

**POLITICAL ATHEISM VS. THE DIVINE RIGHT OF KINGS:  
UNDERSTANDING *THE FAIRY OF THE LAKE* (1801)**

by

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## **DEDICATIONS**

*For John, for Beatrix, and for Dasein.*

*They know why.*

## **REVOLUTIONARY CATECHISM**

**Q. When is it your sacred duty to kill a God?**

*A. When that god is a devil falsely worshipped.*

**Q. When is it permissible to kill the King?**

*A. When the King pretends to be a god.*

**Q. If you believe that there is only one God, and that to worship anything other than that God is idolatry, then what's the best way to start the Revolution?**

*A. Start telling the people that the King is an idol, and that monarchy is idolatry.*

**Q. But, if you do not believe in either Gods or Kings, but cannot admit to that in public, then how do you start the Revolution?**

*A. Convince your Christian neighbours that the King thinks he is God.*

**Q. And how do you begin the *next* revolution?**

*A. Remind The People that God, too, is a king.*

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## ABSTRACT

In *Political Atheism vs. The Divine Right of Kings*, I build on Thompson and Scrivener's work analysing John Thelwall's play *The Fairy of the Lake* as a political allegory, arguing all religious symbolism in *FL* to advance the traditionally Revolutionary thesis that "the King is not a God."

My first chapter contextualises Thelwall's revival of 17<sup>th</sup> century radicalism during the French Revolution and its failure. My second chapter examines how Thelwall's use of fire as a symbol discrediting the Saxons' pagan notion of divine monarchy, also emphasises the idolatrous apotheosis of King Arthur. My third chapter deconstructs the Fairy of the Lake's water and characterisation, and concludes her sole purpose to be to justify a Revolution beyond moral reproach. My fourth chapter traces how beer satirises Communion wine, among both pagans and Christians, in order to undermine any religion that could reinforce either divinity or the Divine Right of Kings.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED

<i>E</i>	<i>Essay Towards A Definition of Animal Vitality</i>
<i>P</i>	<i>The Peripatetic</i>
<i>PWCC</i>	<i>Poems Written in Close Confinement</i>
<i>T</i>	<i>The Tribune</i>
<i>RN</i>	<i>The Rights of Nature</i>
<i>FL</i>	<i>The Fairy of the Lake</i>
<i>HA</i>	<i>The Hope of Albion</i>
<i>PCWR</i>	<i>Poems, chiefly Written in Retirement</i>
<i>LT</i>	<i>Life of John Thelwall</i>
“FiS”	“Fears in Solitude”
“RM”	“Religious Musings”
<i>EM</i>	<i>The Edinburgh Magazine</i>
<i>DF</i>	<i>The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire</i>
<i>KJV</i>	<i>King James Version</i>
<i>BCP</i>	<i>The Book of Common Prayer</i>
<i>BM</i>	<i>The Book of Martyrs</i>
<i>AA</i>	<i>Absalom and Achitophel</i>
<i>CM</i>	<i>Court Maxims</i>
<i>D</i>	<i>Discourses Concerning Government</i>
<i>HB</i>	<i>The History of Britain</i>
<i>PL</i>	<i>Paradise Lost</i>
<i>PR</i>	<i>Paradise Regained</i>
<i>FQ</i>	<i>The Faerie Queene</i>
<i>SA</i>	<i>Seditious Allegories</i>
<i>SP</i>	<i>The Silenced Partner</i>
“JTR 1649”	“John Thelwall and the Revolution of 1649”

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## CHAPTER I. – INTRODUCTION

### I.i INTRODUCTION

“All art is political, Jonson, otherwise it would just be decoration. And all artists have something to say, otherwise they’d make shoes. And you are not a cobbler, are you, Jonson?”

— Rhys Ifans as the 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford (*Anonymous*)

John Thelwall was born to a Welsh family of Saxon origins, “baptised and educated in the religion of the Church of England,” and bred a thorough-going Tory Loyalist of the London artisan class (Thelwall, *PCWR* iv). But, during the social upheaval of the French Revolution, this awkwardly artistic law school drop-out would achieve notoriety as Britain’s first celebrity atheist,<sup>1</sup> and would quite literally find his voice as the most feared working-class Revolutionary orator, journalist, pamphleteer, and lecturer, and revolutionary theorist of his time (who, unlike Thomas Paine, remained in Britain). His success in frightening the authorities, and his skill in evading them, were most singularly evinced by his *acquittal* of the charge of High Treason in 1794; and he afterwards remained a thorn in the side of William Pitt’s Tory government. But during the increasingly violent anti-Revolutionary backlash following the French Reign of Terror, the Londoner Thelwall was forced to “retire,” in 1797, to a small Welsh farm, where the sophisticated urbanite spent the next three years in increasingly miserable poverty and isolation. In 1801, he emerged from Wales and from his silence, insisting in the “Prefatory Memoir” to his *Poems, Chiefly Written in Retirement (PCWR)* that he now wished only to be known as a respectable poet; as “The Man, and not the Politician,” “not the Lecturer and Leader of Popular Societies now more” (i). However, the *PCWR*’s opening work, a play called *The Fairy of the Lake (FL)*, is Thelwall’s most sustained<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> i.e., in contrast to Enlightenment-era Deists (in which group I include Thomas Paine).

<sup>2</sup> i.e., in comparison to his unfinished *Hope of Albion*.



portrayal of the armed overthrow of the existing social order, telling the story of a revolution against the Anglo-Saxons led by no less than King Arthur. In other words, despite its supposedly solely artistic purpose, *The Fairy of the Lake* remains the exact opposite of what it professes to be—intensely and unavoidably political.

And yet, for just under two centuries, critics have either accepted or insisted upon a wall of separation between Thelwall's poetry and his politics. Largely ignoring Thelwall's "dramatic romance [...] full of freezing spirits, and songs about ale," Francis Jeffrey, in the *Edinburgh Review* (1803), is relieved at the retired Thelwall's newfound obscurity: "Middling as his poetry is, [...] we shall be happy to find that it affords him a subsistence; because it is a great deal better than his politics" (2:201-2). A century later, Charles Cestre, in *Thelwall: Pioneer of Democracy* (1906), celebrates him as a giant of "the first democratic agitation in England" (13). Cestre even chronicles Thelwall's evasion of censorship through his 1796 lectures on "Roman history"; "a pretext for him to bring in [...] political philosophy [to] which he had devoted the last four years of his life"<sup>3</sup> (13). However, Cestre completely ignores Thelwall's use of *British* history in *The Fairy of the Lake* and its equally radical counterpart, the unfinished *Hope of Albion (HA)*, instead regarding the post-1797 Thelwall as part of the new—strictly *literary*—Romantic movement of democratic "feeling." B. Sprague Allen, in "William Godwin's Influence upon John Thelwall" (1922), recognises Thelwall's efforts to trumpet his politics through his abolitionist novel, *The Daughter of Adoption* (1801), but he refuses to call such blatantly Jacobin propaganda art. Thelwall's post-1797 work is political precisely

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of how Thelwall and William Godwin evaded the Two Acts' prohibition of lectures on politics through their lectures on history, see the first chapter of Jonathan Sachs's *Romantic Antiquity: Rome in the British Imagination, 1789-1832* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

because it is not literary, because it is too weighted down by the absolute abstraction of Godwinian political philosophy to be a work of art. Even E.P. Thompson, whose *Making of the English Working Class* (1963) remains an invaluable resource for Thelwall scholars, refuses to acknowledge Thelwall's art as part of his politics, citing Thelwall's poetry as an embarrassment to British radicalism; he quotes the same sentimental verses from the *PCWR* as Jeffrey and Cestre as evidence that 1797 was his "breaking-point"; and notes that this political radical "*also* had the misfortune to be a mediocre poet—a crime which [...] historians and critics cannot forgive" (164; 157, emphasis added).

It is only since the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that *The Fairy of the Lake* has received its first real critical attention since Francis Jeffrey, and that scholars have begun to advocate the merits of the political theory and artistic precision *behind* the poetry.<sup>4</sup> This new willingness to read Thelwall's retirement as merely a *physical* retreat from the *polis* of London begins with Penelope Corfield and Chris Evans's article "John Thelwall in Wales" (1986). Rejecting the myth begun by Thelwall himself, they simply point to his letters, and to the correspondence of the spies around him, to show that Thelwall continued to write to his radical friends, and actively sought out new ones in the neighbourhood of Llyswen and the English city of Hereford.<sup>5</sup> Judith Thompson has been spearheading Thelwall's re-insertion into the British Romantic canon, her recent *magnum opus* (2012) rigorously cataloguing Thelwall's contributions as *The Silenced Partner (SP)* of Coleridge and Wordsworth (before, after, and most importantly) during the *annus*

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<sup>4</sup> There is also new interest in Thelwall's literary output for its own sake. *The Fairy of the Lake* received its first recorded staging by the Zuppa Theatre Company, with the scholarly collaboration of Judith Thompson, in 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Corfield and Evans even suggest that Thelwall may have been influential, if not instrumental, in the Merthyr Tydfil riot of 1800 (237).

*mirabilis* that produced the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798).<sup>6</sup> In it, she argues that *FL*, *HA*, and Coleridge's *Christabel* "originally formed part of an idealistically conceived, partially attempted, never achieved and long-forgotten joint project to redeem and reform the nation through poetry," and suggests that this attempt to preach politics through poetry may have been the result of Coleridge's frustration with Wordsworth's influence<sup>7</sup> (71). This reading of a political agenda in Coleridge and Thelwall's poetry agrees with Michael Scrivener's earlier understanding of *FL* as a veteran Jacobin's attempt to avoid censorship. Reading *FL*'s Welsh/British rebellion against the Saxons as a proxy for Thelwall's own revolutionary views, Scrivener observes of it and *HA*, "When direct political discourse is blocked from expression, the more indirect and allegorical discourse of antiquarianism is both legally safer and open to mythographic revision" (Scrivener, *Seditious Allegories* 247). This, in turn, agrees with Thompson's observation that the characters in *FL* are closely based on John Dryden and Henry Purcell's opera *King Arthur* (1691)—its own Arthur-vs.-the-Saxons storyline being a similarly "allegorical drama" for the 17<sup>th</sup> century rivalry between Whig and Tory (Thompson, *Origins* 7). Indeed, Scrivener elsewhere observes that *FL* and *HA* "are informed by a [tradition of] radical republican antiquarianism," whereby such radical luminaries as John Milton and Algernon Sidney claimed the precedent of "Saxon democracy" to justify Parliament's

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<sup>6</sup> See Thompson's article "An Autumnal Blast, a Killing Frost: Coleridge's Poetic Conversation with John Thelwall," which work was written to "provide a paradigm for the inclusion of other voices in the romantic canon" (429). For another critic's interest in *FL* as a product of the *Lyrical Ballads*, see Patty O'Boyle, "Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Thelwall's *Fairy of the Lake*," *The Coleridge Bulletin* 28 (2006), 63-71.

<sup>7</sup> Coleridge's brief reaching-out to the infamous radical Thelwall (with whom he began correspondence in 1796)—and his continued production of such jeremiads as "Fears in Solitude"—may also have been signs of his frustration with the more (passably) apolitical direction in which Wordsworth was steering the *Lyrical Ballads* project.

revolution against Charles I (“JTR 1649,” 124). *The Fairy of the Lake*, in other words, has finally become accepted as Thelwall’s vision of revolution.<sup>8</sup>

In keeping with these revolutionary re-interpretations of Thelwall’s drama, but examining the ideological root behind the radical pageant, what I shall demonstrate in this thesis is that *The Fairy of the Lake* is an allegory of “political atheism”; a parable against what I identify as *the* oldest lie in English history—THAT THE KING IS A GOD. Following Thompson<sup>9</sup> and Scrivener, I examine what I believe explains the paradox that Thelwall remains an advocate for the “Saxon democracy” of the English Constitution, while making Rowenna, *FL*’s Saxon antiheroine, an absolute monarch. And I do so by accepting a fusion, not only of Thelwall’s politics to his poetry, but also of his anti-monarchism with his atheism. I also accept Justin Champion’s assessment that “after the Restoration the confrontations between radical and traditional interests took place within rather than without the margins of ‘religion’” (36). Reconciling, then, the spirit of what Scrivener observes is Thelwall’s zeal for “the most radical[ly]” democratic phase “of the Puritan Revolution” to “the sense of shock” that Martin Priestman argues is necessary to understand “the issue of ‘atheism’ as central to” the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, I read *FL* as an “openly closeted” atheist’s call to Revolution temporal and spiritual; as a manifesto in verse that hides its radicalism behind Judeo-Christian edicts *demanding* the deaths of apostate kings who forsake God, or who pretend to be gods themselves (Scrivener, “JTR

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<sup>8</sup> Scrivener also suggests that his readers were perfectly aware that *FL* represented a (passably vicarious) call to arms, calling it “perhaps too ‘Jacobin’ in its celebration of the overthrow of an old authority to appeal to a conservative public” (*SA* 249).

<sup>9</sup> “Thompson,” in this thesis, refers to Judith Thompson, rather than E.P. Thompson.

1649” 120; Priestman 2). Thus *FL*, as an allegory of what I call “political atheism”<sup>10</sup>—the denial that the King is a God—allies itself with a *religious* tradition of an English radicalism, which was *directly opposed* to “the Divine Right of Kings,” and which held that doctrine, at best, as blasphemous rhetoric uttered by Christian kings; and at worst, as an illiberal relic from the days when pagan kings and queens *were* worshipped as living gods. By making *FL*’s villain a pagan queen, perpetuating her ancestral lie that she is a goddess on earth, Thelwall actually fashions a precise allegory justifying revolution against a supposedly Christian king. But *FL* is not simply an attack upon “The Divine Right of Kings” *in sui generis*; rather, it tackles the paradox that any *Christian* king could (and did!) claim to be a god, or to be God’s *direct* representative on earth. Like his play’s pretended embrace of its audience’s religion, Thelwall pretends to justify the Divine Right of Kings in his characterisation of Arthur and his allies, while attacking that doctrine’s too-literal Saxon application. Yet, the atheist Thelwall offers no real solution of his own, instead letting all religion blur into one big mess, and refusing *any* historical or logical basis for the separate renderings of God or Caesar, let alone their combined tribute. The union of God and King becomes a lie easily remedied by *reducto ad absurdum*; “political atheism” is simply the reason for, as well as the result of, the mockery of that union. Each chapter in this thesis shall expose a different aspect of the play’s backhanded praise of either Divine Kings, or kingdoms ordained by a jealous Deity, by deconstructing those contradictions viz. *FL*’s symbolic “support” for Divine

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<sup>10</sup> Following Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary*, I take “atheism” to mean “the disbelief of a God,” or in a plurality gods; but I also use “impiety” (“Irreverence to the Supreme Being; contempt of the duties of religion”) and “irreligion” (“contempt of religion”) in their early modern senses as euphemisms for atheism (Johnson). In this thesis, however, I am more concerned with how a stereotypically, politicised caricature of “atheism” helped give rise to, was informed by, and informed the rhetoric of what I call “political atheism.”

Kings. This first chapter serves as the lens through which each subsequent chapter shall examine *The Fairy of the Lake*. Following a plot summary in which I highlight the play's temporal conflict as a spiritual one at heart, I shall next explain how Thelwall appealed to official British culture by thinly veiling his irreligion with Protestant piety, while justifying his own atheism through the "political atheism" of an otherwise intensely religious English radicalism. Finally, I shall explain how I intend to execute the rest of this work, further elucidating my interpretation of *FL* as an epic struggle waged by a politically zealous atheist against the rights of divine kings.

### **I.ii. THELWALL'S BATTLE FOR BRITAIN**

"If it be asked why there were no religious wars among the Pagans,  
when every state had thus its peculiar deity and worship? I answer,  
It was plainly for this very reason, that each state having its own peculiar religion as well as government,  
no distinction was made between the obedience paid to their gods and that due to their laws."  
— Jean-Jacques Rousseau (*The Social Contract* 4.8, p. 229)

*The Fairy of the Lake* is about a *religious* war; a fight between Christian and pagan forces for the Crown, and the very soul, of Britain. Leading the opposing factions of what is technically a civil war are the young Arthur, whose rebellion sees him crowned King of Britain, and the Anglo-Saxon Queen of Britain—Rowenna, the pagan *pontificia maxima* and "pride of Woden's race"—whose descendants are historically fated to become Kings of Angle-Land (1.1, p. 3). Distraught by her "apostate heart[']s]" infatuation with the young warlord Arthur (who is *winning* a rebellion against her), but tiring of her weak-willed puppet-consort, the apostate King Vortigern,<sup>11</sup> Rowenna convinces herself that she can secure the Saxons' dynastic foothold in Britain, *if* she can

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<sup>11</sup> According to Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* (on which the play is based), Vortigern usurped the throne from Arthur's grandfather, Constantine.

show Arthur a false vision of Guenever engaged in incest with her father (Vortigern)<sup>12</sup>—thereby making him fall out of love with the Princess, and become more receptive to a political marriage with the Queen (1.1, p. 5). To ensure Arthur’s isolation, she locks Guenever in a tower, and has an Incubus-turned-ice-demon lure Arthur’s knights astray as the Court relocates to the Welsh castle Gwrtheyrnion. But, when she descends into Hel(a) to ask about the success of her plan, she receives only the cryptic prophecy that when Vortigern “heedless quaffs” a poisoned bowl, then “fire and water shall surround” “the maid,” and “perjur’d ghosts” shall be received by the gates of hell (1.4, p. 29). Back in the land of the living, Arthur’s last remaining companion, the perpetually inebriated Welsh squire, Sir Tristram, is literally tempted to drink by the devil (the Incubus), who, once let out of the bottle by Tristram, overpowers and freezes him. Arthur himself is ensnared and tempted by Rowenna, and just as she is about to show Arthur the vision (false or no), the Lady (the “Fairy”) of the Lake rises from her lake, incensed that the Saxons have profaned a grove sacred to *her*. As the Saxons flee, the Lady reveals she has “redeem’d” Arthur’s knights, who suddenly appear, and they and a chorus of bards march on Gwrtheyrnion; the Fairy leads them in a war song calling upon a fiery angel who remains curiously unseen (2.4, p. 59). Following a comic interlude in which Sir Tristram pretends to join forces with the Saxons only to mock their gods in song (as part of a plan to rescue Guenever), Rowenna poisons Vortigern, setting the Norns’ prophecy in motion.

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<sup>12</sup> Whether Guenever is Rowenna’s daughter or stepdaughter is never specified—but does follow Nennius’ account that Vortigern fled to Gwrtheyrnion “with his wives” (32). In the notes to *FL*, Thelwall only asks to be pardoned for “[m]aking Guenever[] a daughter of Vortigern, and the object of the incestuous passion with which that tyrant has been stigmatized” (207). However, Thelwall’s only liberty, his decision to make *Guenever* a daughter of Vortigern, otherwise follows Nennius’ accusation that “St. Germanus admonished Vortigern to turn to the true God, and abstain from all unlawful intercourse with his daughter” (Thelwall, *PCWR* 207; Nennius 32).

In the course of the following battle, the *moated* palace Gwrtheyrnion is set on fire, trapping *Rowenna* in it, as the Lady of the Lake's magical flood destroys the castle, and the "perjured" "demon gods" of the Saxons return to the Hell from whence they came. Arthur is crowned King, and as the Lady descends back into her Lake, the Bards sing her a hymn of thanksgiving, singing of the signs that shall foretell her second coming. In this surprisingly modern play based on carefully researched ancient religions that are then just as carelessly disregarded and confusingly arranged, Arthur's revolution is astonishingly incomplete: the names "God," "Christ," or even "Christian" are not uttered *once* during the play, and there *are* no clergy. But, what could possibly possess an atheist of Thelwall's convictions to make his play about Britain's most famous Christian warlord?

### **I.iii. A "SQUIRE OF HOLLOW FAITH":<sup>13</sup> PORTRAIT OF THE ATHEIST AS AN ARTIST**

"A man full of warm speculative benevolence may wish his society otherwise constituted than he finds it; but a good patriot and a true politician, always considers how he shall make the most of the existing materials of his country. A disposition to preserve, and an ability to improve, taken together, would be my standard of a statesman. Every thing else is vulgar in the conception, perilous in the execution."  
— Edmund Burke (*Reflections on the Revolution in France* 157-58)

Thelwall was the embodiment of British conservatives' fear that atheists, having rebelled against the Kingdom of Heaven, could not be trusted as loyal subjects of the Kingdom of Great Britain. Accordingly, while Thelwall made no efforts to deny his atheism, he made a show of pretending to a sort of neo-Classical "piety"<sup>14</sup>—with varying degrees of camouflage and success—in order to minimise suspicion about the potentially treasonous nature of his irreligious views. In one chapter of his novel *The Peripatetic* (*P*), one of his early literary forays into democratic politics, he sings the praises (or at

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<sup>13</sup> Thelwall; *FL* 1.2, p. 37.

