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The Once and Future Childslayer: Guy Gavriel Kay's Inversion of Malory's *Morte Darthur*

KATHY CAWSEY

Guy Gavriel Kay's *Fionavar Tapestry* interprets Arthur's return not as a reward or honor, but as a punishment for killing the children on Mayday. This reinterpretation links the 'Mayday' incident with the famous 'May passages' and provides a rewriting of the *Morte Darthur's* stance on prophecy, predestination, and free will. (KC)

The range of responses to the Arthurian legends in modern fantasy fiction is overwhelming. From momentary 'grace-notes' to whole-sale adaptation of the legend, late-twentieth-century fantasy writers have made Arthur a staple of the fantasy genre. The Arthur story has been used in almost every way imaginable, though some aspects have proven more fruitful than others. The Grail legend, the symbol of the Fisher King, and the doomed love-triangle of Tristan and Iseult loom large; many fantasy and science-fiction writers also capitalize on the 'time travel' element opened up by Sir Thomas Malory's 'once and future king' phrase in *The Morte Darthur*.¹ Interestingly, Merlin and other characters travel in time more often in modern fantasy than Arthur himself, the original 'once and future' character.² Guy Gavriel Kay, a Canadian fantasy writer, does use a time-traveling Arthur in his fantasy trilogy *The Fionavar Tapestry*; however, unlike many fantasy authors, Kay uses the Arthurian story and the 'return of the king' angle not just as a popular legend or trendy motif, but as a means of staking out a philosophical argument about the nature of freedom and free will. Guy Gavriel Kay's *Fionavar Tapestry* is unique among modern fantasy in its reading of Malory's *rex quondam rexque futurus* prophecy: Kay reads the return of Arthur not as an honor but rather, as a curse.³ Moreover, the Lancelot-Guinevere-Arthur love triangle is envisioned, in the series, not as a cause of the fall of Camelot but as a punishment for the young Arthur's killing of the boatload of children on Mayday in his attempt to forestall Merlin's prophecy about Mordred. A minor incident in Malory is thus reinterpreted by Kay as the defining moment in Arthur's reign.⁴ Most importantly, these changes are not merely 'plot' revisions or 'updatings' of the story. Rather, through these changes Kay offers a profound commentary on key themes of Malory's work: the roles prophecy, fate, and free will play in

the lives of both commoners and kings. In Malory, fate is inevitable and the characters are inexorably moved to the tragic ending; in Kay, the characters have free will and can choose to act against prophecy or 'fate'. Kay thus both points up the feeling of inevitability in the *Morte Darthur* and shows that actually, Arthur *did* make choices that could have averted the tragedy.

THOMAS MALORY'S 'OTHER' MAY PASSAGE

In Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*, two key stories open with the invocation of the month of May, when 'every lusty harte begynnyth to blossom and to burgyne.'⁵ The importance of the 'May passages' is a commonplace among scholars of the *Morte Darthur*. The significance or meaning of the passages is debated; nonetheless, few Malory scholars would dispute the claim that one's interpretation of at least the first 'May passage' fundamentally colors one's interpretation of the love of Lancelot and Guinevere and, ultimately, the causes of the fall of Camelot.⁶ Both 'May passages' draw on the trope, pervasive in medieval literature, of the 'May morning,' which links the renewal of springtime with the onset of human romantic love.⁷ The first passage explicitly connects the 'May morning' literary trope with the love of Lancelot and Guinevere, calling Guinevere a 'trew lover' (Vinaver III.1120.12, Field I.842.11); the second passage inverts the trope to increase the shock to the reader when 'wynter wyth hys rowghe wyndis and blastis' metaphorically interrupts the May morning, and the 'floure of chyvalry' is destroyed and slain (Vinaver III.1161.4–8; Field I.870.6–10).

What few scholarly critics have noted, however, is that there are not two but *three* 'May' passages in the *Morte Darthur*. The first one comes well before the later, better-known passages, well before Lancelot and Guinevere are even introduced, and stands in stark contrast to the later passages. When Arthur is still a young king, Malory tells us, he

lette sende for all the children that were borne in May-day, begotyn of lordis and borne of ladyes; for Merlyon tolde kynge Arthure that he that sholde destroy hym and all the londe sholde be borne on May-day. Wherefore he sente for hem all in payne of dethe, and so there were founde many lordis sonnys and many knyghtes sonnes, and all were sente unto the kynge. And so was Mordred sente by kynge Lottis wyff. And all were putte in a shyppe to the se; and som were four wekis olde and som lesse. And so by fortune the shyppe drove unto a castelle, and was all to-ryven and destroyed the moste party, save that Mordred was cast up, and a good man founde hym, and fostird hym tyll he was fourtene yere of age, and than brought hym to the courte. (Vinaver I.55.19–32; Field I.46.7–18)

This passage, often mentioned but rarely analyzed by scholars, is strange on a number of levels. It draws on numerous literary tropes and motifs only to confound the reader's expectations of them. Most obvious is the bewildering

use of the 'May morning' trope: in medieval literature Mayday is supposed to be a time for romantic and erotic love, not for the killing of babies.⁸ Other tropes are similarly overturned. The 'Killing of the Innocents' is an incident familiar to medieval audiences from mystery plays and biblical stories, but it is perpetrated by one of history's worst villains, King Herod—a strange role in which to cast the great King Arthur, however young at the time. Mordred, moreover, is hardly a Jesus-figure! The 'innocents adrift' is likewise a familiar medieval motif or plot device; but again, it is usually the saintly hero or heroine of the tale who is cast adrift and saved by providence, not the eventual villain. Mordred is a strange bedfellow (boatfellow?) for the likes of St Kentigern, St Gregory, Constance, Emaré, or King Horn. As Helen Cooper notes, this seeming paradox can be resolved with reference to the widely-distributed medieval tradition of Judas being set adrift in a boat—Malory may be connecting Mordred to the most famous traitor of Christian history.⁹ This connection is further strengthened by the legend's Oedipal plot that Judas killed his father and married his mother, as Mordred does with Arthur and attempts to do with Arthur's wife (albeit not his mother). Such a connection, however, does not exonerate Arthur of the crime of child murder, especially since in the *Legenda Aurea* Judas is set adrift alone, not in a boatload of innocents.

