburn, his sword, he hung by his side;
> it was wrought in Avalon, with magic craft."[42]

After the Council of Elrond, during which Aragorn is revealed as the heir to Gondor, "the blade that was broken," is indeed renewed, as the riddle contained in the letter for Frodo left by Gandalf at the Prancing Pony had foretold:

> "The Sword of Elendil was forged anew by Elvish smiths… for Aragorn son
> of Arathorn was going to war upon the marches of Mordor…. And Aragorn
> gave it a new name and called it Andúril Flame of the West."[43]

In the letter to Milton Waldman cited earlier, Tolkien explained that in addition to its being "associated with the soil of Britain but not with English" the other reason he did not consider the Arthurian world to fit his ideal of a mythology for England was that "its 'faerie' is too lavish, and fantastical, incoherent and repetitive." [44] This judgment may apply to much of the French Arthurian material, but it certainly does not apply to the Arthurian section of the *Brut*. Far from being incoherent or repetitive, Laȝamon's account of the elves in Arthur's tale is presented in quite a matter-of-fact way by the narrator; they appear sparingly in specific moments of Arthur's life when their skills or magic are needed, and their intervention has a purpose. Of the writers who describe the bestowing of arms on Arthur, for example, only Laȝamon ascribes part of its crafting—the "burny" or corslet—to a specific individual with a name and a reputation: "Wygar, the witty wright." Naming the elvish smith who made Arthur's corslet makes the fact that Wygar is an elf seem quite natural, and so it also seems logical that Caliburn, Arthur's sword, would be wrought in Avalon "by magic craft," no doubt also by elves. This is stated in an unaffected way, with no embellishments. The role of elves in the reforging of Narsil, the "blade that was broken," into the sword that Aragorn will rename Andúril also appears as a necessary and logical part of the narrative. Because Tolkien and Laȝamon created convincing secondary worlds in the *Brut* and *The Lord of the Rings*, the reforging of Andúril , like the forging of Caliburn and Arthur's burny, do not seem "marvelous or miraculous" at all: elves are known to be skilled and "witty" wrights: this is what they do. [45]

But what of Laȝamon's account of the elves who took Arthur into their care after his birth and " enchanted the child with magic most strong?" Is this not an example of the "lavish and fantastical" elements of Arthurian literature that Tolkien found "incoherent?" In this passage, as in the passage recounting the forging of Arthur's armor and sword, the role of the elves is to provide the young Arthur with material goods or attributes he will need in order to succeed as king: "might", "riches", "a long life" and "princely virtues." These are described as gifts from the elves: "this the elves gave him, and thus the child thrived." The intervention of the elves has again, a specific practical purpose in the text, and resembles enchantment more closely than magic. In his essay "On Fairy Stories," Tolkien drew a clear distinction between magic, of which

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[42] Wace and Layamon, *Arthurian Chronicles*, 194-95.

[43] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 276-277.

[44] J.R.R. Tolkien, *Letters,* Letter 131,203.

[45] The word "witty" derives from the Old English *wit*, *witt*, more commonly *gewit* "understanding, intellect, sense; knowledge, consciousness, conscience." https://www.etymonline.com/word/witty. The "witty wright" Wygar has deep knowledge of his craft.

he wrote "its desire is power in this world, domination of things and wills," and enchantment , which seeks "shared enrichment, partners in making and delight, not slaves." [46] Laȝamon's gift-giving elves do not appear again in Arthur's story; they are partners in the making of the king who will unite the Britons, for the benefit of all.  Their gifts may have a magical element, but then, so do Galadriel's gifts to the members of the Fellowship as they prepare to leave Lothlórien: to Aragorn she gives a special protective sheath for Andúril: " 'the blade that is drawn from this sheath shall not be stained or broken even in defeat,'" and Frodo receives a crystal phial containing the light of Eärendil's star. [47]

In *The Lord of the Rings*, as in the *Brut*, the world of Faërie coexists with the world of mortals: they are both part of "middle-aerde," to use Laȝamon's  term.  Both Laȝamon 's Arthur and Aragorn are in this sense liminal figures  "with one foot in the world of men and one foot in the world of fairies."[48]  There is a striking passage later in the *Brut* which illustrates the way in which Laȝamon, like Tolkien, creates a universe in which human and elf, man and monster, the mundane and the marvelous, are all part of a coherent universe, achieved through the process of enchantment which Tolkien believed to be essential to a fairy story. After defeating the Scots at the Battle of Moray, Arthur is approached by a group of grieving women who beg him to spare the few Scotsmen who have not been slain by his army. Arthur is moved by the women's tears, and he allows the men to return to their homes, showing pity to a defeated enemy—a quality which Aragorn also manifests when he grants amnesty to Sauron's former slaves—thereby laying the groundwork for lasting peace. After this merciful gesture, Arthur turns to his kinsman Howell, points to the landscape that moments earlier was the site of  bloody battle, and says