<sup>14</sup> "I shall not repeat, that the Pagan worship was a matter, not of *opinion*, but of *custom*; that the toleration of the Romans was confined to nations or families who followed the practice of their ancestors" (Gibbon, *Vindication* 98).



least, the *uses*) of “the Christian system,” which “would furnish a much more noble machinery than ever was produced from Grecian superstitions,” but which thankfully did not *inhibit* the genius of “Dryden, who very evidently looked upon the whole as a mere fable” (303). For Thelwall, John Dryden, a High Churchman and Tory in practice and a Deist in private, was the model of a freethinking poet who was able to prosper so long as he catered to the tastes of the political and religious establishment.<sup>15</sup> Yet, throughout his own career, Thelwall remained highly conscientious of the anathema his atheism was to that very establishment; however, he refused to give his enemies the satisfaction of seeing him as they wanted to see him. He certainly recognised that “atheist” was a term of abuse; his posthumous memoir acknowledges that during the 1790s, “[n]othing was more common [...] than to charge every active member belonging to political Societies with atheism” (*Life of John Thelwall* 147). His solution was *the use of religion* as a Loyalist affectation at London Corresponding Society meetings.

It will not be a little surprising then, to hear, that this *irreligious, revolutionary, seditious* Convention never commenced or ended the transactions of the day, without its members, by solemn prayer, committing their cause and referring their acts to that tribunal, whence justice, sooner or later, will fall on the heads of all who are traitors to their country” (147-48).

Of course, this strategy did not work. After willing to be tried “By God and my country” when charged with High Treason in 1794, Thelwall and other radicals who “*were* known atheists” found themselves incarnations and targets of an anti-Revolutionary stereotype

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<sup>15</sup> “Thelwall recognized Dryden as a poet like himself, whose mind has been emancipated from superstitious systems but who is unable to speak openly because ‘the slip he had made in religion and politics’ put him at odds with a ‘dissipated’ and ‘profligate’ age” (Thompson, *Origins* 7).

they may have wished to avoid (Ramsey 31; Priestman 29, original emphasis). However, following his acquittal, Thelwall, now a public face of Revolutionary atheism, seemed to relish doing everything he could to turn the worst aspects of his irreligious public image into attacks against his political adversaries. Most memorably, in his rebuttal to Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (RRF), *The Rights of Nature* (RN), Thelwall projects the stereotyped fears of himself back onto Burke, calling Burke's beloved "Christian system" "a system which [...] went to much greater lengths" in slaughtering its opponents "than the wildest *Atheism* either of the French or English Jacobins" (Thelwall, RN 1:67). At the same time, he also rebuts Burke's fear of revolutionary communalism by invoking the Church of England's jealous guarding of the Early Church's legacy:<sup>16</sup> "The primitive Christians (as every scholar knows) both upheld and practised, not only *equality of rights*, but *community of goods*"<sup>17</sup> (Thelwall, RN 1:67).<sup>18</sup> He further demands to know what a *truly* Christian establishment ought to fear from the Revolution, since Christ's "doctrines [...] contained so many elementary political truths, and vindicated, so directly, [...] the Rights of Man?" etc. (Thelwall, RN

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<sup>16</sup> I am grateful to my fellow M.A. candidate, André Forget, for explaining to me this particular facet of the Anglican Communion's impression of itself.

<sup>17</sup> "The *community of goods*, which had so agreeably amused the imagination of Plato, and which subsisted in some degree among the austere sect of the Essenians, was adopted for a short time in the primitive church" (Gibbon, *DF* 1:541; emphasis added).

<sup>18</sup> Thelwall was fond of slandering Burke as a crypto-Catholic; his appeal to the history and authority of the Early Church may also be a subtle jab at Burke's use of Ecclus. (Sir.) 38.24-34 in his (Burke's) argument *against* private property. Regarded by Roman Catholics as canonical, the Church of England regards Ecclus. as part of the Apocrypha, and uses it for readings, but not for doctrine (Burke n. 49-50). Burke, for his part, excuses himself from the debate over "whether this book be canonical, [...] or apocryphal," and insists only, "I am sure it contains a great deal of sense, and truth" (n. 50). Thelwall parodies Burke's philosophical reach into the Protestant Apocrypha by similarly qualifying his own use of what was apocryphal for him, calling the precedence of communalism "a wild and absurd scheme, I confess; and not practicable upon any large scale: but I speak to the doctrinal and historical fact" (Thelwall, RN 1:67; my italics).

1:68).<sup>19</sup> His second letter of *RN* was no less explicit in making his more peaceable *English* radicalism tug at the heartstrings of the Anglican notion of its own *via media*: “Having rejected the Old Testament of Gothism [i.e., Burke’s political Gothicism], I shall not adopt, with implicit[] submission, the new Koran of the Robespierians” (Thelwall, *RN* n. 2:31). In other words, Thelwall reached as far as he could into “enemy territory” without letting the public mistake him for a Christian himself—or at least this was the case so long as the openly radical Thelwall remained a politically active force.

With Thelwall’s new career as a poet came the understanding that his poetry could not or would not be acknowledged as political; in order to draw attention away from *FL*’s political agenda, it therefore became necessary for him to appease his censors by transforming *FL* into an allegorical character assassination of his former public persona.<sup>20</sup> Thompson observes that in the figure of Rowenna, “Thelwall defiantly dons the mantle of pagan atheist that [Samuel Taylor] Coleridge had woven for him” in his more Gothic poetry (*SP* 72). The play’s villain, in other words, is a recognisable stand-in for Thelwall himself—yet she is burned to death by Thelwall’s “hero,” King Arthur. This is no ordinary suicide: Arthur remains the Revolutionary hero, while the tyrant Rowenna has all the worst excesses of revolution grafted onto her. She is specifically an embodiment of the barbarous atheism Thelwall’s friends and his enemies associated with

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<sup>19</sup> Thelwall’s description of Christ as a martyr for a righteous and popular cause is also, in fact, a sustained metaphor for himself as a martyr for the cause of “reform.”

<sup>20</sup> In an 1800 letter, though Thelwall is quite proud of his efforts to carry and dress himself as a respectable Loyalist (if not a Churchman, as he was still harangued from the pulpit), he still carried “the old republican [...] in my heart—and [...] in silence, except when with a chosen few” (Corfield & Evans 239). The same letter also suggests poetry to be one of the few exercises through which he could freely, if privately, contemplate politics: “as persecution would not suffer me to crawl upon the earth, I am trying what can be done by soaring into clouds. Hitherto I like the experiment vastly” (239).

his radicalism. When the then-zealously Unitarian Coleridge began writing to Thelwall in 1796, it was in part to ask for his opinion of his “Religious Musings” (“RM”), a poem celebrating the fall of “She that work’d whoredom with the DÆMON POWER,” “On whose black front was written MYSTERY,” “mitred ATHEISM,” thus beginning their conversation by calling Thelwall the Whore of Babylon (lines 336-40). Years later, Thelwall casts *FL*’s antiheroine as an even *more* famous Whore-of-Babylon figure from British history—Rowenna, the beautiful daughter of Hengist whose “cup of iniquity” (in)famously helped seduce King Vortigern into apostasy, and secured the false alliance that would see Celtic Britain overrun by its Saxon vassals. He even answers Coleridge’s anti-Catholic “mitred ATHEISM”<sup>21</sup> by showing Rowenna, adorned, as a high priestess, with a “*Pall*<sup>22</sup> and *snaky Tiara*,”<sup>23</sup> and followed by a girl “*bearing the Pictured Drum and Double Hammer [of Thor]*,”<sup>24</sup> *with a rosary of Brazen Rings, and images of serpents, frogs, toads, and other obscene reptiles, used in the mysteries of Northern Magic*” (*FL* 1.3, pp. 18-19). Thelwall not only opens the *PCWR* with a burning-in-effigy of his public image as Atheism incarnate,<sup>25</sup> he was clearly eager to destroy his stereotyped self with whatever ammunition he could find.

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<sup>21</sup> Both Coleridge and Thelwall’s use of “mitred atheism” respond to a somewhat paranoid Protestant identity which, like atheism, felt obliged to define itself by what it was not. The preface to the 1764 *Book of Martyrs* (*BM*), for instance, begins by arguing the new edition to be useful “In an age when irreligion, on the one hand, and every Jesuitical art on the other, tend to subvert the PROTESTANT RELIGION” (*BM* 1:iii).

<sup>22</sup> In addition to “A robe, cloak, or mantle,” the *OED* also identifies “pall” as a shortened form of “pallium,” “a woollen vestment conferred on archbishops in the Latin Church.”

<sup>23</sup> Cf. the mock-papal “crownèd mitre” of Edmund Spenser’s *Duessa* (*FQ* 1.8.25.3).

<sup>24</sup> In *The Hammer and the Cross*, historian Robert Ferguson recalls “the physical similarity, widely noted at the time, between the hammer of Thor and the cross of Christ, one which enterprising silversmiths of those syncretic times exploited in the creation of small ‘double’ symbols which could represent both gods simultaneously” (267).

<sup>25</sup> Thus striking the final blow in the hunt for the Jacobin Fawkes.

Furthermore, while Thelwall distances himself from any further (non-vicarious) political insurrection, “Rowenna’s” death remains a Trojan horse; a false offering in keeping with Thelwall’s penchant for rhetorical self-sacrifice. Following his projection of “atheist” bloodlust onto Christianity, he mocks his jailers’ attempt to martyr him, since

the spirit of a great reformer, martyr’d for a glorious principle, will rise again.

The phoenix mind springs triumphant from the pyre; and the winds, that scatter the ashes of the martyr, propagate the principles for which he fell (*RN* 1:69).

Thelwall, then, only “martyrs” himself to more spread the principles he held so dear; indeed, he almost celebrates his figurative death as what will finally bring about Reform. And this exultation at his own death in the face of that death’s ability to fulfill or enact a Revolution is *exactly* what happens during Rowenna’s death. In a flourish of dramatic irony, Rowenna wildly rejoices that her love for Arthur shall soon be consummated once Guenever is dead—shortly before Arthur sets her turret on fire:

The Phœnix burns!

And, from the odorous ruin, mine the love,

With renovated wing, shall soar aloft,

Gorgeous in natal triumph.—’Tis complete (*FL* 3.5, p. 83).

Rowenna, in other words, uses the language of Thelwall’s lyric republican martyrdom in order to celebrate her love for the (leader of a) Revolution that is about to destroy her, its “target”; and through her frenzied rhetoric, Thelwall remains triumphantly giddy in his expectation that *whatever his plan is* will succeed, thanks to the perfectly selfless

immolation of the creature his Christian adversaries believed him to be.<sup>26</sup> Of course, this establishes only Thelwall's methods, which at present only justifies an explanation of the play's revolutionary allegory that others have already advanced. The question remains—*Why* was Thelwall so eager, not only to defiantly self-immolate on paper in 1801 (something he had already done in 1796), but to ensure that “he” would meet his death at the dawn of the Saxon invasion of Britain? And if Rowenna's death is so entirely morally necessary, than what moral does her death demonstrate?

#### **I.iv. “POLITICAL ATHEISM”: ORIGINS, CONTEXTS, TRANSFORMATIONS**

“Yet he did cast down their frontiers, and cut down their groves: for he had decreed to destroy all the gods of the land, that all nations should worship [Nebuchadnezzar] only, and that all tribes should call upon him as God.”  
— Jth. 3.8 (*King James Version*)

Rowenna, as a royal character from pagan history—specifically, from the moment in history when Christian Britain is being re-paganised—allows Thelwall to take to its logical extreme the supposedly Christian doctrine of the Divine Right of Kings, and refute it with less suspicion than he would likely incur if Rowenna were a Christian monarch. As such, however, Rowenna is also a reminder of the most *unpleasant* aspect of a Saxon history Thelwall would otherwise prefer to celebrate. Like many liberals and radicals since the English Civil War, Thelwall countered the “Norman yoke” (revived by Burke) with “Saxon democracy,” arguing for a pre-Norman precedent for a limited, constitutional, and preferably elected monarchy (if not a republic).<sup>27</sup> But, as we have

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<sup>26</sup> Percy Shelley would revive the image of the public burning of atheist martyrs in *Queen Mab* (1813) lines 7.1-13. It is also possible that the Creature's promise to give himself a Viking funeral (a *Saxon* funeral?) at the end of *Frankenstein* (1818) continues this motif.

<sup>27</sup> “The theory of the Norman Yoke, as we find it from from the seventeenth century onwards, took many forms; but in its main outlines it ran as follows: Before 1066 the Anglo-Saxon[s] lived as free and equal citizens, governing themselves through representative institutions. The Norman Conquest deprived them of this liberty, and

seen, Thelwall was not above projecting the worst aspects of his own public persona onto those of his enemies; and, perhaps *because* his retreat into Britain's Saxon past was so recognisably partisan, *FL* ignores the Saxons' politics, and focuses instead on their paganism in order to have an appropriately pagan Saxon monarch stand in for a Neo-Norman political doctrine. He had previously shown a willingness to denounce the Saxons' paganism in order to vindicate their politics in a speech from 1795:

Kings, according to our *ancient Saxon Constitution*, [...] were [...] *chosen* to fill the office of first magistrate [...] for notwithstanding the boasts made by the supporters of the divine right of lineal descent from the God *Woden*, or the devil knows what other gods, or godlings[,] I will venture to affirm that, legally speaking, *the crown of this country was never hereditary, till the revolution in 1688* (*The Tribune* 1:215).

Six years later, *FL* centers around, not the first British monarch to expect a hereditary transition of power,<sup>28</sup> but the first Daughter of God who claims a Divine Right to rule the Isle of Britain. She calls herself as the "mission'd daughter" of "Asori's gods,"<sup>29</sup> and her attendants address her as the "pride of Woden's race," which appellation acknowledges her supposed descent from the Norse Father of Gods and Men (1.1, p. 3). This is of

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established the tyranny of an alien King and landlords. But the people did not forget the rights they had lost. They fought continuously to recover them, with varying success. Concessions (Magna Carta, for instance) were from time to time extorted from their rulers, and always the tradition of lost Anglo-Saxon freedom was a stimulus to ever more insistent demands upon the successors of the Norman usurpers" (Hill 52).

<sup>28</sup> Although Arthur is a constitutional monarch, insofar as he is crowned by Parliament at *FL*'s end, Arthur is a Young Pretender who is able to invade England with Celtic allies ("Armoric [Breton] aids") *because* he is the grandson of the dispossessed King Constantine, and a son of the disinherited Uther Pendragon (Thelwall; *FL* 1.1, p. 9). Thelwall thus plays both sides of British politics by sketching a revolution that is Glorious in substance, but Jacobite in structure.

<sup>29</sup> "Woden and his race are called the Asi or Asori" (*PCWR* 204; Thelwall's note).

course entirely in keeping with history: in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, the Venerable Bede relates that the Saxon warlords Hengist and Horsa, Rowenna's father and uncle, "were the Sons of *Victgilsus*, whose Father was *Vecta*, whose father was *Woden*; from whose Stock the Regal Race of many Provinces deduce their Original" (1.15, p. 47).<sup>30</sup> In his *History of Britain* (1670), John Milton less forgivingly follows Bede: "Hengist and Horsa [were] descended in the fourth degree from Woden; of whom, deified for the fame of his acts,<sup>31</sup> most kings of those nations derive their pedigree" (2:51). The Scottish philosopher David Hume, in his wildly popular *History of England* (1754-61), more suspiciously extrapolates from Bede, adding that Hengist and Horsa "were reputed, as most of the Saxon princes, to be sprung from Woden, who was worshipped as a god among those nations, and they are said to be his great grandsons, a circumstance which added much to their authority" (1:17). Hume's successor-historian Edward Gibbon, in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-89), betrays a later *political* preoccupation with that ancient mode of succession.

Seven independent thrones, the Saxon Heptarchy, were founded by the conquerors; and seven families, one of which has been continued, by female succession, to our present sovereign, derived their equal and sacred lineage from Woden, the god of war (4:103).<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Whereas Bede makes no mention of Woden's divinity, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the King's of Britain* recognises Woden as the principle deity of the Saxons, but fails to record Hengist and Horsa claim of descent from him (Geoffrey 6.10, p. 182).

<sup>31</sup> This is also the interpretation of the "historic" Woden (or Odin) preserved in the Prose (or "Younger") Edda of Snorri Sturlusson, and in Mallet's *Northern Antiquities*.

<sup>32</sup> St. Margaret of Scotland, the wife of Malcolm III, was born a princess in the House of Wessex, and fled from the Norman Conquest. Among her progeny was James VI & I.



In his notes to *FL*, Thelwall makes a grievance of (“Gothicises?”) Gibbon’s ennobling factoid, aggressively outperforms Milton’s smirking at Woden’s apotheosis, and all but revives Geoffrey of Monmouth’s medieval zeal against the entire Norse “pantheon”:

Woden (or Odin) was the Scandinavian God of War—the Chief and Father of all the other Gods. From him all the Saxon princes affected to trace their descent. [...] I have followed the suggestion of Milton (and, indeed, of The Old and New Testament) in considering these Demon Gods as real personages—as rebellious and fallen angels assuming these forms to draw the deluded nations into idolatry (*PCWR* 203).

Thelwall thus levels his own “medievalist” curses against Horsa and Hengist’s ancestor, “who, as they say, was the son of a god, not of the omnipotent God and our Lord Jesus Christ, [...] but the offspring of one of their idols, and whom, blinded by some demon, they worshipped according to the custom of the heathen” (Nennius 18).<sup>33</sup> Thelwall’s Saxon Queen of Britain, however, if not a devil herself, is certainly a woman whose politics “work whoredom with the demon power”; who, in claiming to be a goddess *and therefore* a queen, makes herself the ideal target for any self-respecting monotheist; and who makes herself the only *acceptable* target for a Revolution that is also a Crusade.

Indeed, the old gods’ most redeeming feature was that they

were not supposed to be immortal. They were to perish in the general wreck of the universe [...] and the descriptions of this [...] constitute the noblest parts of the system of Runic Mythology” (Thelwall, *PCWR* 205).

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<sup>33</sup> Nennius does not actually list Woden as that deity; instead he names “Vuoden” as the great-great-great-grandson of “Geta,” the German pagans’ ancestral “son of god”(18).

But Thelwall's paganising of his allegory against the Divine Right of Kings is not undertaken for mere Saxon aesthetics; on the contrary, his satire of that doctrine was the latest contribution to a two-hundred-year-old blood-stained conversation that had left England with many, many raw nerves.

While Thelwall's contemporary politics betray themselves in Rowenna's historical context, at her more basic allegorical level, Queen Rowenna is a distractingly female parody of the Divine Right of Kings, as that doctrine was famously articulated by King James I & VI, whose pronouncements shaped the next two centuries of anglophone anti-monarchism. In his 1610 speech to the English Parliament, James must have delivered an extraordinary shock to Puritan MPs when he declared that, "Kings are not onely Gods Lieutenants vpon earth, and sit vpon GODS throne, but euen by GOD himselfe they are called Gods" (James 181; cf. Ps. 82.6). Elsewhere, he cites God's decree that Samuel "Hearken unto the voice of the people" (i.e., their request, "Give us a king") in order to justify monarchy as instituted by God (1 Sam. 8.6-7). Accordingly, refuting both James's "Right of Divine Kings" and the Divine Right of Kings became a cornerstone of, and increasingly conflated in, English radical and liberal discourse. Oliver Cromwell's then-chief propagandist, John Milton, in his *Defense of the English People* (1651), prefers to refute Royalist argument by alluding to James's rhetoric.

God frequently protests that he was extremely displeased with them for asking a king. [1 Sam. 8.7.] "They have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them." And certainly, they that subject themselves to a wordly master, and set him above all laws, come but a little short of choosing a strange God (1:517).

After the Stuart Restoration, however, there was a greater willingness to take James at his word. Cromwell's former ambassador to Sweden, Algernon Sidney, in his unpublished<sup>34</sup> *Court Maxims* (CM) fumed that "though [kings] or their flatterers sometimes say they are Gods, they shall die like men"; and in his published *Discourses Concerning Government* (D), he wondered "why did not God of his own goodness institute" monarchy (CM 36; D 3.3, p. 338). And Milton, returning to poetry after the English Revolution's failure, was probably a direct inspiration for Thelwall's figurative self-sacrifice when he consigned to Hell his "atheist crew" who raised "impious war" against the "sole-reigning" Tyrant of Heaven (PL lines 6.370, 1.43, 1.124). During the American Revolution, Thomas Paine would invert Milton's tactics and go a step further—"That the Almighty hath here [1 Sam. 8.7] entered his protest against monarchial government is true, or the scripture is false"—daring his opponents to "out" *themselves* as the true "atheists" (23). And during the French Revolution, Thelwall claimed that, if not the King,<sup>35</sup> then certainly his representative on earth was become an idol: "I have no doubt, [...] that there are [...] perhaps, good pious men [here], who, when they say their prayers, forget the name of God, and whisper Pitt" (*Tribune* 1:254). But Thelwall refused to celebrate the Glorious Revolution by refusing to "extoll[] individuals" such as William III "into *demi-gods*, and then fall down and *worship the idols we have set up*," instead praising the Glorious Revolution for its complete refutation of King James I as well as James II (3:143-44).