Few critics have commented on this passage, other than to note its problematic nature.¹⁰ As Elizabeth Archibald writes, 'This ought to be a key episode, one would have thought, since Mordred is fated to be Arthur's nemesis. Yet Malory devotes curiously little space to it.'¹¹ No one has suggested that there might be a link between this 'Mayday passage' and the later 'May passages.' Yet both the 'Mayday passage' and the last 'May passage' invoke the 'May morning' trope only to invert it: in both cases May becomes a time not of love but of killing, and the killing is all the more shocking because of its unexpected timing. Moreover, both the first 'Mayday' passage and the later 'May passages' are implicated in the ending of the *Morte Darthur* and the downfall of Camelot: the first by Merlin's prophecy of the role Mordred would play in the death of Arthur and the destruction of 'all the londe,' the second by the way Lancelot and Guinevere's adultery instigates the rumours and faction-fighting in the last book of the *Morte*. Implicitly, then, the 'Mayday passage' about Mordred and the 'May passages' about the love of Lancelot and Guinevere are linked, both through the common motif of the May morning and through a common foreshadowing of the destruction of Arthur's kingdom.

No scholarly critic that I know of has made the argument that these passages are connected in this way. However, fiction writers are 'readers' and 'interpreters' of Malory just as much as academics are. As Neil Sinyard argues, adaptation can be a 'critical essay on its source.'¹² Guy Gavriel Kay's

Fionavar Tapestry presents a reading of Malory that implicitly argues for a connection between the three ‘May passages’—for an interpretation of the *Morte Darthur* which sees the killing of the Mayday children, the love of Lancelot and Guinevere, and the fall of Camelot not as discrete incidents, but as intimately, and causally, connected.

HIGH FANTASY AND THE LEGEND OF ARTHUR

Guy Gavriel Kay deliberately drew on the Arthurian legends in his first fantasy work as a kind of challenge to himself. Having worked with Christopher Tolkien on *The Silmarillion*, and thus having been thoroughly steeped in the Tolkien-style fantasy tradition, Kay felt the need to counteract the more escapist kind of popular fantasy that he felt was ‘debasing the genre’ in the post-Tolkien years. He says, ‘The [*Fionavar*] *Tapestry* was a conscious decision ... to work squarely in the Tolkien tradition while trying to allow room for character development and plausibility that I tended to find missing in most post-[Tolkien] High Fantasy. In a way it was a challenge to the debasing of the genre.’¹³ In another interview he comments,

Fionavar was very much a conscious attempt to—the phrase I’ve sometimes used is—‘throw a gantlet [*sic*] down to the barbarians in the temple.’ I was so irritated by the lazy imitations of Tolkien that had been coming out through the seventies, and into the early parts of the eighties. It seemed to me that the writers of fantasy I respected had abandoned high fantasy, they’d sort of thrown up their hands and said, ‘Well, this is only going to be for the hacks, doing derivative work!’ and they were writing small precise fantasies, or introducing urban fantasy, the modern urban fantasy tradition, and I felt to some degree that that was abdicating. There was such a long, illustrious tradition to high fantasy that it seemed an abdication to abandon it to people doing nothing but imitative work. So writing the [*Fionavar*] *Tapestry* was a very conscious effort to say that the elements of high fantasy; the magic weapons, the enchanted jewelry, the races of dwarves and the *lios alfar*, the equivalent of elves, that all of these things could still, if done right, have some vitality.¹⁴

Drawing on the Arthurian legend allowed Kay to follow Tolkien’s practice of incorporating myth into his high fantasy world without being merely derivative, since the Arthurian legend is arguably the medieval legend that Tolkien *least* uses in *The Lord of the Rings*.¹⁵ Kay’s work touches on Arthurian sources beyond Malory—from Welsh sources such as the *Mabinogion* to T.H. White—but it is Malory’s version which forms the core of the Arthurian material in *The Fionavar Tapestry*.

For a work in which the Arthurian legend plays such a large role, the story does not even enter the trilogy explicitly until the second book, *The Wandering Fire*. In the first book, Kay’s five protagonists, Kim, Jennifer, Paul, Kevin, and Dave, travel from Toronto to Fionavar, the ‘first of all worlds,’ and become

involved in the age-long fight against the world's manifestation of absolute evil, Rakoth Maugrim. Each of the five characters begins to take on archetypal and mythological roles and resonances, from Odin to Adonis to the Celtic Morrigan, and it is around the character Jennifer that the Arthurian legend (unbeknownst to the reader) begins to coalesce. At the end of the first book of the series, Jennifer is captured and taken to Rakoth Maugrim's fortress in what becomes a re-enactment of Guinevere's capture by Meleagant in Malory—a rewriting the reader only realizes retrospectively, after discovering Jennifer's alternate identity as Guinevere. Jennifer is raped by Maugrim, and after being saved and pulled back to 'our' world, she decides to bear the resulting child.