> "Howel, min aȝe mæi, monnen me leofest,
> lust mire worden      of mucle mære wunder
> Þat ic Þe wullen tellen      of soðe mine spellen
> Bi Þisse maere enden,      Þer Þis water wendeð
> is an lutel with mære,      monnen to wundre
>
> He is endlonge      feouwer and sixti munden:
> he is imeten a braede      fif and twenty foten;
> fif foten he is deop      --alfene hine dulfen!
> Feower-noked he is,      and Þerinne is feower kunnes fisc,
> and ælc fisc an his ende      Þer he his cun findeð
> ne mai ðer nan to oðere      buten al swa  tacheð his icunde
> Nes næuer nan mon iboren,      ne of swa wise craft icoren,
> no libbe he swa longe,      Þe maȝen hit vnderstonde,
> what letteð Þene fisc      to uleoten to Þan oðere,
> for nis Þer noht bitwenen      buten water clæne!"[49]

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[46] J.R.R. Tolkien, "*Tolkien On Fairy Stories*: Expanded edition, with commentary and notes," eds. Verlyn Flieger and Douglas A. Anderson (London: HarperCollinsPublishers, 2014) 64.

[47] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 377.

[48] Nicholas Dalbey, "'Aluen hine iuengen': Fairies, Arthur and Ideal Kingship in Lawman's *Brut*," *Scientia et Humanitas*: A Journal of Student Research (Spring 2016): 2.

[49] Barron and Weinberg, 89.

> "Howell, mine own relative, dearest to me of men,
> listen to my words, of a much greater wonder,
> that I will tell to thee in my sooth speech
> By this lake's end, where this water floweth,
> is a certain little lake, to the wonder of men!
> It is in length four and sixty palms;
> it is in measure in breadth five-and-twenty feet;
> five feet it is deep ; elves it dug!
> Four-cornered it is, and therein fish of four kinds
> and each fish in his end where he findeth his kind.
> Was there never any man born, nor of so wise craft chosen,
> live he ever so long, that may understand it;
> What letteth (hindereth) the fish to swim to the others,
> For there is nought between but water clean![50]

The victorious Arthur does not gloat over his defeat of the Scots, or declare himself master of the conquered land; rather, he points to the marvelous lake as a reminder to Howell that man is not complete master of *middle-aerde*. The Scots may be under Arthur's dominion, but the lake and the creatures within it are under the dominion of the elves, much as the Old Forest only answers to Tom Bombadil, or Fangorn, to Treebeard. After reflecting on the wondrous existence of the lake and its mysteries, which he regards with awe, Arthur continues on to the court of York to resume his kingly duties. The battlefield, the marvelous lake, and York are all part of the coherent secondary world that Laȝamon creates around the legendary Arthur.

At the beginning of this essay, I quoted Christopher Tolkien's lament that his father had never completed *The Fall of Arthur*. Christopher does not give a specific reason for the abandonment of this poem, but speculates that Tolkien's continued revisions of his 'Silmarillion' "together with the new enterprise of *The Lost Road* … were in themselves sufficient to account for his turning away from *The Fall of Arthur.*" [51] Certainly, Christopher Tolkien knew the mind and the work of his father J.R.R. better than any other scholar, but this does not exclude the possibility of other interpretations. I concur with the hypothesis put forth by Richard Finn, that that *The Lord of the Rings* was Tolkien's "recasting of the Arthurian myths in his own way." Finn argues that Tolkien "taps into the emotions Arthur stirs while reinventing the very cycle he feels is imperfect for England." [52]Seen from this perspective, Tolkien had no need to finish *The Fall of Arthur*, his contribution to the rich body of Arthurian literature, because he had already done so, once *The Lord of the Rings* was completed. The resonance of the Arthurian legend is strong in *The Lord of the Rings*, and as I hope to have shown, to the extent that any of the poets who told retold Arthur's story had an influence on Tolkien, it was Laȝamon. Tolkien and Laȝamon, West-Midlanders both, manifested a great love for their "native tongue and soil" in their respective works. They were able to create for their audiences a sense of connectedness with the past though writing in the vernacular of their day laced with archaic language and a deep history of places and people. Their use of faerie was fully integrated into the main narrative and the biography of their heroes, Arthur and Aragorn. Through these means, in their respective

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[50] Wace and Layamon, *Arthurian Chronicles*, 202.
[51] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fall of Arthur*, 154-55.
[52] Finn, 26.

mythologies for Britain, they created secondary worlds evoking a lost past in which their readers or listeners could become fully immersed. Perhaps this is why Richard C. West referred to J.R.R. Tolkien as " a contemporary medieval author." [53]

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