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<sup>34</sup> It is not impossible that he may have had access to Sidney's *Court Maxims* in manuscript, which work was not published until 1996. But, whether or not Thelwall did come in contact with Sidney's dialogue, it is fair to say that the Court Maxims offer a much more scathing condemnation of institutional monarchy than would have been permitted by printing authorities.

<sup>35</sup> The above excerpt is taken from a 1795 speech—*after* his Trial for High Treason.

By this Revolution was overthrown the absurd and ridiculous doctrine of “the right divine of kings to govern wrong”; by this Revolution was annihilated the pretence that *kings are God’s viceregents*; that from heaven they derive their authority, and are responsible for the exercise of it to heaven alone (Thelwall, *T* 3:145; Pope, *Dunciad* line 4.188).<sup>36</sup>

Even the liberal Whig jurist William Blackstone, with whom Thelwall took issue for insisting that while his ministers can, “the king himself can do no wrong,” insists in his *Commentaries of the Laws of England* that the Scottish James entirely misread English law (Blackstone 1:237; Thelwall, *T* 3:176-77).

James the first, who had imbibed high notions of the divinity of regal sway, more than once laid it down in his speeches, that “as it is atheism and blasphemy in a creature to dispute what a deity may do, so it is presumption and sedition in a subject to dispute what a king may do” [...] But, whatever might be the sentiments of some of our princes, this was never the language of our ancient constitution (Blackstone 1:231; cf. James 214).

The most recent in a long line of dialogue, refutation, allegory, and adaptations of the rhetoric of King James, Thelwall’s play simply retreats into the ancient past in order to justify his nation’s sacred constitution which refused to accept a god as its head of state.

#### **I.v. THELWALL’S ATHEIST ALLEGORY**

At last him chaunst to meete upon the way  
A faithlesse *Sarazin* all armde to point,  
In whose great shield was writ with letters gay

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<sup>36</sup> “O! if my sons may learn one earthly thing, / Teach but that one, sufficient for a king; [...] May you, may Cam, may Isis preach it long! / The °RIGHT DIVINE of kings to govern wrong!” (*The Dunciad* 4.183-188). Whatever Alexander Pope’s own persuasion, he uses Cam and Isis, the river-deities of Milton’s *Lycidas* and his *Areopagitica*, to sharpen his own sarcastic barb against the Divine Right of Kings as articulated by King James.

*Sans foy*: full large of limbe and every joint  
He was, and cared not for God or man a point.  
— Edmund Spenser (*The Faerie Queene* 1.2.12.5-9)

Thus far I have shown the religious nature of *FL*'s central conflict; I have shown how Thelwall preferred to live and write as an "openly closeted" atheist pandering to Britain's Protestant tastes, which *modus operandi* culminates in Rowenna as a caricature of himself; and I have demonstrated how Thelwall manipulates the "relative atheism" of his Loyalist Protestant audience into their inadvertent support for the "political atheism" so integral to English republicanism. However, I have yet to explain how Thelwall combines these elements of literary respectability into what I argue is an almost subliminal justification of his own atheism.<sup>37</sup> What I shall demonstrate in the following chapters is that Thelwall arranges almost every aspect of the play's internal structure to prevent *FL* from providing *any* consistent or otherwise logical basis for either the notion that God approves of Kings, or that Kings are gods. In its literary execution, political atheism therefore becomes a type for the rejection of God, which renders the question of any "Divine" Right whatsoever entirely moot. What began as my inchoate attempt to read the duelling Saxon and British nationalisms as the proxy factions of an ultra-secular crusade has since evolved into a more careful analysis of *FL* as a Jacobin parody of a Gothic monstrosity; one which a close reading of its internal logic reveals, hidden beneath the dazzling labyrinth of its mind-blowing theatrics, a mock-didactic structure that is not *supposed* to make sense at all.

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<sup>37</sup> For a discussion of the Irish radical John Toland's use of similar tactics, see David Berman, "Disclaimers in Blount and Toland," *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*, Eds. Hunter & Wootten (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992): 262-272. A cursory reading of Toland also reveals a style thoroughly indebted to Hobbes.

Each of the following chapters shall therefore be devoted to examining a separate fiefdom within the Arthurian kingdom of Thelwall's closet-drama, each of which shall be surveyed according to the paradoxical nature of its local genii: namely, Fire, Water, and Beer ("Cwrw" in Welsh), all three of which are used to perform the will of, deny the existence of, or otherwise replace God or undermine the sanctity of a God-King. These three "elements" masquerade as sources of sacredness for their respective, rival fiefdoms—Rowenna's Saxon *nouvelle régime*, the Lady of the Lake's aquatic matriarchy, and what might be described as Sir Tristram's democracy of drunkards. All of these combine to justify, and to deny (and to replace?) the chief "Matter" of Thelwall's Britain—Christianity itself, which, as I have demonstrated in this first chapter, Thelwall only pretends to advocate in order to undermine the legal sanctity of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. Just as the King is not a god, so neither fire, water, nor ale will bless the King as the Lord's anointed. In the second chapter, I shall show that, while Rowenna supposedly purifies her *pagan* realm with fire sacred to the gods, the supposedly Christian Arthur uses that same hellfire in order to purify his own kingdom from the stain of paganism; the only viable end result being that Fire is an accoutrement of false gods, but that Arthur is one of them. The third chapter shall demonstrate how the "Kingdom" of the Lady of the Lake, though shrouded in the mystique of the supernatural quality of its Water, is designed *only* to maintain itself at the expense of the Kingdom of Heaven by continually thwarting the order of the God of Nature—and casting doubt on his very existence—by exercising its *own*, self-sufficient miraculous nature; which nature may be the work of devils anyway. The fourth and final chapter shall explain how both the drunken Sir Tristram's native Welsh ale and the ale of various

Saxon Last Suppers represent, ridicule, and replace the wine of the Eucharist—and, by extension, the Gods who preside over both religions' heavenly feasts. Having established Cwrw to be universally iconoclastic, I shall then explain how that same ale, known by another name as Rowenna's deadly draft of "wassail," becomes a symbol of Britain's "original sin"—the sin of ever having accepted the lie that their King was a god or their Queen a goddess.

## CHAPTER II. – HELL FIRE AND SACRED FLAME

### II.i. INTRODUCTION

“If our religious tenets should ever want a further elucidation, we shall not call on atheism to explain them. We shall not light up our temple with that unhallowed fire. It will be illuminated with other lights.”  
— Edmund Burke (*Reflections on the Revolution in France* 30)

The conflict in *The Fairy of the Lake* may be over the lie that Rowenna is a goddess, but the lie around which the entire play revolves is that Fire will purify Britain and bless the Anglo-Saxons’ *nouvelle régime* in order to confirm Rowenna’s divinity. Like Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, Rowenna only believes Fire shall help her secure her throne because of her misinterpretation of an already demonic prophecy. The Three Fates promise Rowenna that when Vortigern “[h]eedless quaffs” “the bowl” that she will poison, the gates of hell shall open, and

Arthur’s hand shall light the fire  
In which thy sorrows all expire. [...]  
More thy rival to confound,  
Fire and Water shall surround; [...]  
Arthur’s hand no help shall lend,  
No mortal arm the maid befriend,  
Nor aid from pitying Heaven descend (*FL* 1.4, pp. 29-30).

The Queen believes this prophecy to mean that *Guenever* shall be confounded in her love for Arthur—presumably *after* he has seen Rowenna’s vision of Vortigern in the willing embrace of his daughter—and that no help shall come to her when Arthur sets fire to her prison (in the moated palace of Gwrtheyrnion), ridding Rowenna of her rival for the heart and hand of the *legitimate* heir to the British throne. Of course, Arthur never sees the vision (false or no), remains true to *Guenever*, and in an ironic echo of Shakespeare,



Rowenna “die[s] upon the hand [she] love[s] so well” when Arthur lights the fire that burns the whole of Gwrtheyrnion—and Rowenna in it (*A Midsummer Night’s Dream* line 2.1.244). The burning wreck is then drowned by a tidal wave summoned by Rowenna’s temporal *and* spiritual “rival,” the Fairy of the Lake, who “confounds”<sup>38</sup> her own magical flood with the fire Arthur uses to send Rowenna and her demon-gods to Hell. Although the Saxons are the only ones who claim Fire for their medium of sanctification, if Fire bears witness to the godliness of *any* of *FL*’s three regimes—the Arthurian, the Aquatic, the Anglo-Saxon—it is Arthur whose kingdom is purified, whose divinity is confirmed, by the immolation of the *false* goddess Rowenna. But, by the tenets of his own religion, Arthur is barred from being acknowledged as the *true* god—or is he?

The King both is and is not a God; it is only natural that Fire both venerates and incinerates crowned heads accordingly. This chapter shall explore the dual role of Fire as both an antitheistic purgative, and a divine attribute; as an element that both obliterates gods from earth and proclaims their divinity unto other nations. Rowenna believes that her reign as (Arthur’s) Queen will be confirmed by a divine fire; however, this same Fire is also quite literally hellfire (or at least its earthly type) in its role of casting false gods out of Israel.<sup>39</sup> To its rightful wielder, Fire is a blessing from the Saxon gods—remember, they are “*demon* gods”—heralding that monarch as their representative on earth. But to its intended target, Fire is the hell to which he or she is consigned when his or her hour is at hand. What separates those two eventualities is *temporal* success, and temporal success alone: so long as one does not mistake Fire as the equivalent of what

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<sup>38</sup> Dr. Johnson defines the verb “confound” as “to mingle things” (*Dictionary*).

<sup>39</sup> Capitalised forms of the “elements” (“Fire,” “Water,” “Ale,” etc.) refer to them in their capacity as symbols or symbolic agents of the Death of God, or of the (Divine) King.

Thelwall's audience would see as a halo (or what today's generation might call an aura), but instead remembers Fire to be demonic in origin, then one is less likely to mistake Fire for a *blessing* from out the LORD out of heaven (Cf. Gen. 19.24). In order to demonstrate how Fire symbolises the temptation of too much temporal (i.e. monarchical) power, I shall first show how even by *Saxon* standards, Fire is itself a stumbling-block for Rowenna, whose excessive devotion to Fire signals both her apostasy from her ancestral gods, and her idolatry *to Arthur*. Second, I shall then show that Rowenna's blind devotion to Fire is a characteristically Thelwallian meta-commentary on the Divine Right of Kings, since Saxon reports of Arthur as the fiery likeness of one of *their* gods on the battlefield allow Rowenna to mask her devotion to Arthur in the guise of her own religion, while at the same time straying blasphemously far from it. Third, I shall demonstrate how Arthur's burning of Rowenna—the only time either Arthur or Rowenna *use* Fire on stage—is in fact a pagan sacrifice, which act undoes any pretence that either Arthur (or Burkean neo-feudalists) might make to a Christian England or Britain's *rejection* of pagan ritual by its monarchs. Fourth and finally, I shall show how the play's pagan and "Christian" factions' understandings of *which* natural or supernatural beings are the proper bearers of that god-king-killing Fire, in harmony with one another, all conspire to deny that Fire comes from God.

### II.ii. "WHEN THE PRIEST[ESS] TURNS ATHEIST"<sup>40</sup>

Now conscience chills her, and now passion burns;  
 And atheism and religion take their turns;  
 A very heathen in the carnal part,  
 Yet still a sad, good Christian at her heart.  
 — Alexander Pope ("Epistle to a Lady" lines 65-68)

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<sup>40</sup> Cf. Milton, *Paradise Lost* (*PL*) lines 1.494-495.

Thelwall ensures Fire *cannot* sanctify the Saxon order because its queen no longer follows the gods whom she would have the Britons (let alone the Saxons) believe give her the right to rule. At the same time, her claim that Britain is *her* promised land—“the dower confirm’d / By the three Fatal Sisters”—is undermined by her impassioned renunciation of those gods whom she would join as Their anointed Queen (1.1, p. 11). That her fixation on Arthur is a sexualised form of apostasy is evident from the beginning. When the curtain rises, Rowenna is heartbroken that “Arthur disdains my charms; and o’er his heart, / My spells are powerless” (1.1, p. 8). So useless (powerless?) are the Old Gods, that they cannot allow her to love *as equals* a man who, by her standards, is an atheist:

Does the power  
Of magic numbers not extend to Love?  
Or are our gods fastidious, to deny  
An unbelieving paramour?<sup>41</sup>—save such  
Whom Weakness to uxorious<sup>42</sup> faith may bow (1.1, p. 8).

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<sup>41</sup> Rowenna’s anger at her failure to win the “atheist” Arthur’s heart is an ironic inversion of Dido’s fury with Aeneas: “False as thou art, and more than false, forsworn; / Not sprung from Noble Blood, nor Goddess-born,” etc. (*Aeneid* 4.522-ff). Her inversion of Dido’s wrath is also ironic since she is basically a female Aeneas bringing her gods and her people to a new land.

<sup>42</sup> The *OED* defines “uxorious” as “Dotingly or submissively fond of a wife” (and cites its use in Milton’s *Ekklesiastes*). Unlike Arthur, Vortigern *is* seduced by the Saxons’ “uxorious faith”; but, since he remains virtually enslaved by her while she who props him up as a false god, Rowenna cannot accept him as a true god—and murders him accordingly. Prior to this regicide, the uxorious nature of Saxon paganism is emphasised by Rowenna’s description of her “witching smiles” as “ensanguin’d altars” of the old gods—a literal Gothicisation of Shakespeare’s “holy shrine” where “My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand” (*FL* 1.1, p. 6; *Romeo and Juliet* lines 1.4.207-208).

Believing herself forsaken by her gods, she forsakes them: “In vain,” do “Asori’s gods [...] Their mission’d daughter call” (1.1, p. 4). She, the Daughter of God, has found a new god<sup>43</sup> whom she wishes to confirm as a god in the eyes of her people by making him her King (1.1, p. 4). But, so powerful is this new god against the magic of the old ones (indeed, so smitten is she by his miraculous atheism towards them), that she cannot help but lose her faith in them herself: “The conquering sword—the magic art / Are baffled by the apostate heart” (1.1, p. 5). In her frustration, she even vows to live as an atheist if her ancestral “demon gods” do not grant her wish.

Hell, give me more: or take the power ye gave.

Give me to triumph o’er my Arthur’s heart,

And in these arms enfold him! or my spells,

Hence I forswear, this gifted wand I break,

Nor at the altars of Asgardian Gods

Chaunt hence the Runic rhyme (Thelwall; *FL* 1.1, p. 7).

Rowenna may claim a Divine right to rule Britain, but she undermines her own pretence by choosing for an co-equal heir to Woden’s empire a Christian prince who, unlike her husband, is *not* seduced by an “idoltrous faith” that regards kings as gods.

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<sup>43</sup> “’Tis Arthur!—Arthur all!” (Thelwall; *FL* 1.1, p. 4). Separating Fire from the less harmful rays of the Sun, Rowenna’s pyrophilia is yet another one of Thelwall’s attacks upon his public image as *the* atheist of Britain. In Act II, as Rowenna lies in wait for Arthur near Gwrtheyrnion, she observes how the sun’s sacred rays make all nature shine “with mimic radiance”—“All but here, / Where one lov’d object [i.e. Arthur], filling every thought, / Blots out Creation” (*FL* 2.4, p. 45; cf. Jn 14.17). In other words, Rowenna’s “relative atheism” towards her old gods (particularly Woden, the Creator) reveals itself as such when, filled with the love of Arthur, she echoes Coleridge’s “owlet Atheism, / Sailing on obscene wings athwart the noon, / Drops his blue-fringed lids, and holds them close, / And hooting at the glorious sun in Heaven, / Cries out, ‘Where is it?’” (Mallet 1.87; Coleridge, “Fears in Solitude” lines 82-86).

The other broad hint that Fire cannot possibly confirm a Divine King's right to rule is that Rowenna engineers her interpretation of the Norns'<sup>44</sup> prophecy in order to disguise her apostasy from her gods through her intense piety towards them, and to disguise her idolatrous adoration of Arthur. Her use of the old gods to confirm her new one essentially satirises Christian Old Testament typology; Rowenna herself is a sexualised parody of St. John ("the disciple whom Jesus loved") who all but proclaims *her* would-be lover to be a god,<sup>45</sup> but who rejoices in the ascent of that Fire which shall be a Comforter unto her, and which shall provisionally bear witness unto Arthur's divinity, presumably until the coming of the bridegroom.<sup>46</sup> The irony is that because Arthur, the rightful heir to the throne, is *already* an earthly type for Christ (but cannot himself be God), every step Rowenna takes towards Arthur or Fire *would* seem to draw her nearer to Arthur's god, except that she remains a sacral queen who can only articulate Christian concepts within the pagan worldview in which she was raised. Rowenna cannot even express her atheism towards her old gods, instead insisting that her desire to fulfill the will of the Fates is so strong, that neither the God of Fire Himself nor His Son shall thwart her efforts: "Lok nor Fenrir say us nay: / 'Tis Rowenna's holiday" (1.4, p. 31). Her newly "religious" zeal reveals itself as such on the eve of battle when, having

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<sup>44</sup> Rowenna refers mostly to the "Fates" or "fatal sisters": Urd, Verandi, and Schulda; the past, present, and future Fates respectively. Rowenna's attendant Etheldred does, however call upon the "Nornies"—which regrettably diminutive plural of *norn* (Fate), *nornr* (anglicised as "*Nornir*"), Thelwall probably got from Bishop Thomas Percy's translation of Mallet's *Northern Antiquities*, the principal source of 18<sup>th</sup> century Norse antiquarianism (Mallet 2.51, n. 2.51).

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Jn. 21.20-24. If the parallel I suggest is valid, Thelwall may not have been the first English freethinker to respond to a possible homoerotic subtext to the Gospel of John. When the atheist playwright Christopher Marlowe was tried for blasphemy in 1593, he was accused of saying "That St John the Evangelist was bedfellow to C[hrist] and leaned alwa[y]s in his bosom, that he used him as the sinners of Sodoma" (Kuriyama 221).

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Jn. 13.23-26, 19.25-27, 20.1-10; Acts 2.3; Jn. 14; Mt. 25.1-13.

heard the news that Guenever has been rescued and “borne [...] to the lonely tower,” Rowenna demands that the tower be burnt, and Guenever be sacrificed immediately (3.4, p. 76). “Fire the bridge!—— [...] No weapons use but fire. [...] Shaft and sling *were sacrilegious* [*sic*] here; were impotent” (3.4, pp. 76-77; emphasis added). So obsessed is she with fulfilling the Norns’ prophecy herself that she demands her soldiers ensure Guenever’s death matches exactly the imagery of what was foretold. Yet, Rowenna’s impatience to make a sacrificial lamb out of Guenever—who, as the daughter of Britain’s nominally Christian king, is the semi-divine child of the nation’s ruling “patriarch”—much more directly recalls the ironic assurance that “God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering” than Macbeth’s attempted murder of Fleance ever can (Gen. 22.8).

Rowenna’s *unheimlich* devotion to Arthur even threatens to destroy the divine basis of Saxon rule in her most desperate avowal of the Saxon gods. Rejoicing in the imminent destruction of Guenever (and thinking the impending fire on a moated tower sufficient fulfillment of her prophecy), she promises, “The first that brings me word / The turrets flame (be he the meanest drudge) [...] Shall rank, for wealth and power, with Woden’s line (3.4, p. 77). She essentially offers to *deify* whoever bears witness to Fire (and thus to Arthur’s divinity), which only undermines her own supposed divinity—meant to inspire unquestioning loyalty from her subjects—by making straight the path for any rival god who might claim for himself Rowenna’s throne as an adopted prince of “Woden’s line.”<sup>47</sup>

Furthermore, such an adoption contains in it the seeds of a democratic levelling of the Divine Right of Kings insofar as Rowenna gives these theoretical “drudges” “power to

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<sup>47</sup> Rowenna never explicitly mentions the possibility of *children*; her promise thus recalls the Roman (or the Roman Church’s) custom of succession by adopted princes.

become the sons of God, even to them that believe in [Arthur's] name" (Jn. 1.12).<sup>48</sup> Even the rhetoric in Rowenna's exultation at what she believes is death of Guenever is impossibly Christian in its service of pagan ends. Hearing Guenever scream to Arthur that the flames "reach—they scorch me" in the heat of battle, Rowenna rejoices, "The Phœnix burns!" prophesying that her love for Arthur at last "shall soar aloft, / Gorgeous in natal triumph" of Guenever's sacrificial flames (*FL* 3.4, pp. 82-83). Even as she compares her love to a symbol of physical resurrection, her subsequent and equally ironic prophecy that "Arthur soon shall light the fire / In which my sorrows all expire" is uttered immediately before Arthur's hand lights the fire that sends Rowenna and her gods to the "second death" of the Christian Hell (3.4, p. 83). Rowenna may wish Fire to unite the wills of all the gods of whom she is High Priestess, but such is her zeal for The Word that she all but ignores The Gods themselves except in her backhanded "praises" of them.<sup>49</sup> Fire cannot bear witness to the divinity of the Saxon Gods and Arthur both—unless, of course, Arthur is a God himself.