The second book begins with another character, Kim, resurrecting Arthur, 'The Warrior,' in order to gain his help in the battle against evil. Arthur, we are told, has been eternally doomed to return to life, fight, and die over and over again as punishment for killing the children on Mayday. When Arthur encounters Jennifer, both realize she is Guinevere, and she becomes drawn into the Arthurian narrative. Later Arthur raises Lancelot from the dead, and when Lancelot returns with Arthur to Jennifer/Guinevere, the reader learns that the perfectly-balanced love triangle is a further aspect of Arthur's doom and punishment: 'The grief at the heart of a dream, the reason why [Guinevere] was here, and Lancelot. The price, the curse, the punishment laid...on the Warrior in the name of the children who had died.'¹⁶

In the final battle in the third book, *The Darkest Road*, Arthur discovers that the battle is to be fought at a place called Camlann, and concludes that it was for this fight that he was meant to return and die, as a champion for the side of the light. However, the endless replaying of Arthur's doom is broken when another character, Diarmuid, decides to take the fight on himself instead. Arthur therefore survives the final battle, the cycle of punishment is broken, and Arthur, Guinevere, and Lancelot are allowed to sail together into the West in an echo of Frodo's sailing from Tolkien's Grey Havens.

Bare, bald plot summary can never re-create the power of the full tale; and such a summary of the Arthurian material omits the greater part of the narrative of *The Fionavar Tapestry*. The Arthurian story is merely one strand, albeit an important one, in the overall epic, and this was quite deliberate on Kay's part. He says, 'I wanted to find my own avenue into working with the Arthurian material, to see if I could find a way to create a scaffolding or a canvas for a book which would be large enough for that material to be a central part, but not the whole story.'¹⁷ Other strands involve the story of Odin and the Yggdrasil tales from Norse mythology, the cauldron myth from the Welsh Cauldron of Annwn, the Irish goddesses Macha and Nemain, and the Greek myth of Adonis, among others; nevertheless, the Arthurian material in *The Fionavar Tapestry* constitutes a significant re-working of the legend, which also stands as a critical interpretation of Malory's *Morte Darthur*.

THE ONCE AND FUTURE KING

The phrase *rex quondam rexque futurus*, found in earlier texts such as the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, but known to most readers from Malory,¹⁸ has proven to be unremittingly resonant in the five centuries since Malory. The phrase has been endlessly fruitful in its spawning of other stories, some only tangentially related to the original medieval legends. From the title of T.H. White's epic Arthurian series, to Peter David's re-incarnation of 'Arthur Penn' as mayor of New York City, to Andre Norton's space-traveling Arthur who has been preserved by a half-alien Merlin until future space travelers can heal him, the idea that Arthur will return someday, somehow, has had enduring appeal.¹⁹ Almost all writers, however, interpret Arthur's exclusion from the normal cycle of mortality as a positive thing, an honor given to a peerless hero. At the start of the tradition, Malory reports that some men say that 'kyng Arthure ys nat dede, but had by the wyll of oure Lorde Jesu into another place' (Vinaver III.1242.22–3; Field I.928.23–24) so that he might return and win the Holy Cross on Crusade. T.H. White too, reports that 'the old King felt refreshed, clear-headed, almost ready to begin again,' and that he believed that 'there would be a day—there must be a day—when he would come back to Gramarye with a new Round Table which had no corners, just as the world had none.'²⁰ The narrator shares a hopeful vision of the return of Arthur:

I am inclined to believe that my beloved Arthur of the future is sitting at this very moment among his learned friends...and that they are thinking away in there for all they are worth, about the best means to help our curious species: and I for one hope that some day...they will issue from their rath in joy and power: and then, perhaps, they will give us happiness in the world once more and chivalry.²¹

Numerous other examples of the way in which the 'once and future king' is seen as a positive and honorable reward for Arthur's greatness could be given.²² Raymond H. Thompson perhaps summarizes it best: 'What all these returns offer is hope. Just as he once led the heroic resistance against barbarian invaders who assailed a crumbling civilization at the beginning of the Dark Ages, so Arthur once again rallies us to defy the gathering darkness that threatens to overwhelm all that is precious.'²³

Few authors, however, trouble themselves with wondering what Arthur *himself* might think of this fated return. Guy Gavriel Kay explains that it was this question—of what Arthur might think of the whole thing—which inspired his inversion of the Malorian 'once and future king' motif:

This came about in part because of a chance, almost wry, reflection on what it must feel like to be always on call. Dial 911 in time of need and your champion must answer! The only time you're around is when there's a dismal, violent,

destructive, dangerous crisis! Furthermore, as part of the received material of the legend, Arthur does not see the end of such conflicts. I found myself thinking, that's not much of a state of grace; that is a burden and a duty and a responsibility.²⁴

In *The Fionavar Tapestry*, Arthur's return is not an honorable reward, but a curse. When Kim re-awakens Arthur, she 'set[s] once more in motion the workings of a curse so old it made the wind seem young' (284). In punishment for Arthur's killing of the Mayday children, the Weaver—Fionavar's name for God—had 'marked [Arthur] down for a long unwinding doom. A cycle of war and expiation under many names, and in many worlds, that redress be made for the children and for love' (285). Indeed, the name which summons Arthur to his doom is 'Childslayer,' as though that one deed forged his identity despite all his later great deeds. Kay explains, 'What was vital for me was to use the notion of Arthur as child slayer. . . . That was my innovation: the notion of being condemned to be the Once and Future King, the Warrior, by virtue of a crime in youth. The crime was not the incest, because I'm not coming out of a religious tradition where unknowing incest is a great crime. It's the sentient ordering of the death of the children.'²⁵ Kay's reinterpretation of the *Morte Darthur*, his reading of it, solves the question of what/who caused the fall of the round table—Mordred or Lancelot/Guinevere? Instead he suggests that Arthur himself, in being responsible for an evil deed more typical of Herod than one of the great Christian 'Worthies,' ultimately caused his own downfall, and that Mordred *and* Lancelot and Guinevere were all part of the punishment, rather than being the cause.

Enhancing the impact of the notion of Arthur as Childslayer is the importance that children play in the *Fionavar Tapestry*. Although the main characters are all adults, some of the key secondary characters—and, indeed, some of the most tragic figures in the books—are children. Finn is called from his family to lead the Wild Hunt, a cold, inhuman destiny in which he kills people at random and must leave everyone he loves. Leila is the girl who 'called' Finn to his destiny, and is forced, painfully, to witness Finn's actions through her second sight. Tabor is a young boy whose destiny is to ride a winged unicorn, a creature of war, and he too grows distant from his family and becomes almost inhuman because of the fighting and killing he must do. Darien, the youngest of the children in the book, is Jennifer's child by Rakoth Maugrim. Darien is rejected by everyone, including (seemingly) his own mother, and spends most of the narrative journeying towards his father, who kills him in the end. Darien pushes himself onto a dagger held by his father in an echo of the way Mordred pushes himself on Arthur's lance in order to reach and kill his father in Malory, but in doing so Darien saves the world rather than destroying it.²⁶ By the end of the trilogy, Finn and Darien have died, Tabor narrowly escapes death, and Leila has witnessed her

beloved Finn's death and has become the youngest High Priestess in history. Although Kay does not spell it out explicitly, the specific tragedies of the lives of these children individualize and particularize the nameless children killed on Mayday by the 'Childslayer.' Moreover, the importance of these children to the story and to the fate of the world implicitly points up the monstrosity of the young Arthur's actions—what might those individual children in the boatload of children have accomplished had they lived?—and rounds out the reader's understanding of the appropriateness of the curse laid upon the once and future king.

Part of the curse is that Arthur does not even know if his efforts have any impact: he always dies before the end of the battle, so he never knows who wins (335). The other part of the curse is, of course, the repetition of the love-triangle between Arthur, Lancelot and Guinevere. Lancelot and Guinevere themselves do not remember any life but their first, because the original crime was not theirs: 'No curse so dark as [Arthur's] had been given [Guinevere], for no destiny so high, no thread of the Tapestry, had ever been consigned to her name. She was, instead, the agent of his fate, the working out of his bitter grief' (366). Nonetheless, they are there every time Arthur reappears, as part of the doom laid upon him. Unlike some Arthurian writers, both pre- and post-Malory, Kay insists on the perfect balance of the love triangle. Both in *The Fionavar Tapestry* and in his unrelated poem 'Guinevere at Almesbury,' Kay portrays Guinevere as loving both Lancelot and Arthur equally. In 'Guinevere at Almesbury,' Guinevere says, 'We cannot be other than / we are. I loved two men. A kingdom / broke for it.'²⁷ In the *Fionavar Tapestry*, after Jennifer meets Arthur for the first time, she remembers her former life: 'She had only fallen in love twice in her life, with the two shining men of her world. Nor was the second less golden than the first. He was not, whatever might have been said afterwards. And the two men had loved each other, too, making all the angles equal, shaped most perfectly for grief' (366). Had Guinevere loved either Arthur or Lancelot more than the other, the reader senses, or had Arthur and Lancelot had less love and respect for each other, the situation would have been resolved and the tragedy would have been less.

PROPHECY, FREE WILL AND FATE

By interpreting the return of Arthur as a curse rather than an honor, and by focusing on the childslaying incident of the *Morte*, Kay provides a reading of the ending of Malory's tale which challenges the feeling of inevitability that pervades the *Morte*. Fate and prophecy are hugely important in the *Morte Darthur*, especially in the first book. Merlin repeatedly makes prophecies about the results of Arthur's actions and the future of Camelot. In addition to the Mayday prophecy about Mordred, Malory includes prophecies about Balin; a prophecy of Arthur's conquest of Wales, Scotland, and Ireland;

numerous prophecies about the Grail quest; minor prophecies about random knights and various events; and a key prophecy about Guinevere's love for Lancelot. Some of these prophecies come true, and act as linking and structuring devices for the narrative. Others vanish from the narrative, and the reader never finds out if they come true or not.

In Malory, prophecy seems to serve three main functions. First, as Jane Bliss has argued, it serves as a structuring device which connects the whole of the *Morte Darthur* and sets the tale firmly within an overarching 'Matter of Britain,' which contains stories and connections that may or may not be retold in Malory's tale itself.²⁸ Second, it adds to the mystery and magic of the tale, especially in terms of Merlin's character and role.²⁹ Most importantly, however, prophecy opens the narrative to an exploration of free will, destiny, and fate that swirls around and adds poignancy to the tragedy of the final books of the *Morte*. As Bliss writes, 'prophecy is also a thematic device by which Malory shows human free will in conflict with divine will and with fate or destiny ... Prophecy as theme is used by Malory to set up a wall of predestination (divine or fated, mindful or mindless) against which human will is shown to react.'³⁰ As Rachel Kapelle has cogently argued, prophecies in the *Morte* fall into two categories, contingent and categorical.³¹ Contingent prophecies are open-ended: the actions of the characters can affect the outcome. For example, near the beginning of the narrative, Merlin warns Arthur that if he continues to fight the eight kings, God will become displeased and the tide of battle will turn; Arthur withdraws and thus forestalls the foretold consequence (Vinaver 1.36.26–32; Field I.29.25–33). This kind of prophecy is therefore a useful guide to action. Other prophecies, by contrast, are categorical: no matter what the characters do, the outcome will be the same. Arthur has slept with his sister; therefore God is displeased and the child of the union will destroy Arthur and all the knights of the realm (Vinaver 1.44.16–19; Field I.36.15–17). Nothing Arthur can do can change this outcome: the action setting the foretold events in motion has already been taken. Such prophecies are useless as guides to action—although Arthur nonetheless acts as though the prophecy were contingent and attempts to avert destiny by killing the Mayday children.³²