### **II.iii. BY THE GODS THEMSELVES CALLED "GOD"**

"No man can look upon that as a wickedness, which shall render him sacred; nor fear to attempt that which shall make him God's viceregent. And I doubt, whether the wickedness of filling men's heads with such notions was ever equalled, unless by him who said, *Ye shall not die, but be as gods.*"

— Algernon Sidney (*Discourses Concerning Government* 1.19, p. 68)

Rowenna's apostasy is so tragically ironic because all she has heard of Arthur is that he *is already acknowledged* by the Saxons as one of their gods—and that they have already seen his divinity evinced in his supernatural command of Fire. Though Rowenna is hailed as the "pride of Woden's race," the flattery of her attendant spirits is completely

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<sup>48</sup> Cf. Milton, *PR* lines 4.520; Coleridge, "FiS" lines 45-47.

<sup>49</sup> Thelwall may have agreed with Burke's private view that "A man is certainly a perfect Protestant who protests against the entire Christian religion" (n. Burke 30; Penguin).

undermined by a Saxon vision of Arthur as the living image of God (i.e., Woden).<sup>50</sup> This of course neither stops them from waging war against him (Arthur), nor does it soothe at least one nobleman’s resentment that the soon-to-be-victorious Britons plan to “[c]rown *the new idol*, Arthur” in lieu of “[o]ur pageant Vortigern” (1.1, p. 11; emphasis added).<sup>51</sup> But, regardless of his antipathy towards him, the Saxon nobleman Alwin’s report establishes from the very beginning that the Father of Gods and Men is “[s]ubstantially express’d” in Arthur’s person—even if, in a horribly “Gothic” reversal of British Israelism,<sup>52</sup> the Lord of Hosts has chosen a new people (Milton, *PL* 3.140).

In horrid grace,  
 Wrathful he strode the field. His glittering mail  
 And youthful limbs, besmear’d with Saxon blood,  
 Daz’d every sense. With awful wonder fill’d,  
 Our hearts were palsy’d: as though Woden’s self,  
 Fresh from Iduna’s Banquet,<sup>53</sup> came renew’d,  
 To ply the work of Fate, *and his own race*  
*Whelm in one general wreck*” (*FL* 1.1, pp. 9-10; emphasis added).

This account of Arthur is thus the mirror image of the condundrum that Thelwall’s Saxonism throws at Christian Loyalists. Alwin quite clearly sees Arthur as Woden on

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<sup>50</sup> In a pagan context, unless otherwise specified, I use “God” and “Woden” interchangeably, as Plato’s earlier works were inclined to do when speaking about Zeus.

<sup>51</sup> Even Thelwall’s “pagan” Saxons want nothing to do with kings who are *actually* gods!

<sup>52</sup> In a further reversal of the Saxon appropriation of that Israelism, “Arthur’s enchanted sword” that “[g]leam’d *like a pestilence*” replaces the rod of Moses, the arrival of which eventually heralded the ten plagues (“pestilences”) upon the Kingdom of Egypt (*FL* 1.1, p. 9; emphasis added).

<sup>53</sup> “[Iduna] possesses The Apples of Youth; of which, when [...] the Deities tasted, [...] instantly restored [them] to their former youth” (*PCWR* 205; Thelwall’s note).



earth, but because the “Impostor” Arthur is a Christian *and therefore an unbeliever*, it is “impossible” for him to recognise Arthur as a *legitimate* god; yet he remains attached to the Daughter of Woden ruling his own tribe (my phrasing). If Alwin accepts that Arthur *is* Woden incarnate, he betrays either his Queen or the God Who has turned against her; if Alwin confers Divine honours on a foreigner, he undermines the Saxon pretence to a *hereditary* divine right; if Alwin denies what he has seen, then he undermines *the* central religious tenet of the Saxo-Viking warrior ethos:

The assistance of [Woden] was implored in every war that was undertaken [...] and it was believed that he often descended to intermix in the conflict himself, to inflame the fury of the combatants, to strike those who were to perish, and to carry their souls to his celestial abodes (Mallet 1:87).

But, while Mallet describes battles waged between pagan armies, Alwin thinks it no contradiction that the pagan Allfather has bestowed his “horrid grace” on a Christian prince who slaughters the gods’ “believing” Saxons so valiantly. In fact, like Woden, Arthur appears *literally* to “inflame the fury of the combatants” with such a miraculous command of Fire on the battlefield that even The Gods lie in wait to claim his spoils.

His dragon crest<sup>54</sup>

Belch’d streams of living fire; and on his breath

The dread Valkyries<sup>55</sup> hung; where’er he bad,

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<sup>54</sup> According to Geoffrey, Uther Pendragon, Arthur’s father, “commanded two Dragons to be made of Gold” at his coronation, one of which was “to be carried along with him to his Wars” (8.17, p. 257). Arthur inherited this heraldry, using a “golden Helmet” “on which was engraven the Figure of a Dragon” (9.4, p. 283). If Arthur’s helmet is also “besmear’d with Saxon blood,” then he embodies the red dragon—still the national symbol of Wales—destined to beat the white.

Singling their victims [...] (Thelwall; *FL* 1.1, p. 9).<sup>56</sup>

So complete is Arthur Pendragon's transfiguration, that he goes beyond even appearing as Woden as his dragon helmet becomes a *living* dragon whose vengeful Fire wreaks havoc on what are supposedly the idolatrous Saxons. All the while, the demonic Valkyries' hovering around Arthur's now *dragon-like* breath signals his own increasing resemblance to "the great dragon [...], that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world" (Rev. 12.9). Indeed, Arthur certainly deceives his *Christian* subjects' implicit understanding that he is not a god. Thelwall thus perfectly calculates this praise of Arthur in order to solicit his Protestant audience's instinctive fury against this prince destined to become the "poster boy" for medieval (i.e., Burkean) chivalry. Arthur, in his battle-fury, is indistinguishable from Woden, whom Christians are obliged to regard as a demon; he fights not as a Crusader but a Norse Berserker, a warrior of a *riyal* religious order "properly" regarded as demonic;<sup>57</sup> and Arthur Pendragon's own family crest is used against him to suggest that this "Christian" Divine King "sits on God's throne" not only as Woden, but as the Devil Himself.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> "Subordinate Goddesses, who attend [...] Woden, and usually execute his commands, selecting those in battle who are doomed to die" (*PCWR* 204-5; Thelwall's note).

<sup>56</sup> Arthur inverts Milton's Jesus' "walk" that "The fiery serpent fled" (*PR* 1.311-312).

<sup>57</sup> The *OED* cites the first recorded use of "berserker" in English to Sir Walter Scott's 1814 *Illustration of Northern Antiquities*. However, I have found a much earlier example that suggests prior (if gradual) awareness of that concept among English-speakers. The *Edinburgh Magazine* (*EM*), in a 1799 review of the newly-translated *Kristni saga* (about the Christianisation of Iceland), contains the following passage wherein berserkers, like Arthur, remain unharmed by fire consecrated to demons. "After this triumph Thor[v]ald traversed Iceland with the bishop; at Vatnsdal they were encountered by two Maniacs or BERSERKER, who raved, stormed, and, through the power of their familiar spirits, walked unhurt amid the burning fire; but when Frederic had consecrated the fire, they were miserably scorched and slain" (*EM* 3).

<sup>58</sup> Because the only witnesses to Arthur Pendragon's "dragon crest[']s" magical powers *are pagans*, the sanctity of this supposed Christian's symbol is compromised. Again,

## II.iv. ARTHUR'S BURNT-OFFERING

“[T]here is one thing among you knights-errant, that I cannot approve of, and that is, when any great and dangerous adventure occurs, [...] in the instant of engagement, you never think of recommending your souls to God; [...] but, on the contrary, put up your petitions to your mistresses, with as much fervour and devotion as if they were your deities; a circumstance which in my opinion smells strong of paganism.”

— Miguel de Cervantes y Saavedra (*Don Quixote* 1.2.5, p. 104)

Whatever we are to make of the religion of the *Pax Arthuriana*, Thelwall ensures that *his* Fire-wielding Arthur cannot be regarded as a type for Christ, except by claiming types from a pagan religion that Christians would first have to legitimise before insisting upon its fulfillment. Whatever religion Arthur institutes, it is *not* Christianity; or at least if it is, it is a Christianity that so shamelessly borrows pagan customs that Arthur, in his very moment of triumph, only replaces Rowenna as *pontifex maximus* by making her the last—or latest—victim of the “Saxon” custom of human sacrifice. In his note to Rowenna’s description of her ruby-red lips as “ensanguin’d altars,” Thelwall reminds his readers that “Human victims (especially prisoners of war) were offered to Woden, and others of these Demon Gods” (204). Arthur may not (explicitly) sacrifice Rowenna to Woden; and, as his war is apparently one of ethnic cleansing, he has no interest in taking prisoners; but, so hell-bent is he on sacrificing this false goddess of an “idoltrous faith” to the glory of his own regime, that he welcomes the Word of *any* god who might give him an excuse to send her to hell (*FL* 2.4, p. 56). Giddy in what she believes is Guenever’s imminent death, Rowenna’s final repetition of it the Fates’ prophecy—“Arthur soon shall light the fire / In which my sorrows all expire”—is overheard by Arthur, who seizes upon her suggestion:

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Thelwall creates a familiar symbol that is impossible for Christians either to renounce or to accept as righteously theirs. Any defence of Arthur’s helmet is therefore *the same* corner into which Bible-readers are backed when confronted by the “fiery serpent” God commands Moses to make for the Israelites’ well-being, but which King Hezekiah later “brake into pieces” in his zeal against graven images (Num. 21.8; 2 Kings 18.4).

A brand! A brand! Hell-hag—thy prophecy  
(Whatever juggling demon gave it shape)<sup>59</sup>

Soon I fulfil. Tristram, a brand! a brand! (*FL* 3.5, p. 83).

This Christian Arthur not only fulfills the Norns' prophecy, but by means of Thelwall's play on the word "brand," ironically agrees with Rowenna that because "the maid" must meet her death *according to the Gods' Word* that "Shaft and sling were sacrilegious here; were impotent" (*FL* 3.4, p. 77).<sup>60</sup> He further betrays the iconoclastic nature of the Fire foretold by the Fates by reducing Guenever to a mere mortal in the flames. As "TRISTRAM *throws several brands to ARTHUR and the KNIGHTS: ROWENNA starts, with a terrific shriek, as they seize, and brandish them on high*" and thus her rhetoric (i.e., her command of The Word/"The Rhyme") is defeated by her apostasy; the flabbergasted Queen can only recoil, "Furies of Hela's shades! Is *this* the flame?" (3.5, p. 83; emphasis added). Her final words confirm her atheism by ensuring she dies in despair of her old gods, forever undermining the Saxon Right of Divine Kings—or so it would be, did not the Christian Arthur's giving credence to *pagan* prophecy signal his appropriation of Anglo-Saxon ritual, if not their religion. Yet, just as Rowenna hides her apostatising devotions to Arthur behind her religion, so does Arthur hide his paganising sacrifice of Rowenna behind his own cult of chivalry. He certainly does not sacrifice Rowenna to God, and neither is she (openly) a sacrifice to Woden, yet she *is* a sacrifice unto the apparently transfigured Guenever: "Oh! Guenever! thus at thy funeral pyre, I offer up thy

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<sup>59</sup> "the very name of God / Sounds like a juggler's charm" (Coleridge, "FiS" lines 79-80).

<sup>60</sup> Johnson defines "brand" as an Anglo-Saxon word meaning "1. A stick lighted, or fit to be lighted" or "2. A sword"—which latter sense remains in the English word "brandish."

hecatombs” (3.5, p. 83).<sup>61</sup> If in this moment Arthur believes Guenever has met her own death, then his mock-chivalrous sacrifice to his lady becomes a sacrifice to a woman who, according to Rowenna’s final prophecy (“The Phœnix burns!”) has been transfigured by the sacrificial flames. However, she *does* survive, and is promptly wedded to that “immortal Arthur,” “Britain’s *pride*,” whose apotheosis—in recognition of his having brought about the Ragnarok of the “*pride* of Woden’s race”—is confirmed immediately upon his coronation (3.6, p. 88; emphasis added). He, no doubt, is only too happy to make Guenever a goddess beside him who is now the Gods’ lieutenant on earth, who sits on the Gods’ throne, and who is by The Gods themselves called God Almighty. Arthur thus secures his kingdom through “purification in the Old Law” of pagan sacrifice by offering, not just any human, but a royal goddess as a sacrifice unto Britain’s rightfully Divine Monarch—himself (Milton, “Sonnet 23” line 6).

#### II.v. “AND THE DEVIL KNOWS WHAT OTHER GODS, OR GODLINGS...”

*Lucifer.* He who bows not to him has bow’d to me.  
*Cain.* But I will bend to neither.  
*Lucifer.* Ne’er the less,  
 Thou art my worshipper; not worshipping  
 Him makes thee mine the same.  
 — Lord Byron (*Cain: A Mystery* lines 1.1.314-317)

Fire is both idolatrous and iconoclastic, sanctifying one god while denying and damning another; it bears witness to the “divinity” of the true (or the current) Son of Woden, as it destroys those false gods who would claim that title for themselves. Those crowned heads who anoint themselves with Fire claim—or allow others to claim for them—that they are either gods on earth, or allies of the Saxons’ “demon gods.” The sacrament of Fire may be clothed in rituals or mysteries uncannily similar to Christian

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<sup>61</sup> Johnson’s *Dictionary* defines “hecatomb” as “A sacrifice of an hundred cattle”; the *OED* observes that “even in Homer,” the word means “a great public sacrifice’ not necessarily confined to oxen” (Johnson; *OED*).

ones, but because Fire remains sacred to the Saxon gods, any monarchy blessed by Fire's hellish sanctity is necessarily pagan; any monarch transfigured through its flames is necessarily a false god of Milton's "atheist crew," against whom any self-respecting monotheist is perfectly justified in rebelling. Neither Britain's King nor her Queen are God; if either is a "god," then any historical precedent either of them might set is not of a divine, but a demonic monarchy. Rowenna attempts to use the fire foretold by her old gods to justify her apotheosis of her new god, the "Christian" Arthur whom she would have for her new husband. But, as the pagan glass through which she darkly sees the world is never ground into an *explicitly* Christian lens, any internal reform of her own religion she may make only parodies (i.e., takes to the logical extreme) the political doctrine that Christian kings are earthly types for Christ. Accordingly, she is burnt alive by that Fire which she would otherwise use to justify *her* divinity. Conversely, Thelwall's Arthur *cannot* properly be considered Christian, since he makes no overt references to the faith he supposedly defends.<sup>62</sup> If anything, eyewitness accounts testifying to his power over Valkyries and that Fire to which gods, devils, dragons, and berserkers are immune only prove him a truer heir to the kingdom of Woden than Woden's own descendant (*FL* 1.1, p. 10). This new Son of Woden's appropriation of pagan Saxon ritual—and his "fulfillment" of their sacrificial rite by offering up the false goddess Rowenna as a burnt-offering—does not, in fact, cleanse Britain of its paganism,

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<sup>62</sup> Arthur's only *credo* is the oath, "by the Eternal Truth / Whom my soul worships," but this is a typically Thelwallian abstraction of possibly no meaning at all (*FL* 3.5, p. 78). It is, at best, only imitatively Christian, possibly as an echo of Milton's Egyptian "virgin Truth," who was "hewed into a thousand pieces," and who, unlike the God Osiris, has yet to achieve physical resurrection (*Areopagitica* 1:166). If Arthur worships this dead "Eternal Truth," his interrupted oath recalls Lord Bacon's words: "What is truth? said jesting Pilate, and would not stay for an answer" (Thelwall, *FL* 2.4, p. 78; Bacon 3).

but simply makes Arthur its uncontested High Priest. God and Caesar are one and the same in the person of Arthur, but this is only possible because Arthur is his own demonic idol whom he would set over the peoples of Britain. But has not Arthur's army, by burning Gwrtheyrnion and Rowenna with it, cast those "demon-gods" out of Britain? If Arthur is truly allied with the gods of the Saxons, then why does Thelwall make a show of casting them into perdition upon Arthur's victory?

So far, I have shown how Thelwall's play, through its use of the Norse gods, denies that Fire comes from God, but instead suggests that its true origin is from hell directly opposed God; but, I have yet to consider those passages in which various of Thelwall's characters explicitly observe or call upon various Deities who rain Fire upon Their supplicants' enemies. Though called by different names, I shall conclude by demonstrating that whether imagined through British or Saxon mythology, or in nature itself, these different entities serving the same function are actually the same Being, Whose sole function is as a hidden presence signaling that the "demon-gods" *have* forsaken the Saxon regime—or that they have at least forsaken Rowenna.<sup>63</sup> Rowenna claims that her Word is so powerful that even the Son of God must obey it: even "Cloud-compelling Thor," the Saxon Son of God,

Must wield his thundering Gauntlet, or controul,

With lifted Mace, the Giants of the Frost

If I but chant The Rhyme (1.1, p. 6).

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<sup>63</sup> Remember, Rowenna *could* be Guenever's mother; Thelwall would thus be fulfilling Gibbon's words by preserving his own divine Saxon line "by female succession."

We never see her test this claim *per se*, but, preparing to descend into Hela, she calls upon the aid of the “Demons of the Storm” who are Thor’s earthly ministers; “who rive / With Thor’s own bolts the groaning earth,” and whose job it is to lay a waste to the earth:

Who to the labouring mine’s combustion’d womb  
Dart the contagious spark, whence Earthquake rends,  
Or pent Volcano spits his sulphurous fires, [etc.] (1.3, p. 19).

Although Rowenna successfully splits open the earth once the ritual is complete, before this happens, her servant Agga interrupts the ceremony bearing an omen that Thor is displeased. Though she does not mention The Thunderer by name, she worries that “Our Gods forsake us” because, while procuring the herbs for her mistress’s cauldron, “three-times thrice” she was electrocuted by a “benumbing shock—as lightning-struck!”; the implication being, that either the Demons of the Storm, if not Thor Himself, most likely sent those lighting-bolts as a warning (1.3, p. 20). But what perhaps prevents Agga from *naming* Thor<sup>64</sup> is the preceding vision she sees of “the glare of fiery eyes / Peep[ing] up from the unhallow’d turf” (1.3, p. 20). If we are meant to assume that these eyes *actually* belong to Thor, rather than to one of his attendant storm-demons, this would correspond to the Book of Revelation’s description of “the Son of God, who hath his eyes like unto a flame of fire” (Rev. 2.18). However, in the play itself, the only other being with a flaming visage is not a god *per se*, but an angel. As Arthur and his army begin their march on Gwrtheyrnion, the Lady of the Lake calls upon a “fire-eye’d [*sic*] Seraph”; an unnamed and unseen guardian angel who “Mak’st sea-girt Albion’s cause thy own,” and who apparently helps preserve Britain’s innocence with his “sword of flame” (2.3, p. 61).

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<sup>64</sup> Cf. John Donne’s “as atheists at their dying hour / Call, what they cannot name, an unknown power” (“Farewell to Love” lines 4-5).



Thelwall says in his notes that this angel is “the Tutelary Angel of Albion, or Britain,” and insists upon his character’s orthodoxy:

That the belief of such supernatural Agencies, presiding over different tribes, nations, [...] &c. is a consistent part of the christian faith, may be shewn by several passages from the Book of Daniel [etc.] (*PCWR* 208).