I believe a third category of prophecy is at work in the *Morte*, which Kapelle does not discuss. These prophecies are, to my mind, the most interesting: they are contingent prophecies which become categorical because of the nature or personality of the participants.³³ For example, many of the prophecies about Balin could theoretically have been averted. The damsel says to Balin that if he keeps the sword from her he shall kill his best friend with it; Balin responds merely that he shall 'take the adventure... that God woll ordayne for me' (Vinaver 1.64.12–13; Field I.50.5–6). Within the code of Balin's chivalry and his understanding of 'worship,' a contingent prophecy becomes categorical, since Balin will not change the way he acts. Similarly,

scholars have commented on the lack of response Arthur gives to Merlin's prophecy that 'Gwenyver was nat holsom for hym to take to wyff' (Vinaver 1.97.29–30; Field I.76.25–26), yet the explanation for Arthur's inability or unwillingness to change his actions in the face of this prophecy is given a few lines earlier: 'thereas mannes herte is sette he wolle be loth to returne' (Vinaver 1.97.26–27; Field I.76.23). Again, a contingent prophecy becomes essentially categorical, since the characters would have to abandon the essence of their selves in order to avert the prophecy.³⁴

It is this third kind of prophecy—the theoretically-contingent-but-practically-categorical—that is most important in Guy Gavriel Kay's reworking of Malory. Kay makes it clear throughout, in a way that it never is in the *Morte Darthur*, that the individuals in Fionavar's universe have free will, and are not completely controlled by destiny. Indeed, the importance of free will is literally woven into the ruling metaphor of the universe: the 'Weaver' has allowed a 'random thread' to enter the 'Tapestry,' so that he does not and cannot control everything that happens. This randomness opens up space for the free will of individuals, since there is always the chance that it might disrupt 'fate' or 'destiny.' The full explanation comes near the beginning of book three:

The [Wild] Hunt was placed in the Tapestry to be wild in the truest sense, to lay down an uncontrolled thread for the freedom of the Children who came after. And so did the Weaver lay a constraint upon himself, that not even he, shuttling at the Loom of Worlds, may preordain and shape exactly what is to be. We who came after...we have such choices as we have, some freedom to shape our own destinies, because of that wild thread of Owein and the Hunt slipping across the Loom, warp and then weft, in turn and at times. They are there...precisely to be wild, to cut across the Weaver's measured will. To be random, and so enable us to be. (558)

The sense of inevitability that feels so strong towards the end of the *Morte Darthur* is continually undercut in the *Fionavar Tapestry*: phrases such as 'and it appeared that there was nothing inevitable after all' (236) are scattered throughout the books. This message comes through most forcefully with regards to Jennifer: she is told by another character, 'we are not slaves to the Loom. Nor are you only Guinevere—you are Jennifer now, as well. You bring your own history to this hour...It need not be now as it has been before!' (417). Unlike in the *Morte*, there is a chance that Arthur's destiny can be averted: 'if all this is true, if the Weaver put a check on his own shaping of our destinies, it would follow—surely it would follow—that the Warrior's doom is not irrevocable' (558).

Ironically, however, despite the repeated message about individual freedom, Arthur himself does not feel that he has free will. When Kim first summons him, she promises she will never tell anyone the summoning name, but

Arthur responds, 'Others will, though, as others have before' (285). Jennifer tries to tell Arthur that this time things are different, that Lancelot is not here this time; but Arthur answers, 'It cannot be so...I killed the children, Guinevere' (420). Before the final battle, Arthur asks the name of the place, and when told that it used to be called 'Camlann,' he answers, 'I thought it might be' (700). When another character tries to take the fight upon himself, Arthur tells him, 'The name...made things clear: there has been a Camlann waiting for me in every world. This is what I was brought here for' (701). When Guinevere tries to protest, Arthur says simply, 'we are caught in a woven doom of no escape' (701).

Yet what becomes clear from the narrative, despite Arthur's own feeling of doom and inevitability, is that he does in fact have free will. He *could* choose to avert his destiny—but if he were to do so, he would be someone other than himself. Kay's Arthur is caught in the contingent-yet-categorical kind of prophecy that Malory gives when the *Morte's* Arthur simply cannot, or will not, heed Merlin's prophecy about Guinevere and Lancelot. When Arthur goes to wake Lancelot from the dead, another character tells him, 'My lord Arthur...you do not have to do this. It is neither written nor compelled.' Arthur responds, 'He will be needed...He cannot but be needed.' 'You are willing your own grief,' he is told, and he responds simply, 'it was willed long ago.' Yet despite Arthur's feeling that these actions were 'willed long ago,' Kay makes it clear that it is Arthur's personality, his moral values, that make him act this way, and not 'fate' or 'destiny': 'Looking on Arthur Pendragon's face in that moment, Paul [one of the five Canadians] saw a purer nobility than he had ever seen in his days...Here was the quintessence, and everything in him cried out against the doom that lay beyond this monstrous *choice*' (465–66; emphasis mine). What seems to be doom—fate—is in fact choice. The point is driven home even further: when Lancelot wakes, the first thing he says is, 'Why have you done this, my lord, to the three of us?' and Arthur responds, 'Because there are more at risk than the three of us' (466). This vision of Arthur is implicitly a reading of Malory: Kay says when reading Malory as a boy, he felt 'such a sense of grief and frustration when Arthur is warned against the marriage by Merlin but proceeds nonetheless...Arthur knows that certain actions will engender the destruction of his kingdom, and he proceeds nonetheless.'³⁵ As in the *Morte*, Kay's Arthur is caught by destiny because he cannot act differently and remain true to himself.

In the end, Arthur *is* freed from his doom in *The Fionavar Tapestry*: he survives the final battle and sails into the west with Guinevere and Lancelot. This release from destiny, however, comes about not because of Arthur's own actions, but because of the actions of another character, Diarmuid. Throughout the series Diarmuid has been linked linguistically to the 'wild thread' of 'Owein's Hunt'—he is called 'a little wild' (230), 'feral and fey' (71),

‘mercurial’ (221), ‘irresponsible’ (312), ‘frivolous’ (328) and ‘unreliable’ (221), and he is often associated with freedom (71). Diarmuid is also the character who tells Arthur that it is ‘neither written nor compelled’ that he must wake Lancelot (quoted above).³⁶ Diarmuid is in many ways the human embodiment of the ‘wild thread’ which grants free will to other individuals, and so even though Arthur, according to the Weaver’s planned pattern, is destined to die in the battle, Diarmuid is able to exercise his free will and change the predestined pattern. While Arthur and Guinevere are arguing over whether Arthur should fight the final battle, Diarmuid simply rides off and takes the battle upon himself. Diarmuid, therefore, is the one who dies in the battle, and Arthur is released from his fate. It results in a paradox: we all have free will, yet only the actions of another character, and not his own actions, can free Arthur from his fate.