However, one of this angel’s attributes makes his orthodoxy impossible. The Lady claims he sits on a “saphir [*sic*] throne”; but, strictly speaking, in the Bible, there is only *one* fiery “angel” with any claim to a sapphire throne,<sup>65</sup> namely God himself, who twice appears *as fire* (Thelwall, *FL* 2.3, p. 61; Ezek. 1.26). The first time is when “the angel of the LORD appeared unto [Moses] in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush” (Exod. 3.2).<sup>66</sup> The second manifestation of Yahweh’s avatar is perhaps the original of Agga’s vision of fire from the ground up, rather than “from out the LORD out of heaven”: “Then the angel of the LORD put forth the end of the staff that was in his hand [...] and there rose up fire out of the rock, and consumed the flesh and the unleavened cakes” (Gen. 19.24; Jgs. 6.21). But even if Rowenna is warned from seeking out the Fates by fire from this “angel,” can the atheist Thelwall’s angel truly be said to be the angel of the Lord?

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<sup>65</sup> Strictly speaking, the King James Book of Genesis does not describe an angel *with* a flaming sword, but rather “Cherubims, *and* a flaming sword [...] to keep the way of the tree of life” (Gen. 3.24; emphasis added). There is an angel in Revelation whose face is “as it were the sun, and his feet as pillars of fire,” but the qualifiers betray the fact that these are only similes (Rev. 10.1). An angel in a later chapter “had power over fire,” but is not himself a fiery so much as an agricultural figure (Rev. 14.18). Finally, there is another angel unto whom “power *was given* [...] to scorch men with fire,” but this power is apparently not his own (Rev. 16.18).

<sup>66</sup> The Geneva Bible claims it is God “[w]home [Moses] called the Angel” (n. Ex 3.4).

If in fact Thelwall's Angel of Albion is actually God, it is certainly not the avatar of God Almighty, but simply another unseen (and for all we know, entirely imaginary<sup>67</sup>) god among a multitude of strange gods claimed for saviours by warring nations—in other words, no god at all. Thelwall is extremely careful to portray this angel as extremely orthodox and indeed nationalist in its form, but it is entirely pagan in its execution. However close the function of the angel may come to answering “O Lord, our God arise, / Scatter his enemies,” its credibility as an exclusively Christian means of salvation is rendered moot by the similarities it and Arthur's “Christianity” bear to pagan precedents set in the play. The Lady of the Lake, for instance, begs that angel to “Propitious now on Arthur smile” in answer to Rowenna's far less chaste prayers to the “Propitious Goddess” of Love, Frea; and the chorus to the Lady's song, “Thee! whom the warrior host reveres— / Thee! whom the bleeding Battle fears” is echoed in Rowenna's later invocation of the Valkyries as “The dastard's dread, the warrior's pride” (*FL* 2.3, pp. 61, 65). Even this angel's “flaming sword” is undone by the lightning of Thor that “inflicts the destin'd wound” not only on soldiers but the earth itself. Not satisfied with mimicking the Norse Son, even the belief that this angel fights on Britain's behalf is *essentially* no different from the belief that the Norse Father fights among whichever belligerent *pagan* faction he so chooses—and as we have seen, he has apparently chosen Arthur's. Furthermore, this angel's only purpose seems to be to spread a spirit of revolution that smacks, at the very least, of “political” atheism. Taliesin's clan of bards “Spread the fervour—spread the song, / Spread the martial flame along, / warm'd by that Seraphic Power,” but this seems a purely functional song designed to kindle the zeal of

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<sup>67</sup> Agga's insistence on an unknown being behind her shock is in keeping with the “psychological Gothic” mode of writing—especially since she is a female servant.

Arthur's soldiers (including Arthur's "Armoric aids"?<sup>68</sup>) to spread fires from Richard Price's spark of Revolution in France, which is "there kindled into a blaze that lays despotism in ashes, and warms and illuminates EUROPE!" (Thelwall, *FL* 1.1, 4; *FL* 2.3, p. 65; Price 50). Except that "despotism," in a Saxon context, can *only* mean the "Rights" that "Divine" Tyrants have over their people. If in fact Arthur's soldiers are inflamed by that revolutionary wildfire prophesied by Dr. Price, then Arthur's Christian soldiers become an army of "atheists" fighting "against" the false gods of the Saxons, even the Angel of the LORD becomes a devil to be cast out of Israel—the Lady of the Lake's invocation of "Him" being little more than an underhanded exorcism of Divinity itself. The drunken Sir Tristram certainly recognises that any supernatural contest waged through or above *FL*'s fires is a fight between imaginary creatures. Literally fighting fire with fire at Guenever's tower, hurling back torches thrown at him by the Saxons,<sup>69</sup> he recalls both Arthur's dragon and Rowenna's "obscene reptiles [...] of Northern Magic" when, seeing Arthur approach Gwrtheyrnion, he yells, "Fire for your fire, ye Salamanders! if that's your game, / But here comes one will fire you prettily, I'll warrant" (*FL* 3.3, p. 78). Even the Welsh bard Taliesin recognises that the Crown has only changed heads, and not religions, as his song pretends to celebrate the Goddess Rowenna's fiery demise, while at the same time grafting her charms onto Queen

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<sup>68</sup> i.e., soldiers from Brittany (Bretagne; Armorica), a Brythonic Celtic region (like Wales), and for much of the Middle Ages an independent Celtic kingdom (like Wales), of northern France (also known as "Little Britain"). Notice that Thelwall eschews High Medieval(ist) anachronism by denying Burkean Tories any claim to a "Normanised" King Arthur's legacy—while still emphasising a Jacobin-style celebration of regional diversity and culture. "Armoric aids" also sounds suspiciously like a pun on the "Amerikay" of Irish folksong—raising the final "a" sound of "America" the same way that "Spinoza" infamously became "Spy Nozy."

<sup>69</sup> Cf. also Rowenna's "No weapons use but fire" (*FL* 3.4, p. 77).

Guenever—who, again, if she is not Rowenna’s *biological* daughter, *is* Her adopted Daughter. Just before Arthur’s coronation, Taliesin’s song promises to “forego” “kindling Beauty’s roseate smile” (recalling Rowenna’s “ensaguin’d” “witching smiles”), but he asks that “Love” (a deliberate abstraction that could mean either Cupid, Venus, *or Frea*) “bestow” “for laurels” “*Witching smile / And sportive wile / That sense of wearied worth beguile*” (3.5, p. 87). In other words, he asks that Love let Rowenna’s charms be substantially expressed in her daughter’s face, if only to “beguile” (“deceive pleasingly; to amuse”) Arthur’s “wearied worth” of himself as a mere mortal (Thelwall; *FL* 3.5, p. 87; Johnson). Thelwall’s allegory thus puts his enemies in *exactly* the spot as Thomas Paine’s enemies either to agree “That the Almighty hath [...] entered his protest against monarchical government is true, or [that] the scripture is false” (Paine 14). If it is agreed that Arthur is *not* a god, then the political atheism directed towards him can claim the mantle of Christian monotheism; if Arthur *is* a god, it is only because heathenish pagans have said so, and that supposedly zealous British Christians agree with them, and that Arthur’s bards don’t really care what Arthur thinks of himself so long as he continues to privilege their sacred order. Of course, Arthur *is not, never was*, and in good conscience *cannot possibly be* a Divine King of the Britons who, despite his ethnic allegiance to its Celtic natives and his imagined fealty to the Church, insists upon ruling as the English “church” imagines him to be—no less than God Himself, ruling as His Own Lieutenant—because Britain is *unquestionably* Christian, because “atheists are not our preachers,” and because Brutus is an honourable man (Burke 86).

## CHAPTER III. – THE LADY OF THE LAKE

### III.i. INTRODUCTION – THE AUTHORITY OF THE FAIRY’S FLOOD

“Listen, strange women lying about in ponds distributing swords is no basis for a system of government. Supreme executive power derives its mandate from the masses, not from some farcical aquatic ceremony.”

— Michael Palin as Dennis (*Monty Python and the Holy Grail*)

Having established in my first chapter that the King is not a God, and having established in the previous chapter that Fire sanctifies neither Rowenna’s pagan nor Arthur’s “Christian” regime, it is now necessary to demonstrate that neither does Water bear witness to the divinity of Kings. In this chapter, I shall argue that the function of both Water and *its* “divine” monarch,<sup>70</sup> the Lady of the Lake, is either to kill, or otherwise to undermine the religious authority of, false gods or goddesses who would raise themselves up as temporal monarchs—including the Lady of the Lake herself. The biggest challenge, of course, is to prove that the Fairy, an ally of Arthur, is a mortal enemy of both the false goddess Rowenna *and* the Being “understood” (by Thelwall’s audience) to be Arthur’s god. That she is anathema to the Saxon gods is apparent enough. When the Fates inform Rowenna that “the maid” shall meet her end once “Fire and Water shall surround” “the maid,” Rowenna grows delusionally fixated on the temporal joys that this divine Fire signifies, but she remains oblivious to the possibility that her rival, “Savadan’s elfin regent else / not obvious,” could combine her Water with any flames that might spell Rowenna’s doom (*FL* 1.4, p. 30; *FL* 3.2, p. 64). In fact, the Lady causes a new lake to rise up from secret channels underground to overwhelm Castle Gwrtheyrnion after Rowenna’s *and* Arthur’s soldiers set the palace on fire. While the

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<sup>70</sup> A possible parody of the doctrine of the King’s Two Bodies, the Fairy literally *embodies* the realm over which she presides, even exiting by “Murmuring—tinkling, / Bubbling—sprinkling” to rejoin the “Gushing—Rushing” waters from whence she came (*FL* 3.6, p. 91).

Fairy's flood allows Thelwall's audience the illusion that Water's sacred purpose is to cleanse Britain of the Saxons' "demon-gods," there is very little to suggest that the Fairy is at all a Christian figure. The closest she comes to explicitly Biblical sanctity is when she leads Arthur's bards in a war hymn calling upon the Angel of Albion who "joys to wield / The sword of flame" (*FL* 2.3, p. 61). However, because this angel remains unseen, because the Fire that sends Rowenna to hell comes not from heaven but Arthur's own hand, and because this "angel" may be a pagan deity anyway, the Fairy's invocation of the angel allegorises Thelwall's own use of the Lady of the Lake. She, like the angel she calls upon, is a purely functional *dea ex machina* whose only real purpose is to call the Britons to arms against the gods who rule them—and to serve as an excuse for an avowedly "Christian" army's victory over divinity itself.

In order to explain the central paradox of the Fairy as a demigoddess who allies herself with a rebellion against the Divine Right of Kings, this chapter shall deconstruct the supporting paradoxes that combine to give the impression that Water or the Fairy blesses Arthur's Revolution by bearing witness to his divinity. I shall begin by showing how the Lady of the Lake is neither localised in her "Lake," nor is she a "Lady." First, considering the many symbolic and spoken references to the ocean—and by extension, British maritime power—I shall explain how, despite her other attributes to the contrary, she cannot be truthfully regarded as the *genus loci* of an isolated Welsh locale. Second, I shall argue, using Thelwall's own notes to *FL*, how the Fairy's "virginal" state is a lie more-or-less-openly imposed on the play for political purposes as well as artistic license, but one that only thinly veils Thelwall's contempt for the "historic" Arthur as just another Impostor. Third, I shall demonstrate the Fairy's Lake's miraculously "virginal" state to

be an artificial construct, in which the Fairy's subordinate fairies use the purifying water of the Lady's sacred grove in order to *counteract* the order of Nature, and thus of God. Fourth, I shall deconstruct the impressions either that the Lady of the Lake is a goddess, or that she confirms Arthur as a God, by showing how, despite the baptismal function of her Deluge, she cannot be a true divinity, since her final act is to confirm a Divine King who is the sum of the will of the people—in short, no god at all.

### **III.ii. THE LADY OF THE LAKE**

For earthly things were turned into watery,  
and the things, that swam in the water, now went upon the ground.  
— Wis. 19.19

Before exploring the Lady's seditious character by virtue of what she is not, it is first necessary to acknowledge what she is. She is first and foremost a precisely localised figure, whose mythologised "location" vindicates Thelwall's politics. The Lady may be the ethereal governess of a lake hidden in Wales, but the transplanting of Vortigern's castle onto her otherwise insignificant lake allows Thelwall to transform quietly the scene of his retirement into the site of an ancient Revolution. The lake in question is even named; "Savadan" is Thelwall's corruption of *Llyn Syfaddan*, or Llangorse Lake, in what is today the Brecon Beacons National Park, which lake (for such an accomplished peripatetic as Thelwall) is only a hop and a skip away from Llyswen-Farm. Thelwall further anglicises the name of *Afon Llynfi*, the river that feeds into and out of the Lake and empties into the River Wye roughly four miles from Llyswen, as "Lunvey." However, even Thelwall's engineering of his play's mythic Llyn Syfaddan is a microcosmic illustration of *FL*'s *modus operandi*. Thelwall simply makes the scene of his avowedly "apolitical" retirement the exact location of his ancient fantasy of the Ancient Britons' (i.e., the Welsh) Revolution against the Saxon (i.e., the "English")

power; he even confirms his devotion to a revolution at that precise site by removing Vortigern's Castle Gwrtheyrnion from "Plynlinmon [*sic*], near the source of the Wye" "to the Beacons of Brecknock (Farinioch)" (*PCWR* 205). Thelwall plants the seed of revolution not far from his farm, in order to have his brainchild spring from his pen "a goddess armed" with too pleasingly local a persona to seem a threat to the national interests of a Tory government (Milton, *PL* line 2.757). His ruse certainly fools the Saxon Queen: foiled by the Lady's rescue of Arthur, Rowenna curses "the adverse power / Of dull Savadan's elfin regent, else not obvious" (Thelwall; *FL* 3.2, p. 64). She thus acknowledges the Lady as a spiritual rival<sup>71</sup> (the "Adversary" of the Norse Gods) as well as a rival to her temporal power; but, only as a troublesome, minor "regent" who presumably can be dealt with at a later date. Nevertheless, by removing the site of Vortigern's retreat, Caer Gwrtheyrnion,<sup>72</sup> to Llyswen-Farm's neighbouring Llyn Syfaddan, Thelwall brings this Arthurian legend to its Revolutionary fulfillment in the Lady's "local" rebellion. Thelwall's Lady of Llangorse Lake personifies the hidden water that traditionally prevented Vortigern from building his castle, which water also contained the famous prophesy of the Saxons' defeat by the Britons.<sup>73</sup> *She* is the force

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<sup>71</sup> In a breakdown of feudal privilege, Rowenna rejects *the Fairy's* divinity; a "political atheism" hinted at when the Fairy chases her away: "Goblins avaunt! *nor impious*, thus profane / My sylvan confines and irriguous reign" (2.4, p. 59; emphasis added).

<sup>72</sup> Nennius identifies "Cair Guorthegrin" as the city that Vortigern builds and calls "according to his name" shortly after meeting Ambrosius (i.e., Merlin); when Vortigern flees the Saxons, he also retreats into "the province Gurtheoirnaim, so called from his own name" (Nennius 29, 32). During Vortigern's final flight, he again builds "a castle, which he named Cair Guothergirn," where his entire court are killed when "fire fell suddenly from heaven" (Nennius 33). Geoffrey mentions only "the Town of *Genoreu*" as the site of Vortigern's retreat (Geoffrey 8.2, p. 230).

<sup>73</sup> Nennius and Geoffrey both tell how Vortigern, retreating into Wales, orders a castle built (Gwrtheyrnion), but which keeps sinking into a hidden pool. Informed by his magicians that the blood of a man without a mortal father must be mixed into the palace's



who sinks Gwrtheyrnion into *her* Lake’s secret pool. When Gwrtheyrnion burns, she delivers the Saxons’ *coup-de-grâce* as “*Castle and Keep together [...] sink down*” and “*the space becomes a pool of Water*” from which she rises triumphantly in her chariot (3.5, pp. 84-85). However, her boast as to how Llangorse Lake *itself* does not drown the castle begins to unravel her staunchly regional veneer: “The tribute spring that wont its course to take, / Thro secret veins, to feed my broader Lake, / A lake itself now spreads at my command (3.5, p. 86). Already the governess of a hidden “*Lake or Pool*” hostile to the Crown and its false gods, the Fairy reveals herself to be, literally, the British revolutionary underground (3.4, p. 77). She commands not only the Lake, but the river feeding into it; perhaps through these same subterranean means, she also exerts her control beyond her “tribute spring” of the Wye, and is even able to whisk Arthur and his retinue away to Caer Leon—a city along the River Usk, which parallels but never joins the Wye. Furthermore, the modern city of Caerleon is only a few miles away from the place where the River Usk empties into the Bristol Channel—a highly problematic detail for any writing off the Fairy as a *genius locus*. Where, exactly, is the Fairy’s “broader lake”; Llyn Syfaddan, or the Atlantic Ocean? Does only the Fairy’s *angel* make “sea-girt Albion’s cause [her] own” (2.3, p. 61; emphasis added)?

### III.iii. THE LADY OF THE “LAKE”

All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full;  
 unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again.  
 — Eccles. 1.7

The Lady of the Lake is not only the Lady of *the Lake*. She actually rules over a network of salt and fresh water in order to make her a more suitable figurehead for

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mortar, Merlin instead tells the King to drain the pool, where they discover two sleeping serpents or dragons—who awaken and fight, the red dragon’s victory over the white signifying Ambrosius’s victory over the Saxons.

Arthur's *national* rebellion against a foreign power. This is not to say the Fairy is an exclusively saltwater spirit; she is called by her local freshwater title, but she is unmistakably a saltwater creature. Rather like a francophone Anglo-Norman Lady of feudal times, she is an oceanic "ethnic" transplant; and, quite unlike the Norman aristocracy idealised by Edmund Burke (but very much like Milton's Satan), just as "Thelwall took Jacobinism to the borders of socialism," so does the Fairy invoke aristocratic privilege and *noblesse oblige* in the service of open "revolutionism" (E.P. Thompson 160).<sup>74</sup> Like Milton's Sabrina, the Fairy is an aquatic "local" representation of universal resistance to oppression; she even militarises Sabrina's guardianship of sexual and spiritual chastity by rescuing Guenever from the Flood she inflicts upon her (i.e., Guenever's) Saxon captors. Geographically (and ideologically) speaking, the Lady of the Lake is also Sabrina's "niece": Milton's Sabrina is the demigoddess who gives her name to the River Severn; Thelwall's Lady is the physical embodiment of a lake sprung from a tributary of the Wye, the Severn's Anglo-Welsh sister-stream. While these rivers run parallel courses, what makes their respective naiades' kinship possible is that both rivers (and the Usk, on whose "remember'd banks" Arthur and Guenever pledged their "chastest love inviolate") are connected by the *saltwater* of the Bristol Channel (Thelwall; *FL* 2.2, p. 38). Both river-goddesses ultimately claim a maritime authority, a literally "revolution"-ary reminder of the high and low tides that make the Fairy in

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<sup>74</sup> Perhaps correctly, Thelwall realised that this was the only form of revolution deemed acceptable by the Toryism of his day. Responding to Burke's aristocratic re-interpretation of the Glorious Revolution, he angrily writes, "Kingship may be annihilated, if Aristocracy does but monopolize the advantage; and the Revolution in 1688 was only right because 'the Prince of Orange was called in by the flower of the English *Aristocracy*; *aristocratic* leaders, who commanded the troops, went over to him, with their several corps, in bodies; and *aristocratic* leaders brought up the corps of citizens who newly enlisted in this cause" (Thelwall, *RN* 2:13).

particular a “symbol of cyclical change” (Thompson, *Origins* 9).<sup>75</sup> The first clue that the Fairy is more than she appears is *how* she first appears onstage. Although her chariot is pulled by swans (which aquatic fowl *can drink* saltwater), her throne is one of “Spars”<sup>76</sup> “and Coral”—which marine organism cannot survive in freshwater environments (Thelwall, *FL* 2.2, p. 32; emphasis added). She also announces that for Arthur’s sake, “my coral grots I leave”—her native environment being wholly inconsistent with the sorority to which she claims to belong of “sedg’d crown’d sisters fair / Who make *the sylvan lakes* their care” (2.2, p. 33; emphasis added). She further betrays her euryhaline<sup>77</sup> nature when she magically transports Arthur and his army “to a thicket at the foot of *The Beacons*,” and again to Caerleon, by “wav[ing] her silver Trident” (2.2, p. 59; 3.6, p. 88). The Fairy not only sits on a coral throne, but she is allied with Neptune, with Britannia, and with British maritime power;<sup>78</sup> her “broader Lake” can thus refer to the open ocean as well as Llyn Syfaddan. Furthermore, Thelwall’s depiction of the Fairy reaches deep into Loyalist mythology in order to exploit the political atheism inherent in Britannia’s

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<sup>75</sup> This blending of salt with fresh waters mirrors Milton’s Sabrina’s own fate: cast into the River Severn, “The water nymphs that in the bottom” of the river “played” rescued her and brought her to agèd Nereus’ hall” (i.e, the palace of the old Greek sea god), where she is made immortal with “ambrosial oils,” and by Nereus “Made goddess *of the river*” (*Comus* lines 833-842).

<sup>76</sup> The *OED* defines “spar” as “the general term for all masts, yards, boom, gaffs, etc.”

<sup>77</sup> “Able to tolerate a wide range of salinity” (*OED*).

<sup>78</sup> Her trident, the three-pronged, triune symbol of authority, is possibly the “cultural Anglican” Thelwall’s snub of Coleridge’s Unitarianism, as represented in Rowenna’s unific wand. Rowenna’s wand’s only use is apparently to put Arthur to sleep; when he is awake, he is rescued before Rowenna can conjure up her false vision; and when she earlier descends into hell and threatens to use her wand, Hela cuts her off before she demonstrates its supposed power—her chanting and faulty interpretation of prophecy instead emphasises and parodies Coleridge’s evangelical emphasis of the Word. But the Fairy uses her trident three times—first (if implicitly) when she frees Arthur, second when she frees his army, and third when she wafts his army to the scene of his new court—and with it, actually sets a Revolution in motion and blesses its results.

apotheosis. David Mallet and Thomas Arne's opera *Alfred* tells the story of the Christian King Alfred the Great's victory over the Great Heathen Army of Danish Vikings, and famously concludes by celebrating the newborn Royal Navy's victory over the Danes, thereby ensuring their own English liberty: "*Rule, BRITANNIA, rule the waves: / BRITONS never will be slaves*" (*Afred* 3.9, p. 64).<sup>79</sup> Thelwall thus uses Saxon history against itself: because the Lady of Llyn Syfaddan symbolises *naval* power, she invokes national as well as religious zeal—and therefore political atheism—against the gods of Rowenna's pagan regime, against whom Christian Saxons are destined to rebel. By clothing herself with the garb of modern British "aristocrats," she also coerces Bishop Hurd's "erection of [...] petty tyrannies" into one "petty deity's" (characteristically female) sympathetic rebellion against "that proud Tyrannesse" and false goddess Rowenna (Hurd 70; *FQ* line 1.5.46.6).

Not only does the Lady of the "Lake's" trident thus symbolise the British nation's rejection of pagan gods, but her use of it also affirms her *spiritual* protection over Arthur's army of "political atheist" revolutionaries; when she waves her trident, it is in no lesser capacity than as the Saviour of Britain. When we first meet Arthur, all his Knights of the Round Table have been seduced into spiritual prostitution by the Saxon Incubus, and Arthur himself soon walks into a snare laid for him by the Incubus' royal mistress near the banks of Llangorse Lake. Arthur is, of course, rescued when the Fairy rises from the Lake to deliver Arthur from the too-German "Sorceress of Elb" (*FL* 2.4, p. 55). But, in this moment, what makes the Lady more than a figure of *temporal* revolt (against a Queen hailing from too German a river) is her rhetoric of redemption from "impious" temptation (2.4, p. 59). She comforts Arthur in his moment of doubt: "Your weak

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<sup>79</sup> "Alfred [...] laid the foundation of that superiority at sea, which England has hitherto been able to maintain over all the other maritime powers" (Bicknell 218).

despair yourself will freely blame (2.4, p. 59). Speaking the secular language of state, but administering to him a Crusader's penance, she offers him the absolution (the indulgence?) of Revolution to wipe clean the stain of his transgression: "Go—force your *pardon* in the field of fame" (2.4, p. 59; emphasis added). To accomplish this feat, she offers him the return of his army, but with a miraculous and rather vague explanation for *why* Arthur's fellow penitents are available to join his crusade: "Your Knights and Squires already marshall'd stand, / *By me redeem'd*, and wait for your command" (2.4, p. 59; emphasis added). Thelwall offers no explanation to the question, "Who is this that forgiveth sins also?"; neither does the Fairy explain *how* she has replaced either Christ as their Redeemer (Luke 7.49). But, in the service of Revolution, she does give us a sign: "*She waves her trident*" as a sign of her "instant power," which "*instantly changes [the scene] to a thicket at the foot of The Beacons*," where are assembled "THE KNIGHTS OF THE ROUND TABLE" (FL 2.5, p. 59; original emphases). Not only does this symbol of the modern British Navy allow the Fairy to deliver Arthur the means to secure Britain's freedom from the Saxon gods, but her trident's command over Arthur's British Army allows Thelwall to co-opt Augustan Loyalist as well as counter-Revolutionary Tory imagery. Unlike Edmund Burke's modern Britain, in Thelwall's ancient Britain, "the age of chivalry" is very much alive. Arthur's pre-Norman Britain is still "a nation of men of honour and of cavaliers," whose "ten thousand swords" *do* "leap from their scabbards"; but, because Rowenna (rather than Guenever) is legally "The Queen of Britain," these swords are not drawn to "avenge even a look that threatened" their German Queen "with insult," but to utterly annihilate her as a foreign false goddess—as an "insult" incarnate—who threatens British liberty (Burke 76; Thelwall, *PCWR* 2). And what allows Arthur's

“atheist crew” of knights to draw their swords at all in the service of Revolution is one simple wave of the symbol of those waves which a Fairy of “a Lake” alone cannot possibly command. As the Fairy of the Lake, she is a Welsh upstart who exceeds her feudal station in lead a revolution against her liege Lady; but, as the Fairy of Sea-Girt Albion, she is a wholly *British* denial of an English basis for the Divine Right of Kings.

### III.iv. THE “LADY” OF THE LAKE

*Row[enna].* [...] how prepar’d she stands  
To ACT the virgin coyness she professes.  
— John Thelwall (*The Fairy of the Lake* 2.4, p. 56)

What the Fairy is not, however, is a *Christian* denial of the English basis for the Divine Right of Kings. It is essential to the play that she and the Water she represents are *portrayed* with an air of sacred virginity, in order to give the utmost possible political sanctity to an “Ancient British” Revolution that claims the life of too powerful a Divine Queen. However, before explaining in the next section how Water’s use in *FL* advances Thelwall’s agenda of political atheism, it is first necessary to explain how Thelwall tells his readers that the Fairy’s and her Water’s virginal characters are lies used in order to justify Revolution through art. In *FL*’s notes, Thelwall tells us that her magical lake remains unpenetrated by the river that feeds into and out of it, and that this is harmlessly “by allusion to the tradition, still popular in the neighbourhood, that the Lunvey flows thro’ the middle [of Llyn Syfaddan] without mingling any part of its waters with those of the Lake itself” (*PCWR* 207). The Fairy, in other words, is nothing other than the embodiment of a local tradition. However, just as Thelwall refashions “the Lake assigned her particular residence” into the site of an ancient Revolution, so too does the Lady herself become an ancient revolutionary (207). Claiming the authority of Welsh legend, Thelwall insists, “she is here represented as a personification of essential purity”

in order for his contemporaries to see her as “the ancient Cambrians” did, who “considered [her] a benignant Spirit—a guardian of *the just and holy cause*” (207). Thelwall, in other words, retroactively projects the “Good Old Cause” of English republican insurrection<sup>80</sup> onto a demigoddess otherwise billed as a spirit of Welsh resistance against the Saxons. As such, however, she is also a symbol of those Celtic Christians who never had to acknowledge the pagan descendants of Saxon conquerors as living Sons of God; whose magically chaste, Welsh water allied with King Arthur makes her a militarised alternative to the Virgin Mary. In fact, so thoroughly does Thelwall cast her as the adoptive mother of the British Messiah (“one of the Fairy guardians of Arthur,” “according to Cambrian story”) that she even refers to Arthur as “my chosen son”—but this is precisely the point where a *British* precedent for the Divine Right of Kings begins to unravel (*PCWR* 207; *FL* 3.5, p. 88).

If the Lady’s Lake is too pure to be true, it is only because Thelwall designs that Lake as an unbelievable extension of the Lady herself, whose sacred virginity, he assures his audience, is a figment of *his own* imagination. The first sentence in his note about “*The Lady*” even broadly hints that if his semi-pagan potentate at all resembles the Virgin Mary of medieval devotion, it is only because he makes a conscious effort to weave three falsehoods into a single noble lie: “The Cambrian superstitions harmonize so readily with those of the Northern nations; and the mixed and illegitimate christianity of those times

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<sup>80</sup> The last words spoken by Algernon Sidney were: “Grant that [...] thou hast permitted me to be singled out as a witness of thy truth; and even by the confession of my opposers, for that OLD CAUSE in which I was from my youth engaged and for which thou hast often wonderfully declared thyself” (*D* xxxvi). Thelwall’s stated purpose for writing his *Poems Written in Close Confinement* is to celebrate “THE SACRED CAUSE FOR WHICH HE SUFFERS” (iii). His later poem “Maria” reveals this republican codeword as such: “’Twas for Mankind I suffered—for the cause / For which a Hampden fought, a Sidney bled,” etc. (*PCWR* 143).

borders so closely upon paganism, that, I trust, the combination will not destroy the *poetical probability* of either” (*PCWR* 207). Art has priority over such squeamish distinctions as “Christian” and “pagan,” or so he claims—all while not-so-subtly goading Protestant Britain’s nascent anti-Catholicism against Arthur as an Impostor, using the same patterns of doubt that a Unitarian, Deist, or an atheist might use to disparage the birth of a supposedly Divine King from a semidivine, supposedly virginal Queen of Heaven.<sup>81</sup> He then suggests that if *Arthur* is at all remembered as a Divine King, it is only because he fooled his gullible subjects into thinking that he had a demi-divine protectress, not for his adoptive mother, but for his lover.

It is no improbable conjecture that the fable originated in the mysterious seclusion of some beautiful mistress of the British Champion; and that Arthur (like the more fortunate Numa) had the art to derive the Credit of sanctity from the indulgence of an illicit amour (207).<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Thelwall posits, in *The Peripatetic* (1793), that “if handled with the bold licence of poetic genius, the Christian system would furnish a much more noble machinery than ever was produced from Grecian superstitions” (303). However, by 1801, he is less concerned with ennobling art with a Christian façade, here using allusions to various sects as the perfect “machinery” with which to satirise British Protestantism.

<sup>82</sup> Numa Pompilius’ (the first king of Rome’s) alleged affair with a wood-nymph, and his subsequent apotheosis, makes him a textbook referent of political atheism. Even Plutarch writes that “there is no absurdity in that other Account [...] of Lycurgus and Numa, and such other famous Men, That being to manage an untractable and froward disposition of the Multitude [...] they pretended a divine Authority for what they did, as the surest Way of preserving Those who were thus deceived into their own happiness” (Plutarch 4.8, p. 1.193; trans. Dryden). In *Leviathan* (1651), Hobbes similarly lists Numa as the first of three examples of how “the first Founders, and Legislators of Common-wealths amongst *the Gentiles*, whose ends were only to keep the people in obedience, and peace, have in all placed taken care [...] to imprint in their minds a believe, that those precepts which they gave concerning Religion, might not be thought to proceed from their own device, but from the dictates of some God, or other Spirit” (82; emphasis added).

Hobbes’s third figure is Muhammad, who, it was falsely believed, “to set up his new Religion, pretended to have conferences with the Holy Ghost, in the form of a Dove”



But, just as quickly, Thelwall reassures his audience that because the ancient Welsh considered her “a guardian of the just and holy cause[,] with these ideas modern morality cannot reconcile the supposition of an amorous connection. Accordingly she is here represented as a personification of essential purity” (207). The Lady of the Lake’s virginity may be a lie, but for Thelwall’s readers to acknowledge it as a lie would force them to repudiate implicitly *yet another* pagan precedent for the Divine Right of Kings among Britain’s first Christians. And yet, for the sake of the “political” atheism Thelwall uses to justify his Arthur’s revolution against Rowenna, she is a *noble* lie who must be maintained—at least until her exposure may openly cast Arthur’s Imposture in as unfavourable a light as possible to his officially Loyalist, Protestant audience.

### III.v. THELWALL’S ATHEIST FAIRY BAND

“The baptism of John, whence was it? from heaven, or of men?” And they reasoned with themselves, saying, “If we shall say, ‘From heaven’; he will say unto us, ‘Why did ye not then believe him?’ But if we shall say, ‘Of men’; we fear the people; for all hold John as a prophet.”  
— Matt. 21.25-26

Having so far established that the “Christianity,” chastity, and locality of the Fairy and of her Water are contradictions carefully crafted in Thelwall’s attack on the lie that the King is a God, it remains to be seen how the play uses Water’s “purity of essence” to subvert the rights of divine kings. Fortunately, one need not look beyond the Fairy’s subordinate water-sprites’ first appearance to see how their use of Llangorse Lake’s magical water to purify its woodland is essentially a secular baptism of that marsh, which baptismal rite is a Revolutionary act against no less a God-King than the sole-reigning

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(82). Paul-Henri Mallet repeats this stereotype in order to reinforce his reading of the historical Odin as an Impostor, who “in order to conciliate the respect of the people, was to consult [...] the head of one MIMER, who in his life had been in great reputation for his wisdom” (1:69). Edward Gibbon calls Odin “the Mahomet of the North”; Thelwall casts his descendent in the Whig Orientalist image of the Norse Allfather, who was known for “his persuasive eloquence” and as “a most skilful magician” (Gibbon, *DF* 1:268).

tyrant of heaven—the Sun. Perhaps aware that the “confounding” of fire and water spells the end of false gods, the Fairy’s minions take care that the waters of Llyn Syfaddan be affected by the sun’s rays as minimally as possible. Like the atheist’s God, the Sun is an unwelcome presence, against Whom a rebellion is justly called:

Flowers opprest by noontide head  
Let the breath of Fragrance cheer;  
And as we brush with nimble feet,  
Blights and Mildews disappear,  
And all that taint the vernal year (*FL* 2.1, p. 32).

The noon sun is here a tyrant against “nature,” whose purportedly life-giving rays, when directed at water that then “transmigrates” as vapour, only create conditions conducive to “blights and mildews”—i.e., precisely the physical harm and decay with which an all-providing Sun ought not to curse any lowly plant life for whom It truly cares. In an almost Gnostic undoing of the damage of Providence, Thelwall’s fairies, hardly passive agents of Nature, literally *minister* to the local flora, not to *confirm* the natural order, but to *subvert* the order both of Nature and of Nature’s God. Insofar as they ally themselves with a Sun-less (i.e., Son-less) “Nature,” their militant ministry recalls, reverses, and utterly refutes the rite of infant baptism, “that of his bounteous mercy [God] will grant to this child *that thing which by nature he cannot have*, that he may be baptized with water and the holy Ghost” (*Book of Common Prayer* 408; my italics). In Thelwall’s Faëry, if Llyn Syfaddan cannot “by nature” enjoy its night-time dew without expecting it to turn a lush marsh into an noxious swamp, it is only because the tyrant Sun “oppresses” His kingdom by daily subjecting it to “torture without end” in “ever-burn[t]” vapour that

gives birth to “blights and mildews” that consume the flora (Milton, *PL* lines 1.67-69). Or so it would be, were it not for the fairies’ nightly ministrations, which in this context suggest that “None can [*exit*] the kingdom of God, except he be regenerate and born anew of water” (*BCP* 408; emphasis added). The song of the fairies’ rhythmic blessing and cleansing of the Lake from naturally-occurring fungi is thus propaganda lilted to the flowers, to whom the revolutionary sprites congratulate upon their liberation from the Sun’s overbearing radiance. When the Fairy herself rises from the Lake, she praises her “atheist crew” (to use Milton’s phrase) for having performed their “modest functions” against “the Sterrile Fiend” so successfully

that neither blight,

Canker, nor smut, thro all my favourite bowers,

Insect nor worm appears, of power to mar

The buds of vernal promise (Thelwall, *FL* 2.2, p. 33; Milton, *PL* 6.370).

Even the Fairy’s assurance of victory betrays their radical revolution against a Sun (a God) who is figured as the Devil—“the Sterrile *Fiend*”—which grand foe conveniently allows for a Revolutionary fulfillment of the baptismal oath to “renounce the devil and all his works” (*BCP* 411). Although this revolution may be confined to a seemingly insignificant lake in Wales, it is a revolution waged against the whole of Creation—thus taking literally the baptismal prayer that an infant “may [...] triumph against the devil, [and] the world”—refusing to accept that at least in this one locale, the tyranny of the Sun allows a bug or fungus of any description *any* natural right over the Fairy’s life-giving

Water (*BCP* 411).<sup>83</sup> The Fairy's band thus surreptitiously fulfills the conservative stereotype of the atheist Thelwall's perceived rebellion against God, King, and Nature by combining all three into a Sun that *only* exists as a target for Revolution.

Furthermore, if the whole purpose of *The Fairy of the Lake* is to spread the message that political atheism (or indeed atheism) is anything but foreign to British history or culture, then Thelwall's Welsh fairies thoroughly appropriate the "immortal" language of the English Shakespeare in the service of this microcosmic British Revolution against a tyrant Sun-God. Before Percy Shelley would turn Mercutio's rant about Queen Mab into an *openly* atheist manifesto, Thelwall pioneered the conscription of Shakespeare's Faëry in the service of his covertly atheist pageant.<sup>84</sup> What is performed for the sake of magic in Shakespeare's fairy dreamworld is, in Thelwall's magical history, militarised and miraculously maintained against a tyrant shining smugly from heaven. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream (MND)*, the unnamed fairy who first meets Robin Goodfellow tells him that "I serve the Fairy Queen / To dew her orbs upon

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<sup>83</sup> So totally does Thelwall's atheism manifest itself here that even *FL*'s most innocently alluring characters completely disdain anything resembling the Enlightenment-era Deist's reverence for Creation as the means of knowing the Creator. The Fairy thus appears as Nature incarnate, but she leads a revolution forbidding Nature's association with God.

<sup>84</sup> In her preface to *The Peripatetic*, Thompson notes that Thelwall "likely influenced" Percy Shelley's poetry; in *Origins*, she identifies the Fairy as a "proto-Shelleyian [*sic*] symbol of cyclical change"; more research is necessary to establish concretely a direct influence (Thompson, *P* 18; *Origins* 9). However, we do know of a direct connection between Thelwall and Shelley's father-in-law, William Godwin. Both Thelwall and Godwin (like Shelley) were atheists; both men lectured on Classical history to avoid the Two Acts' prohibition of public lectures on modern politics; both men's relationship soured over Thelwall's eagerness and Godwin's reluctance to advocate democracy through provocatively democratic means, and the two were reconciled somewhat after Mary Wollstonecraft died giving birth to the future Mary Shelley. Whether or not Percy Shelley was familiar with Thelwall's works prior to presenting himself as an eager disciple of Godwin, he almost certainly would have come into contact with Thelwall's works during that time—Mary Godwin having most likely grown up reading them.

the green,” among her other duties (*MND* lines 2.1.8-9). This in and of itself is an innocuous couplet, part of small talk in which she introduces herself by her station before attending to her duties gathering dewdrops to place in cowslips (*MND* lines 2.1.14-15). Thelwall, however, radically departs from Shakespeare in his fairies’ application of dew. The Oxford editors identify the Fairy Queen’s “orbs” as “fairy-rings, circles of darker grass caused by decayed fungus,” meaning that Shakespeare’s fay bedews a magical locale that, in *FL*, would be considered either a sickly or “oppressed” patch of green—possibly blasted by fire from the heavens (Holland, n. *MND* line 2.1.9).<sup>85</sup> Furthermore, Thelwall’s fairy band never speak of dew other than mildew, but there is a hint that the fairies spread the magical droplets (evaporated from Llyn Syfaddan) with their feet: “As we brush with nimble feet, / Blights and Mildews disappear, / And all that taint the vernal year” (*FL* 2.1, p. 32). While it is not explicit that they spread *dew* (which would force them to *admit* that they use evaporated water to their advantage), it is also possible that those fays who “on the surface skim, / Buoyant, of lake or rill” take what they need from the Lake itself to spread its figurative holy water (*FL* 2.1, p. 32). Among pagans, however, Rowenna includes “the poisonous dew” around a yew tree among her incantations, and one of the Fates (or Norns), Schulda, speaks of the “dew divine” around the World Tree, Yggdrasil (*FL* 1.1, p. 7; *FL* 1.4, p. 29). Arthur also informs us that his sword was “steep’d in mystic dew / By the fair regent of Savadan’s lake” (*FL* 2.2, p. 43).<sup>86</sup> Some sort of dew from Llangorse Lake, which “No goblin spell resists,” clearly

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<sup>85</sup> Indeed, the only “fairy ring” in *FL* is possibly the one in which Rowenna and her Saxon handmaidens perform their rite of black magic. (See footnote in previous chapter.)