This ‘displacement’ (Kay’s word) of price is a very Christian eucatastrophe in an ostensibly non-religious book.³⁷ Kay says, ‘*The Fionavar Tapestry* was a deliberate attempt to work within the traditions of high fantasy, which incorporates the idea, in Tolkien’s word, of the eucatastrophe, the reverse of the catastrophe. The resolution of the Arthurian love triangle, the unbinding of that curse, would be central to the eucatastrophe at the end of the book.’³⁸ As in the Christian story, the original sin—in this case, Arthur’s killing of the children—must be paid for; as in the Christian story, an innocent person can take the punishment onto himself. Diarmuid is not Jesus; nonetheless, the Christian concept of sacrifice and redemption is very much at work here.³⁹ Through Diarmuid’s sacrifice and payment of Arthur’s sins, Arthur is freed for redemption and salvation. Because he survives the final battle, Arthur can save the life of a child, Tabor, who otherwise would have died. The saving of this particular child thus symbolically redeems Arthur for the original killing of the children; in Kay’s words: ‘that is the symbolic expiation of the child slayer: he becomes the child saver at that moment.’⁴⁰

Kay’s re-reading and re-writing of Malory, therefore, draws out connections and themes left latent in the *Morte*. The re-interpretation of the Mayday passage as intimately connected both to the love of Lancelot and Guinevere and to the fall of Camelot, as well as the revision of Arthur’s return not as a glorious triumph but as a punishment, allows Kay to comment upon the themes of fate and predestination pervasive in the *Morte Darthur*. By bringing to light the hitherto unnoticed connections between the May passages—both in terms of the use and inversion of the traditional ‘May morning’ trope, and in their dual implication in the fall of Camelot, Kay offers a new reading of Malory that challenges the conventional arguments over the reasons behind the fall of Arthur. The sense of inevitability that faces Arthur and the other characters of the *Morte* is present in Kay’s Arthur as well, but it is more explicitly shown to be an inevitability that comes about as much because of

the characters' personalities and values—their inability to act in any other way and remain true to themselves—as because of prophecy or destiny. Most importantly, the eucatastrophe that never manages to come in the *Morte* becomes possible because of the actions of individuals; because of their free will and freely-made choices.⁴¹ The same freedom of choice that allowed Arthur to kill the Mayday babies in Malory frees Arthur, in Kay, from the 'once and future' destiny that is at once his glory and punishment. Kay thus shows that Camelot's seemingly immutable destiny—the fall of the Round Table because of the love of Lancelot and Guinevere combined with the treachery of Mordred—was actually not immutable at all. Arthur himself, in Malory's tale, made conscious choices that set in motion *both* strands of his final doom, and the doom of all of Camelot. This radical re-reading of Arthur and the Arthurian legend suggests that although the feeling of inevitability and fate seems so strong in Malory's telling of the tale, maybe the fall was less foreordained, more contingent, than both characters and readers think.

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NOTES

I owe thanks to the audience of the 'Arthur in the Americas' panel at Kalamazoo's International Medieval Conference, 2011, where an earlier version of this paper was given, for questions and thoughtful comments, and to the anonymous reviewers of this paper, for advice and further references to 20th-century Arthuriana, especially comics. I also owe heartfelt thanks and beer to Kevin Whetter and Cory Rushton, who responded immediately to my panicky requests for Field's page numbers while the new edition was still on order at my library.

- 1 For surveys, see Alan Lupack and Barbara Tapa Lupack, *King Arthur in America* (Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 1999), especially chapter 8, 'Arthurian Tradition and Popular Culture'; Norris J. Lacy, 'The Arthur of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Arthurian Legend*, ed. Elizabeth Archibald and Ad Putter (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 120–135; Raymond H. Thompson, 'Arthurian Legend in Science Fiction and Fantasy,' in *King Arthur Through the Ages*, vol. 2, ed. Valerie M. Lagorio and Mildred Leake Day (New York: Garland, 1990), pp. 223–39; Raymond H. Thompson, 'Conceptions of King Arthur in the Twentieth Century,' in *King Arthur: A Casebook*, ed. Edward Donald Kennedy (New York: Garland, 1996), pp. 303, 310 [pp. 299–311]; Michael A. Torregrossa, 'Once and Future Kings: The Return of King Arthur in the Comics' in *Adapting the Arthurian Legends for*