<sup>86</sup> Echoing of “the powerful dewes” Rowenna extracts from narcotic plants used in her cauldron, Arthur’s report of the Fairy’s use of (the singular) “dew” as a figure of speech is entirely in keeping with his appropriation of Saxon ritual (*FL* 1.4, p. 20).

does exist *somewhere*, and does act in the service of the Fairy Queen; and the fact that the Fairy's *presence* is enough to chase away the Saxon "Goblins" suggests that this dew, wherever it is, contains within it the atheist magic of Thelwall's Fairy Queen (*FL* 2.2, p. 43; *FL* 2.3, p. 59). What Thelwall *does* borrow from Shakespeare is his fairy's ability to miraculously sustain an environment devoid almost entirely of harmful humidity ("miraculously" being the operative word, as we shall see). Thelwall's Fairy's claim that neither "Insect nor worm appears, of power to mar" the marsh's natural fertility recalls the banishment of the same creatures by Titania's fairies-in-waiting: "Weaving spiders, come not here," neither "Beetles black, approach not near; / Worm nor snail do no offence" (*MND* 2.2.20-23). But, whereas Shakespeare's fairies sing this lullaby to protect Titania from inconvenient creepy-crawlies, Thelwall's fairies' nightly cleansing of the "marge" heals the marshland's suffering at the hands of "slimy things" born of Sun-imposed mugginess. Titania's command, prior to her dozing off, that some fairies "kill *cankers* in the musk-rose buds," is similarly drafted into the Lady's war against the shining "Sterile Fiend," as she praises her band for having vanquished "blight, / Canker, [and] smut" as well as "Insect [and] worm"—"mystical[ly] washing away" thereby not the marsh's "sin," but the unforgivable sin of its tyrant ruler (*MND* line 2.2.3; *FL* 2.2, p. 33; *BCP* 409). Thelwall thus vies for Shakespeare's legacy as well as Milton's, by lulling his audience into Shakespeare's magical dreamworld in order to continue Milton's Revolution—while his own Arthur supposedly fights under the banner of Spenser.

### III.vi. "Miracles have birth"

"Water will quench a flaming fire;  
and alms maketh an atonement for sins."  
— Ecclus. 3.30

This is the essence of the politics in the whole of *FL*, and specifically in the decisive role that Water plays in crowning (literally) the Britons' victory over the Saxons: to provide, during the act of revolution against a God(dess), *the illusion* of a Divine protection or sanctification of that Revolution, by claiming to rid the *polis* of its "atheist" Divine Monarch. We see exactly this sort of calculated outrage when the Lady of the Lake scares away Rowenna and her demons by simply *appearing* in her ship of state—her water chariot complete with "a Throne of Spars" (ships' masts) "and Coral"—and demanding, "Goblins avaunt! nor impious, thus profane / My sylvan confines and irriguous reign" (2.2, p. 32; 2.4, p. 59). The Fairy wants nothing to do with the atheist ("impious") Rowenna, and banishes her from her sacred grove accordingly, as a prelude to her watery kingdom's rebellion against this supposed Daughter of Woden. But, just as Thelwall inverts his "Public Atheist No. 1" persona by having the Fairy expel the "impious" Saxons from her grove, and just as he inverts his politics by flaunting the heraldry of the British Navy, so too does he invert even his own materialism. The third and final rise of the Fairy—her ascent from a new lake that springs up and drowns the Saxons during the final battle—fulfills to the letter Thelwall's prophecy that "a sort of Socratic<sup>87</sup> spirit will necessarily grow up, wherever large bodies of men assemble" (*RN* 1:24). But the second time the Fairy exerts her power is a much more tautological fulfillment of Thelwall's democratic determinism; when she rescues Arthur's knights from the Incubus' frozen prison, she essentially functions as the God withheld from the materialist theory in Thelwall's *Essay Towards a Definition of Animal Vitality (E)*. In it, Thelwall suggests that life occurs when the component parts of "*the body must have*

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<sup>87</sup> "Socrates [is] the first democratical lecturer mentioned in history, and the founder of the unsophisticated, and unrestricted *Sans-culotte* philosophy" (*RN* 1:21).

*attained a specific ORGANIZATION; and that Life [...] is induced by the application of proper stimuli,*” but he ends his paper by guessing that an “exquisitely subtle” but entirely material “something” (which *material* “something” *cannot* be God) must exist in air that is life’s Prime Mover (*E* pp. 39, 41). When the Fairy releases the immobilised Arthur from the Saxon clutches, she—a super-natural being—functions as this Not-God who acts as the external stimulus that animates Arthur’s body. When she rises from the water to drown Gwrtheyrnion in her Deluge, she again functions as the Socratic Not-God who animate’s Britain’s body politic, as represented by Arthur’s army (Britain’s lords-and-commons-in-arms, so to speak). However, the Fairy is entirely responsible for assembling a body of soldiers *to* be re-animated! After instructing the rescued Arthur, “*She waves her trident,*” and her “instant power” “*changes [the scene] at the foot of The Beacons,*” where “THE KNIGHTS OF THE ROUND TABLE *appear as just rising from their repast*” (*FL* 2.4, p. 59). As in Thelwall’s own time (not to mention Queen Elizabeth’s), the Navy is the Army’s first line of defense—but the Fairy’s “waft[ing] to a scene” of “redeem’d” and apparently *transported* knights (as the Navy will do for the Army) is a magical miracle fulfilling the apparently apolitical materialism in Thelwall’s *Essay* as a pretext for fulfilling the explicitly political materialism in *The Rights of Nature*. She is thus her own Prime Mover, “self-begot, self-raised / By [her] own quickening power”—and, like Milton’s Satan, she is on earth to inspire anything *but* reverence towards gods who would be kings (Milton, *PL* 6.860-861). As Gwrtheyrnion burns, “*Castle and Keep together, and all the ground they occupied, sink down,*” and “*the space becomes filled with a pool of Water*” from which the Fairy rises (*FL* 3.5, pp. 84-85). This new “*pool*” is *not* “Llangorse Pool,” but a separate war memorial. As the Fairy explains,



to crown your matchless worth,  
*Nature relents, and miracles have birth[;]*  
The tribute spring that wont its course to take,  
Thro secret veins, to feed my broader Lake,  
A lake itself now spreads at my command,  
And long, an emblem of your Fame (3.5, p. 86; emphasis added).

This new lake, then, imparts the Lady's essence to Arthur's kingdom, as a "democratic" reversal of Pentecost in which "Nature" bears witness to the "worth" of Arthur's reign.

Here, it would seem, is a miracle proving once and for all that Britain shall never be free of even its own gods—were not every student of "Spy Nozy" aware that, since miracles

must necessarily interrupt Nature's Order, which, by the Decrees of God, which we conceived to be fixed and immutable, therefore whatever is done in Nature, which doth not follow from the Rules of Nature, that must necessarily be repugnant to that Order, which God to all Eternity by Universal Laws establisheth in Nature, and consequently, being against Nature, and its Laws, the believing it must bring all things into doubt, and lead us to Atheism (Spinoza 6.9, p. 136).

In other words, the Fairy exerts herself so thoroughly *against* God and Nature that her biggest miracle is done for the sole purpose of surreptitiously sowing the seeds of atheism among Thelwall's audience.

The question remains, however, whether the Fairy inspires *political* atheism against more than simply the Saxons. The purpose of Revolution, as Thelwall winced in 1795, should not be "to extol individuals" such as William of Orange "into *demi-gods*, and then fall down and *worship the idols we have set up*" (*Tribune* 3:144). How, then,

does the Fairy at all deny that *Arthur* is a god? The answer is a surprisingly orthodox paradox—by telling us that he is Her Son. Thelwall informs us that the Lady, “according to Cambrian Story, was one of the Fairy guardians of Arthur,” and Arthur alludes to this legend by referring to “her my sometime guardian” (*PCWR* 207). But, despite Thelwall’s assurance that he was also regarded as “a guardian of the just and holy cause,” which cause one would normally expect to be eternal in its abstraction, the Fairy herself does not claim to base her Revolution on ideology, but rather hints at maternal affection in a *personal* cause: “For him [Arthur] I grieve, / For him my coral grots I leave” (*PCWR* 207; *FL* 3.5, p. 83). Whether or not she is his *adoptive* or biological mother is never made explicit within the text of the play; all we know is that, following Gwrtheyrnion’s destruction and the Bards’ *first* round of praise, the Lady informs them, “One thing remains: to waft *my chosen son* / To Caër Leon: then my task is done” (*FL* 3.5, p. 88; emphasis added). And again, “*She waves her silver Trident, and the scene changes to Caer-Leon, in all its fabled grandeur*” etc., where lie “*sumptuous preparations for the coronation of ARTHUR*[, and] *NOBLES, BARDS, LADIES, YOUTHS, and MAIDENS* [...], *MASKERS, REVELLERS, &c*”; in short, all of “the people” of Britain—Lords and Commons—are assembled for the purposes of state (3.6, p. 88). This is essentially a reduction of the scene from Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain*, in which Arthur holds “*a Solemn Assembly at the City of Legions* [i.e., Caerleon]” (“upon the River *Uske* near the *Severn Sea*”) to celebrate both Pentecost and his recently having become King of England, Scotland, Ireland, and France (Geoffrey 9.12, p. 299). What is in Geoffrey’s an affirmation of monarchy is instead the birth of constitutional monarchy, at which momentous occasion there are no clergy whatsoever; “*the Chiefs, &c. present*

*the regal fillet to ARTHUR,*” and it would seem that Arthur is crowned by the authority of Parliament and Parliament alone (*FL* 3.6, p. 88). If Arthur is “the new idol,” as the Saxon nobleman Alwin suggests, he is one whom Parliament will “melt into that golden calf, the state” (*Absalom and Achitophel* line 66).<sup>88</sup> Or, so it *would* seem, did not Arthur then take that same “regal fillet,” and “bind[] it on the brow of Guenever” (*FL* 3.6, p. 88). This is not least of all confusing because of the Fairy’s earlier promise that “Britain’s chiefs [are] assembled” at Caer Leon, to “Prepare the regal fillet for *thy* brow” (3.5, p. 88; emphasis added). As the Fairy introduces Arthur to the new scene, she begins a couplet that either switches into a more elevated mode of address befitting a coronation (i.e., dropping the use of “thou”); or, less likely, her “you” is a plural pronoun addressing the assembly; or she may even be even addressing the flowers in the baskets borne by the maidens—but then she abruptly shifts her subject. “Here youths and maids your gather’d fragrance fling: / Behold your promis’d Chief—your patriot King” (3.6, p. 88). *And then* Taliesin offers the antiphonal litany, “Hail Britain’s pride! immortal Arthur hail!”—which epithets echoes Rowenna’s title as the “pride of Woden’s race,” and apparently recognises the divinity that that Saxon epithet entails (3.6, p. 88; 1.1, p. 3). Even the

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<sup>88</sup> In one of his *Tribune* lectures, Thelwall invokes Dryden’s satire with a cavalier plea for toleration of Roman Catholics: “It is equally scandalous to interupt that freedom and tranquility of [every individual’s worship], if” “he chooses” “to bow down” “to all the wooden Saints or moulton calves ‘which God-smiths can invent, or Priests devise”” (Thelwall, *T* 2:72; Dryden, *AA* line 50). Elsewhere, he characteristically appropriates Dryden’s sardonically anti-Whig “golden calf, the state” into a charge of idolatry against “divine” (here, “absolute”) monarchy (*AA* line 66). In the first volume of *The Tribune*, he refers to “the golden calf of hereditary despotism” (*T* 1:134). In the third volume, he even takes his hero Dryden to task for using his “energetic powers” “to bring liberty into discredit, and to extol those principles which ought to be abhorrent to the hearts of Britons”; but excuses the Laureate’s indiscretion on the grounds that during the English Renaissance, “not only the drama, but every branch of literature was infected with this disposition to bow down to the golden calf of authority” (3:307).

*British* “Parliament” acknowledges Arthur to be a god—and hence monarchy to be institutionalised idolatry. Or, it is, I think, just as likely that the colon splitting the Fairy’s couplet indicates the long pause, during which *she*—rather than, say, an archbishop—places the promised crown on *Arthur’s* “brow” (3.6, p. 88). If this is the case, then this would imply a constitutional and *hereditary* monarchy: Arthur thus becomes the Son of Liberty, whose radical spiritual *and* political revolution confirms him as the Celtic Messiah of British Liberty, the guardian of the Tory myth that Britain’s liberty is secured by a liberal government at home and a strong navy abroad; and Taliesin’s chorus recognises Arthur as a Celtic god, having been revealed to us as the Fairy’s “chosen son” (3.5, p. 88). (He is certainly not crowned by a *Christian* priest!) Arthur is the Son of the closest thing Thelwall’s Britons have to a Queen of Heaven, and because he is also “Pendragon’s fiercer son,” the spoken implication being that Arthur is half-human, half-god; a being of Two Natures, not unlike either Christ or Hercules (1.1, p. 9). However divine, this implied *hieros gamos* between Uther and the Fairy does beg the question, Are we expected to believe that Uther actually *married* the Fairy? Or is it perhaps more likely that Arthur was conceived outside of wedlock—and, complete with his “Armoric aids” is thus a reminder of that “French bastard landing with an armed banditti, [who] established himself king of England against the consent of the natives”? (Paine 16). But, whether Thelwall’s Arthur is a *correction* of either William of Orange or William the Bastard, once Arthur is himself crowned King, he is honoured with an extremely subtle and somewhat ominous reminder of his mortality. The Fairy’s very *presence*—her being the play’s closest thing to God—in a scene based on Arthur’s adulation by the kings of earth (in Geoffrey) is an echo of the vision that “God standeth in the congregation of

princes: he is a judge among gods” (*Great Bible*, Ps. 82.1; qtd. in *BCP* 545). Her celebratory song to Arthur—specifically the line, “Let your valour protect, but not ravage the state; / And cherish the Low, while you rule o’er the great” echoes the Psalm’s charge to “Defend the poor and fatherless: see that such as are in need and necessity have right,” and to “Deliver the out-cast and poor,” rather than “give wrong judgement” (*FL* 3.6, p. 89; Ps. 82.2-4). Arthur’s victory over the “atheist” Rowenna fulfills that same Psalm’s charge to “save them from the hand of the ungodly,” but the victory celebrated by the Fairy’s memorial Lake is only possible *because* “the foundations of the earth are out of course” (Ps. 82.4-5). In this context, the Fairy’s anointing of her “chosen son” (cf. Ps. 2), and the Bards’ *recognition* of that divinity in turn echo the verse whereby King James claimed that Kings are called gods by God: “I have said, Ye are gods: and ye are all the children of the most Highest”; but even this begs that promise’s following caveat: “But ye shall die like men: and fall like one of the princes” (*FL* 3.5, p. 88; Ps. 82.6-7).

## CHAPTER IV. – WASSAIL VS. CWRW: ORIGINAL SIN AND THE ATHEIST’S EUCHARIST

### IV.i. INTRODUCTION – WASSAIL VS. CWRW

Only reapers, reaping early  
In among the bearded barley,  
Hear a song that echoes cheerly  
From the river winding clearly,  
Down to tower’d Camelot:  
And by moon the reaper weary,  
Piling sheaves in uplains airy,  
Listening, whispers, “’Tis the fairy  
Lady of Shalott.”

— Lord Tennyson (“The Lady of Shalott” lines 28-36)

If the physical Death of God in *FL* is brought about by “confounding” Fire and Water against Rowenna and her ancestral gods, then what ensures the meta-physical Death of God during the triumph of the “Christian” King Arthur is the satirical replacement of the wine of the Christian Eucharist with Ale. Beer takes the place of God in order to undermine the premise of God, and is thus the play’s openly-hidden *coup-de-grâce* against any pretence to divinity by either temporal or spiritual powers. Neither Christian nor Pagan can claim to sanctify their regimes with Ale, because even though Ale may act in the interests of either regime by imitating the ritual affirmation of a Christian *ekklesia*, Ale is both a temptation into apostasy and a target for apostasising satire against its supposed sanctity (which satire loosely masquerades as Christian disdain for paganism). In its dual role, then, Ale functions in *exactly* as does Communion wine in the Church of England—which life-giving sacrament, according to the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, only adds to the damnation of unrepentant Communicants:

if any of you be a blasphemer of God, an hinderer or slanderer of his Word, an adulterer, or be in malice, or envy, or in any other grievous crime: repent ye of your sins, or else come not to that holy Table; lest after the taking of that holy

Sacrament, the devil enter into you, as he entered into Judas, and fill you full of all iniquities, and bring you to destruction both of body and soul (*BCP* 396).

In *FL*, Ale, like the Communion wine, purports to be life-giving; but, in (literally) the wrong hands, functions in the opposite way. As Ale takes on Christian attributes in the hands of the pagan Saxons, their ritual use of Ale thus confirms their idolatry and amplifies their damnation.<sup>89</sup> Likewise, Christian Britons who are tempted by the Saxons' pagan offerings externalise their own apostasy by accepting a drink that represents their spiritual (of not their physical) death. Conversely, those Britons—or more specifically, that Briton—who strengthens his “native” resolve with life-affirming “barley-wine” *ostensibly* made by and for Christians allows him both the power and the moral authority to denounce the Saxons' “demon-gods” and their sacrament. Whereas Fire and Water are the Levelling forces washing divine kings forever from the face of the earth—except perhaps for King Arthur—Ale does its damndest to make any respect for sacred majesty disappear with every raising of the wrist.

The above abstract recipe for a black-and-tan of seditious homebrew is allegorised as spiritual warfare waged, through the proxy of Beer, between two principal characters: Rowenna, infamous in British history as the Arch-Temptress of Celtic Britain; and a character(isation) of Thelwall's invention, Sir Tristram, a Welsh squire whose perpetual drunkenness allows him to function both as Shakespeare's and as David's Fool. The two characters do not actually meet face-to face on stage, but their respective uses of Ale cannot be more opposite, more at war with one another. Rowenna uses Ale in carefully-arranged rituals that assert *her* divine power, but the Ale in Sir Tristram's gullet

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<sup>89</sup> Both because it is presumably consecrated to devils, and because it also includes idolatry towards their “divine” kings.

fuels impromptu, drunken rants that mock divine mysteries and undermine *any* power thought to be inherent in “divinity.” In this chapter, I shall examine the dual use of the same surreptitiously iconoclastic beverage, hiding under the two names of Wassail and Cwrw. In order to emphasise Ale as *the* cultural albatross of British (i.e., Arthurian) history, I shall first consider Ale in its pagan context by explaining Rowenna’s place in history as the princess who lured Vortigern (and thence Britain) from Christianity to paganism *through the temptation of wassail*. I shall then explain how Wassail’s Arthurian baggage allows the political atheism of the revolution against Vortigern, by ensuring the physical as well as the spiritual death of Britain’s apostate king. Thus Thelwall maintains Ale’s authority by using it as the chief catalyst of Britain’s apostasy into paganism. Having explained Wassail as Britain’s Original Sin, I shall then illustrate how Wassail is an even greater temptation because of its analogous role, in Saxon paganism, to Christian Communion wine. Having established this connection, I shall then show how the intrusion of the non-believing but ostensibly Christian Sir Tristram as an observer of a (“paganised”) *Saxon* celebration of the Lord’s Supper allows him to mock not only Christianity orthodoxy, but also Britain’s Protestant identity, and even Unitarian Dissent. And I shall further explain how Welsh Cwrw, having masqueraded as a new god, is exposed as an atheist prop when Sir Tristram uses this latter rant to conclude that No Ale is preferable to any ale that is consecrated to the God Woden, thereby renouncing *any* sacramental alcohol affirming the divinity of Woden’s royal progeny. Finally, having shown how Tristram’s conversation with the Saxon Seneschal and Sewer completely undermines the English union of Church and State, I shall conclude by showing not only how Tristram’s *earlier* rant celebrating Cwrw reveals it



and himself to be the natural enemies of Wassail, but also how Tristram's mock-idolatry of Cwrw (as a substitute for wine of either Communion or a Eucharist), like everything else in the play, is both an illusion of piety and an opportunity for impious satire.

#### **IV.ii. UNDERSTANDING BRITAIN'S ORIGINAL SIN**

When Duncan is asleep, [...] his [...] chamberlains  
Will I with wine and wassail so convince  
That memory, the warder of the brain,  
Shall be a fume, and the receipt of reason  
A limbeck only; [...]  
— William Shakespeare (*Macbeth* lines 1.7.64-68)

The acceptance of pagan drink, in British memory as well as in Thelwall's play, is the transgression that allowed the pagan Saxons to overrun Christian Britain. The drinking of wassail is no less than the Ancient Britons' Original Sin—the infamous Temptress who coaxed the tyrant King Vortigern into his weakness being no less than Rowenna, the alluring daughter of Hengist. The Venerable Bede makes no mention of any such temptation; however, later historians would embellish the story of the Anglo-Saxon conquest to justify the Church's loss of England. According to Nennius' *Historia Brittonum*, the Angles were first granted the province of Kent as their power-base as a result of Vortigern's alcohol-fuelled seduction by Rowenna.