- Children*, ed. Barbara Tapa Lupack (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 243–262.
- 2 Lupack and Lupack, *Arthur in America*, p. 289; see Thompson, 'Arthurian Legend,' in *King Arthur Through the Ages*, pp. 224–227; Thompson, 'Conceptions,' in *King Arthur: A Casebook*, pp. 303–310; Dominick Grace, 'The Future King: *Camelot 3000*,' *The Journal of Popular Culture* 41.1 (2008), p. 21 [pp. 21–63].
 - 3 Dena Taylor, 'The Double-Edged Gift: Power and Moral Choice in *The Fionavar Tapestry*,' <http://www.brightweavings.com/scholarship/denafionavar.htm> (accessed Feb. 24, 2015); Susannah Clements, 'From Middle Earth to Fionavar: Free Will and Sacrifice in High Fantasy by J.R.R. Tolkien and Guy Gavriel Kay,' <http://www.brightweavings.com/scholarship/clementsionavarlotr.htm> (accessed Feb. 24, 2015); Adam Roberts, *Silk and Potatoes: Contemporary Arthurian Fantasy* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), p. 89; Raymond H. Thompson, 'The Arthurian Legend in Canada' in *Medievalism in North America*, ed. Kathleen Verduin (Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1994), p. 91 [pp. 85–99]; Raymond H. Thompson, 'Kay, Guy Gavriel' in *The New Arthurian Encyclopedia*, ed. Norris J. Lacy (New York: Garland, 1996), p. 260; Allan Weiss, 'Destiny and Identity in Canadian Urban Fantasy' in *Literary Environments: Canada and the Old World*, ed. Britta Olinder (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2006), p. 111 [pp. 109–130]; Thompson, 'Conceptions,' in *King Arthur: A Casebook*, p. 310. Other writers have used the Mayday incident (see Marie Nelson, 'King Arthur and the Massacre of the May Babies,' *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 11.3 (2001): 266–81; Thompson, 'Conceptions,' in *King Arthur: A Casebook*, p. 300), but few have made it so central: 'Much is made [in Kay] of the fact that Arthur slaughtered children in his attempt to kill Mordred, and because of this act he is fated to return and repeat the pattern of his death'; Alan Lupack, *The Oxford Guide to Arthurian Literature and Legend* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 199. In the comic book series *Camelot 3000* Arthur attempts to drown the baby Mordred with his bare hands, rather than setting him adrift, and in the future expiates this crime by saving a mother and child; however, his return is 'to rid the earth of invading alien hoards' and not a punishment for his crime; on this, see Sally Slocum, 'King Arthur is Alive and Well: *Camelot 3000* and the Comics' in *Moderne Artus-Rezeption 18–20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Kurt Gamerschlag (Göppingen: Kümmerle Verlag, 1991), pp. 307–309 [305–319]; Grace, 'The Future King,' pp. 33–34; see also Charles T. Wood, 'Camelot 3000 and the Future of Arthur,' in *Culture and the King: The Social Implications of the Arthurian Legend*, ed. Martin B. Shichtman and James P. Carley (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), pp. 297–313.
 - 4 I have been unable to find another fantasy writer who re-interprets the 'once and future king' motif in the same way as Kay, although admittedly I have not read all the Arthurian fantasy fiction available (an impossible task!). Guy Gavriel Kay himself said in a 1989 interview that 'to the best of [his] knowledge, no one [else] has ever inverted 180 degrees the idea of the Once and Future King'; post-1989 writers who reinterpret the motif are as likely to be imitating Kay as doing something original; Guy Gavriel Kay, interview with Raymond H. Thompson,

- 30 July 1989, *Taliesin's Successors: Interviews with Authors of Modern Arthurian Literature*, <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/intrvws/kay.htm> (accessed February 24, 2015).
- 5 *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, 3 vols., 3rd edn., ed. Eugène Vinaver, rev. P.J.C. Field (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), vol. III, p. 119, l. 4; Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, 2 vols., ed. P.J.C. Field (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2013), vol. 1, p. 841, l. 21. Further references will be to these editions and will be noted by volume, page and line number in brackets; where there are editorial differences I will use Vinaver's edition.
 - 6 Eugène Vinaver's edition notoriously skewed the importance of the first 'May passage' by placing it at the beginning of the 'Knight of the Cart' story, a move attested in neither the Winchester Manuscript or Caxton's edition; nonetheless, the passage remains of crucial importance in Malory criticism. For scholars who think the 'May passage' shows Lancelot's and Guinevere's love is sinful, see R. T. Davies, 'Malory's "Vertuose Love,"' *Studies in Philology* 53 (1956): 469 [459–69]; Stephen Knight, *The Structure of Sir Thomas Malory's Arthurian* (Sydney: Sydney UP, 1969), p. 69; Irene Joynt, 'Vengeance and Love,' in *Arthurian Literature III*, ed. Richard Barber (Cambridge: Brewer, 1983), p. 111 [pp. 91–112]; Rachel Jurovics, 'The Definition of Virtuous Love in Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*,' *Comitatus* 2 (1971): 28 [27–43]. For opposing views, see Betsy Taylor, 'Malory's Launcelot and Guinevere *abed togydir*,' in *Words and Wordsmiths*, ed. Geraldine Barnes, et al (Sydney, Sydney University Press, 1989), pp. 141–2 [pp. 137–46]; Beverly Kennedy, 'Adultery in Malory's "Le Morte d'Arthur,"' *Arthuriana* 7:4 (1997): 78 [63–91]; Beverly Kennedy, 'Malory's Lancelot: "Trewest Lover, of a Synful Man,"' *Viator* 12 (1981): 436–9 [409–456]; Beverly Kennedy, 'Love, Freedom and Marital Fidelity in Malory's *Morte Darthur*,' *Florilegium* 10 (1988–91): 184 [197–92]; Harry Cole, 'Forgiveness as Structure,' *The Chaucer Review* 31 (1996): 42 [36–44]; Peter Waldron, "'Vertuose Love" and Adulterous Lovers,' in *Sir Thomas Malory: Views and Re-views*, ed. D. Thomas Hanks, Jr. (New York: AMS Press, 1992), pp. 55–6 [pp. 54–62].
 - 7 Catherine Batt, *Malory's Morte Darthur: Remaking Arthurian Tradition* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), p. xiv; p. 160.
 - 8 The paradigm was set by the *Roman de la Rose*, but can be found in romances ranging from *Sir Orfeo* to *Thomas of Erceldoune* to *King Edward and the Shepherd* to Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*.
 - 9 Helen Cooper, *The English Romance in Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) pp. 106–136. See also Paull Franklin Baum, 'The Mediaeval Legend of Judas Iscariot,' *PMLA* 31.3 (1916): 481–632, esp. 591–2; Sebastian Sobecski, *The Sea and Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2008), p. 101.
 - 10 See Batt, *Malory's Morte*, pp. 58–59; P.J.C. Field, 'Malory's Mordred and the *Morte Arthure*' in *Romance Reading on the Book*, ed. Jennifer Fellows et al (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1996), pp. 77–93; Beverly Kennedy, *Knighthood in the Morte Darthur*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1992), p. 175.

- 11 Elizabeth Archibald, 'Beginnings,' in *A Companion to Malory*, ed. Elizabeth Archibald and A.S.G. Edwards (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1996), p. 137 [pp. 133–152].
- 12 Sinyard, Neil. *Filming Literature: The Art of Screen Adaptation* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), p. 117.
- 13 Guy Gavriel Kay, interview with Andrew A. Adams, 1995. <http://www.brightweavings.com/ggkswords/andrews.htm> (accessed February 24, 2015).
- 14 Guy Gavriel Kay, interview with Jean-Luis Trudel for *Solaris*, 1995. <http://www.brightweavings.com/ggkswords/trudel.htm> (accessed February 24, 2015).
- 15 The recently-published incomplete alliterative poem *The Fall of Arthur* shows that Tolkien was not immune to or resistant to the power of the Arthurian legend; on the contrary, he consciously eliminated it from his Middle-Earth mythology in part because it was *too* well-known, as well as being too overtly Christian and too French/continental for his purposes in *The Lord of the Rings*. J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fall of Arthur*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013); J.R.R. Tolkien, 'Letter 131,' in *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), p. 144 [pp. 143–61].
- 16 Guy Gavriel Kay, *The Fionavar Tapestry: omnibus edition* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1995 [1984, 1986, 1986]), p. 571. Further references will be to this edition and will be noted in brackets.
- 17 Kay, Thompson interview.
- 18 Vinaver III.1242.20; Field 1.928.28.
- 19 See Lupack & Lupack, *Arthur in America*, pp. 287–89. Some writers, such as T.H. White, seem to envision Arthur returning only once, whereas others (mostly in science fiction stories) describe a continual returning. Thanks go to the second anonymous reviewer of this article for this distinction.
- 20 T.H. White, *The Once and Future King: The Complete Edition* (London: HarperCollins, 1996 [1939, 1940, 1958, 1977]), pp. 696–97.
- 21 White, *Once and Future King*, p. 812.
- 22 A partial list can be found in Raymond H. Thompson, 'Introduction: Does One Good Return Deserve Another?' in *King Arthur's Modern Return*, ed. Debra N. Mancoff (New York: Garland, 1998), pp. 7–10 [pp. 3–30].
- 23 Thompson, 'Introduction,' p. 10.
- 24 Kay, Thompson interview.
- 25 Kay, Thompson interview.
- 26 Darien is in many ways an inversion of Mordred: both are born out of sinful copulations (though Darien is the result of rape rather than incest) and both kill their fathers, but Darien's patricide saves the world/civilization rather than ending it. Thanks go to the first reviewer of this article for pointing out this connection; see also Roberts, *Silk and Potatoes*, p. 93.
- 27 Guy Gavriel Kay, *Beyond this Dark House* (Toronto: Penguin, 2003), p. 44.
- 28 Jane Bliss, 'Prophecy in the *Morte Darthur*,' *Arthuriana* 13.1 (2003): 1–16.
- 29 Kathy Cawsey, 'Merlin's Magical Writing,' *Arthuriana* 11.3 (2001): 91 [89–109].
- 30 Bliss, 'Prophecy,' p. 1; p. 9.

- 31 Rachel Kapelle, 'Merlin's Prophecies, Malory's Lacunae,' *Arthuriana* 19.2 (2009): 58–81.
- 32 Kapelle, 'Merlin's Prophecies,' 76.
- 33 See Bliss, 'Prophecy,' p. 11.
- 34 For discussion, see Roberts, *Silk and Potatoes*, pp. 91–2; Taylor, 'Double-Edged Gift'; and Clements, 'From Middle Earth.' One could argue that if one cannot act differently because of one's personality, then that personality is simply an instrument of fate; yet this view necessitates an understanding of personality that is immutable and set, rather than one which develops out of one's choices and values. Being unable to change one's behavior because of external forces—Oedipus' ignorance over the identities of his father and mother, for example—seems to me to be fundamentally different from refusing to change one's behavior because to do so would result in a loss of identity. Balin could always choose not to 'take the adventure,' but he finds himself unable to do so while remaining the knight he envisions himself to be.
- 35 Kay, Thompson interview.
- 36 Kay mistakenly says in an interview that it is Paul who says this; perhaps Paul was the original speaker and Kay made the change to Diarmuid in a later draft. Whatever the case, Diarmuid is much more appropriate. Kay, Thompson interview.
- 37 Kay, Thompson interview. See discussion in Roberts, *Silk and Potatoes*, p. 90.
- 38 Kay, Thompson interview.
- 39 See Clements, 'From Middle Earth.' The concepts of sacrifice and redemption are not limited to Christianity, of course, but are fundamental to many other religions, to which Kay often gestures in the *Fionavar Tapestry*. Paul, for example, steps into the role of Odin, the 'Hanging God,' in his self-sacrifice on the Summer Tree. Kevin, Kim, and even Darien play similar self-sacrificing roles which echo other mythic traditions. Thanks go to Jim Weldon who pointed this out to me.
- 40 Kay insists that he had not originally planned to have Arthur save Tabor: he says, 'I knew that [Tabor] would survive, but not how until I actually wrote the episode. I remember smiling as I was writing, and knowing that something had worked, that I'd done something right'; Kay, Thompson interview.
- 41 Although see Thomas Hanks, "A far green country under a swift sunrise": Tolkien's eucatastrophe and Malory's *Morte Darthur*,' *Fifteenth-Century Studies* 36 (2011): 63–4 [49–64], who argues that the ending of the *Morte Darthur* is, actually, a 'Tolkienian happy ending.'