And now the Saxon chief [Hengist] prepared an entertainment, to which he invited the king, [...] having previously enjoined his daughter to serve them so profusely with wine and ale, that they might soon become intoxicated. This plan succeeded; and Vortigern, at the instigation of the Devil, and enamoured with the beauty of the damsel, demanded her [...] of the father, promising to give for her whatever he should ask (Nennius 22-23).

Geoffrey of Monmouth, much more outraged by Vortigern's apostasy, more explicitly casts him as a Satanic Judas-figure, and more subtly casts "Rowen" as the Whore of Babylon, emphasising the Saxon princess's own cup of iniquity.

[T]he young Lady came out of her Chamber bearing a Golden Cup full of Wine, with which she approached the King, and making a low Courtesy, said to him, *Laverd King Wacht heil*. The King at the Sight of the Lady's Face, was on a sudden both surprized and inflamed with her Beauty; [...] *Vortigern* accordingly answered, *Drinc heil*, and bid her drink: Which done, he took the Cup from her Hand, kissed her, and then drunk himself. [...] *Vortigern* being now drunk with the Variety of Liquors, the Devil took this Opportunity to enter into his Heart, and to make him in Love with the Damsel, so that he became Suitor to her Father for her. It was, I say, by the Devils entering into his Heart, that he who was a *Christian*, should fall in Love with a Pagan (Geoffrey 6.12, p. 187).

Geoffrey's more sophisticated narrative of national and spiritual loss sets several important precedents for Thelwall's allegory of political atheism. Characteristic of ecclesiastical history, Geoffrey's theme is simple but profound: a weak-willed Judas<sup>90</sup> (Vortigern) is seduced, by the fatally beautiful Satan or Whore of Babylon (Rowenna), into ceding "Engelond" (Christ or "the Mother Church") to the Anglo-Saxons (here, possibly The Romans). Increasingly subtle are the heralds of Britain's "second darkness." Most obvious is Rowenna's paganism: though neither narrative explicitly depicts Vortigern bowing down to "demon-gods" himself, he is certainly *an apostate* in Nennius' history; either way, Rowenna sexualises the paganism into which Vortigern—

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<sup>90</sup> Cf. Luke 22.3, Luke 22.31, John 13.2, and John 13.27.

and therefore his kingdom—*effectively* lapses. For her part, Thelwall's Rowenna is quite explicit that her conquest of the King's two bodies, and of his soul, is one and the same:

My wiley arts  
Have thrall'd the soul of Vortigern; in whom  
Britain, my foe, lies prostrate; and the gods  
Of Scandinavia in my witching smiles  
Build their ensanguin'd altars (*FL* 1.1, p. 6).

Another precedent set by Geoffrey's narrative is that accepting pagan alcohol symbolises a lapse into paganism. I say "alcohol" because Nennius speaks of "wine and ale," and Geoffrey writes of wine only; in Thelwall, however, just as "God" and "Christ" are all names withheld from *FL*, so the word "wine" is not uttered once by any of its characters. Thelwall recalls the language of Rowenna's seduction when, during the later events of *FL*, the magical Saxon Incubus boasts that he has "laid the whole Round Table (knights, squires, and all) as quiet as Mead and Wassail ever laid them at high festival" (2.2, p. 35). This echo of Geoffrey's famous scene, however, removes any direct suggestion that Thelwall's Incubus uses wine to lead Arthur's knights astray. Thelwall takes advantage of the fact popular usage had since forgotten that the first English "wassail" was supposedly made over a bowl *of wine*; Johnson's *Dictionary* only defines "wassail" as a Saxon term for specially prepared ale.<sup>91</sup> Even when Thelwall distinguishes between

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<sup>91</sup> Johnson anachronistically defines wassail as "A liquor made of apples, sugar, and ale" (sugar had only begun to be imported from India during Johnson's lifetime); the *OED* defines "wassail" as "The liquor in which healths were drunk; esp. the spiced ale used in Twelfth-night and Christmas-eve celebrations." The *New Oxford American Dictionary* defines wassail as "spiced ale or mulled wine" served at those same holidays. Regardless of wassail's original drink, both dictionaries posit "wassail" and "drinkhail" to have originated by "the Danish-speaking inhabitants of England"—i.e., descendants of pagan

“ale and wassail” in the notes to *FL*, it is possibly as an ironic echo of Shakespeare’s “wine and wassail” in which ale *replaces* wine—as indeed, it does throughout *FL* (*PCWR* 203; *Macbeth* line 1.7.65). But even the use of *the word* “wassail” hints at another precedent from Geoffrey—that to embrace the language of pagans is to speak the language of pagan worship. Even before he physically embraces Rowenna—i.e, before he spiritual embrace of her gods, or Rowenna herself as a goddess regnant beside him—when he answers “*Drinc heil*” to her “*Laverd King Wacht heil,*” his embrace of her language allegorises the linguistic conquest that remains a reminder of Britain’s ethnic and religious conquest. The antidote to Saxon “wassail,” then, is the Welsh word for a similar drink—Cwrw (“pronounced cooroo”), the Welsh word for ale, which simple beverage, in the context of Thelwall’s republican allegory, is lauded by the very Welsh Sir Tristram as the native (Ancient) British ale free from gaudily spiced wassail and otherwise culturally removed from the Saxon worshippers of Divine Kings (Thelwall, *PCWR* 207). Even at the level of Thelwall’s literary response to Geoffrey of Monmouth, one can observe the formula whereby Ale subtly replaces wine, Cwrw openly wars with wassail, and Beer ultimately replaces God.

#### IV.iii. WASSAIL AND THE DEATH OF GOD

[...] when in swinish sleep  
 Their drenchèd natures lie as in a death,  
 What cannot you and I perform upon  
 Th’unguarded Duncan? What not put upon  
 His spongy officers who shall bear the guilt  
 Of our great quell?

— William Shakespeare (*Macbeth* lines 1.7.68-73)

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Vikings—and were later regarded as characteristically English by the Norman invaders (*OED*). Either way, the word “wassail” is a 12<sup>th</sup> century anachronism of Geoffrey’s; however, that Welsh monk may have had his own political reasons for having his Anglo-Saxons use an Anglo-Danish expression.

If Wassail can be so despised as a proxy reminder of the Divine Right of Kings, what justifies a cultural revolution against the idol Wassail is its dual use as a *regicidal* beverage. The side effect of its use as such, however, mandates that any Death of the King *also* represent the Death of God. Here especially, the political atheism against Saxon wassail is especially well-disguised: Wassail is the drink of foreign despots who claim to be gods, and Thelwall's Welsh *and* English (i.e., Christian) audience's instinctive disdain for "The First Wassail" is fittingly appeased when wassail is used to poison Vortigern. The hated idolaters, in other words, do their Christian audience the favour of killing "their" most hated tyrant, who has become a Saxon puppet. Just like the fire that reigns down from heaven and destroys Vortigern (in Nennius), Rowenna's—here, "the atheist's"—murder of Vortigern (in Thelwall) saves the Britons' army the embarrassment of killing *their own* king. And yet, the Saxons—translated from Welsh, "the English"—*do* kill that very king whom they would have as a god to rule over them.

Yet, even this political deicide is *exactly* what is promised will end the Saxons' *nouvelle régime*. That The First Wassail should prove the death of the King is hinted at by the Norns, when Rowenna seeks their advice in the netherworld:

When first the fatal bowl you gave,  
 And Vortigern became your slave,  
 Then for sovran [*sic*] power you pray'd;  
 And Fatal Sisters lent their aid (*FL* 1.4, p. 28).<sup>92</sup>

However, since "now no more ambition swells" in Rowenna's heart, and her "secret soul on Arthur dwells," her mind is in no fit state to interpret properly any prophecy she might

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<sup>92</sup> I say "hinted at" because of Thelwall's play on the word "fatal."

seek regarding the success of her elaborate plan to seduce Arthur (1.4, p. 28). Urd (who tells the past) reminds her of her famous offering of Unholy Communion<sup>93</sup>—“Once, to snare a monarch’s soul, / Fair Rowenna drugg’d a bowl”; and Schulda (who tells the future) and Hela promise Rowenna that when Vortigern “Heedless quaffs” “his sleep profound” “When the bowl again goes round,” then “Wide my [Hela’s] iron portals throw: / Perjur’d ghosts descend below (1.4, p. 29). Rowenna is elated (“Plain the drift my sense descries. / Hela thanks.—He dies! He dies!”), but she remains blissfully unaware that the prophecy *actually* means that, when she poisons her second bowl of wassail, then, as a regicide *and deicide*, she will have “perjur’d” herself as the conquering Saxon gods’ “mission’d daughter”; and that, when she relinquishes (or rather, murders) her “God”-given claim to earthly authority, “Arthur’s hand shall light the fire” that sends Rowenna’s soul through the gates of Hell (1.4, p. 30). Oblivious, Rowenna adds to her plan to seduce Arthur what she believes to be the Gods’ will: the murder of her royal husband. Under the pretence of “reconciliation between her and the King,”<sup>94</sup> she professes, “in token of their re-union,” to “present him [i.e., Vortigern] with a Cup of her own mixing; as she did at their first meeting” (3.2, p. 69). It is, of course, a ruse; immediately after “the funeral—nuptial feast,”<sup>95</sup> “*several GUESTS and SERVANTS[] fly[] to and fro, across the stage, in terror and astonishment*” while “*Dirgeful music, from the Harps*” hauntingly contrasts with the groans of an apparently very painful death, and Vortigern makes his first appearance—as a corpse (3.2, p. 65; 3.4, p. 73).

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<sup>93</sup> Upon which, Rowenna remembers reversing the positions assumed by priest and layman at Communion: “Upon my knee, / Vortigern! I gave it thee” (*FL* 1.4, p. 29).

<sup>94</sup> Thelwall offers no explanation for *why* Rowenna needs to be reconciled to her husband at all; we may be meant to assume that their rift is over Vortigern’s lust for his daughter.

<sup>95</sup> Cf. “With mirth in funeral and with dearth in marriage” (*Hamlet* line 1.2.12).

The problem with her regicide is that Rowenna's claim to royal authority was dubious to begin with; according to Geoffrey's *History*, Vortigern was overthrown by Uther Pendragon, whose father Constantine was in turn overthrown by Vortigern. Rowenna, therefore, had married into *the wrong* Royal/Holy Family (here, the wrong *pantheon*) and her "lust" for Arthur may simply be a ploy to wed herself to Britain's *rightful* race of kings. Whatever the reason, Rowenna cannot accept Vortigern as a *true* god to rule beside her as a god on earth, and murders him accordingly. However, by inviting even an *offstage* demonstration that a God *can* be killed like any man, she completely undermines her own pretence as the Divine Queen to whom The Gods have gifted mastery over Britain, and as the wife of the God-King whom she murders.

#### **IV.iv. UNHOLY COMMUNION**

O pale-eyed form,  
The victim of seduction, doomed to know  
Polluted nights and days of blasphemy;  
Who in loathed orgies with lewd wassailers  
Must gaily laugh, while thy remembered home  
Gnaws like a viper at thy secret heart!

— Samuel Taylor Coleridge ("Religious Musings" lines 281-286)

If Ale or Wassail must be feared and reviled as the pagan temptation towards regicide, then its familiar use in a heavenly feast echoing Christians' own celebration of the Death of God makes it even more reviled. Rowenna's laying of her plans for, and the actual death of the King, are interrupted by comic dialogue concerning the preparations for the feast she intends to use as a pretext for murder. The evidence that there is ale at this feast is admittedly scant; however, in his depiction of the same feast's purpose as a religious ceremony, Thelwall scatters clues to suggest that it is cast in a pagan mould of Christian Communion, with ale or wassail taking the place of wine at the Lord's Supper. Before the table is even set (or the feast conceived of), the Saxon Incubus makes a

passing reference to “mead and wassail” served at “high festival”; i.e., during holy-days or other occasions requiring more elaborate ceremony (*FL* 2.2, p. 35). What the Incubus does not make clear is *why* those two drinks are among the more ritually important to the Saxons. Thelwall, however, offers us a clue in his notes. Quoting the *Northern Antiquities*’ quotation of the Prose Edda, he informs us that in the heroes’ paradise of Valhalla, Woden’s (Odin’s) famous hall of shields, “their beverage is beer and mead; one single Goat, whose milk is excellent mead, furnishes enough of that liquor to intoxicate all the heroes: their cups are the skulls of enemies they have slain” (*PCWR* 208).

Although the Edda emphasises *mead*, Thelwall’s Incubus is the only character to mention that drink at all;<sup>96</sup> Thelwall himself, no doubt conscious of the importance of wine in Christian ritual, conveniently omits *the next* sentence, which tells us that “Odin alone, who sits at a table by himself, drinks wine for his entire liquor” (Mallet 1:120).<sup>97</sup> Ale is thus the only drink remaining in the Saxons’ sacramental bar menu; Thelwall even makes clear elsewhere in the *PCWR* that by “wassail” he means beer; the “their beverage is beer and mead” of the Edda becomes, among the *living* warriors in *The Hope of Albion*, “wassail and meed [*sic*] / They quaff” (*HA* line 2.247). Though not emphasised in *FL* itself, the *understood* motif of “mead and wassail” for the Saxons’ “high festival” remains, even if Sir Tristram’s disdain for the Saxons’ high festival only acknowledges the latter: “ere ale in a scull, I’ll drink Adam’s ale the brook in” (*FL* 3.3, p. 72). Not just contemptuous of *the promise* of ale in a pagan heaven, Sir Tristram also facetiously recognises that Saxon “high festival” is an earthly type for the heavenly feast to come:

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<sup>96</sup> Thelwall does, however, spice *FL*’s dialogue with the word “meed” (i.e., “reward”) (2.4, p. 54; 3.5, pp. 86-87).

<sup>97</sup> He in fact uses a long dash as an ellipsis before continuing onto the next sentence.



“for a Banquet is a Banquet, whether in Valhalla or Gwrtheyrnion: Is it not? master Seneschal! There’s affinity[] for you” (3.3, p. 67).<sup>98</sup> Whether through the eyes of a Briton or a Saxon, a pagan or a Christian, it is plain that ale is *the* sacrament at the heart of Thelwall’s Saxon paganism. Its familiar temptation as the sacramental beverage of a heavenly feast—particularly, as the heavenly feast of a warrior cult—is precisely what makes Ale so dangerous to the beliefs of British “Christians.” Because the Saxon “high festival” involved feasting “in memory” of the perpetual feast in an afterlife made possible only by one’s death<sup>99</sup> (one’s martyrdom, one might say), its ale is thus the logical analogue to the wine of Christian Communion. Their resemblance, however, makes Saxon wassail even more tempting because it masquerades as a heavenly feast familiar to Christian communicants—except that the “sacred” feast is, in fact, consecrated to devils (i.e., false gods). From the perspective of such a Christian knight as Sir Tristram, the ale at Gwrtheyrnion’s “high festival” is thus the *direct* analogue to the wine at the sumptuously “regal” feast with which Satan tempts Milton’s Son incarnate (*PR* line 2.340).<sup>100</sup> Of course, as we have seen, Sir Tristram wants nothing to do with the idolatrous Saxons’ barley-wine. No matter how close he draws near to the table, he

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<sup>98</sup> Affinity: “relation by marriage; “Relation to; connexion with” (Johnson). Tristram is so well-versed in Saxon mythology that he launches into a rant about “the joys of Valhalla” without giving his host, the Seneschal, a chance to explain the mystery of the feast.

<sup>99</sup> Only those who fell in battle were allowed into Valhalla; all others went to Hel(a).

<sup>100</sup> Thelwall also continues Milton’s sexualisation of the apostasy represented by the taking of satanic sacrament. In *PR*, Milton’s Satan’s board is flanked by “Tall stripling youths” “of fairer hue / Than Ganymede or Hylas” and nymphs “that seemed / Fairer than feigned” in Arthurian legends (lines 2.352-53, 2.357-58). Thelwall’s squire bawd-lerises Milton’s imagery with sustained sexual punning supposedly describing a legitimate cause for “banqueting” before a battle: “Yearning of the bowels, or the hungering after—temptation to the eye, or the presence of the things whereafter we hunger—and ministration copulative; or the tables and benches, in the great hall; whereby the parties are enabled to approximate, the come-at-ability of the desired is facilitated, and the desirers are fundamentally accommodated” (*FL* 3.4, p. 68).

refuses to partake in a demonic rite;<sup>101</sup> yet, his refusal to join a heavenly feast so similar to his “native” Eucharist calls to mind the words a priest in the Church of England was required to say if “*he shall see the people negligent to come to the holy Communion*”:

Ye know how grievous and unkind a thing it is, when a man hath prepared a rich feast, decked his table with all kind of provision, so that there lacketh nothing but the guests to sit down, and yet they who are called (without any cause) most unthankfully refuse to come (*BCP 397*, italics removed; cf. Matt. 22.1-14).

However, while Sir Tristram—posing as a deserter—is under pressure to enjoy “a rich feast” offered by pagans, until he reveals his disdain for that rite in his impromptu song, “The Joys of Valhalla,” he inundates his hosts with a litany of reasons *for feasting* (in and of itself), without once providing a reason for feast as prescribed by the Saxons themselves. (Indeed, one gets the impression that he is stalling for time until the opportune moment to drop his façade and “out” himself as a non-believer.) When confronted with the mystery of the Saxon “high festival,” the ostensibly Christian Tristram does exactly what his atheist creator does in the whole of *FL*: pretend to defend the “Saxon” (here, “English”) religion, while using his “defence” of it as an excuse to malign what he pretends to praise. Treating the Saxon sacrament like any other feast, he feigns his assent to the ceremony on the wholly material(ist) grounds that “there be victuals to eat—there be people to eat them—and there is a place in which they may be eaten” (*FL* 3.3, p. 68). But, for Sir Tristram, the banquet at Gwrtheyrnion is infinitely

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<sup>101</sup> The “Sewer” refers to “our priests,” but there are no priests directed to appear onstage other than Rowenna; Thelwall thus makes the question of food consecrated to idols an ambiguous one, allowing him to flirt with the thin line in St. Paul’s commandment *to be willing* to eat the food of non-believers—provided that that food is not intended as a sacrifice to devils (1 Cor. 10.27-28).

more logical than the one in Valhalla, not least of all because of how ale is served in the latter locale: “For the scull of a foe, is a very strange sort of a wassail-bowl, Sirs, / That I am very sure I should spill——out at either eye-hole, Sirs, / Ere it got to my mouth in Valhalla!” (*FL* 3.4, p. 72). Only after he ridicules the material improbabilities of the eternal feast does he show his true colours and “out” himself as a thorough-going non-believer (who is yet a cultural Christian):

Then give me still a banquet of your mere mortal cooking— [...]

Yes, give me still a dinner of such plain vulgar cooking;

And, if there’s any other heaven I can find to fly a nook in,

I’ll be damn’d if I’ll go to Valhalla! (3.4, p. 72).

So fervent is Tristram’s “zeal,” in other words, that he would rather exchange the bounty of the Father for not only “mortal” but “vulgar” cooking—i.e., he would rather forgo ale entirely and drink only water—than consent to take and eat or drink at the Saxon board. And yet, he fails to affirm outright any Christianity in his rousing credo. He vaguely promises that he’ll be damned if he’ll go to Valhalla, *if* he can find another heaven—and this after having spent an entire scene ridiculing the alcohol associated with the eternal feast in heaven. Furthermore, he never clarifies the nature of the heaven in which he *does* believe—or, for that matter, the religion.

Tristram *does*, however, expertly hint at that in which he does *not* believe; it becomes abundantly clear, as he explains and is explained Saxon mysteries, that he has fewer and fewer claims to be any sort of *believing* Christian. As he is being shown Gwrtheyrnion, the Seneschal assures him that the reasons that they are “to have feasting *before* fighting” “be three in number” (3.3, p. 66). Without waiting for the Seneschal’s

enumeration of those reasons (which he never gives), Tristram uses the excuse to thinly attack the Christian Trinity by embarrassing the Established Church with as many pagan Trinities as possible. He first of all begins by remarking, “Three!—But three is a favourite number, I believe, among you Scandinavians,” and the Seneschal assures him that that “mystical and sacred number” because, in the first place, “there be three sons of Beör (Woden, Vile, and Ve) who knock’d the giant Ymer o’ the head, created the world out of his carcase, and set his brains a flying thro the air for clouds”<sup>102</sup> (3.3, p. 66). Tristram pretends to acknowledge that Ymer “must have been” “[a] pretty piece of flesh,” but reneges on his flattery when he realises that the Body of God has its limitations, since Ymer must have been “but a moody, muddy, addle-headed sort of a giant, either; or his brains could not have been converted to such a use” (3.3, p. 66). The Seneschal is either oblivious to the mockery or chooses to ignore it, and offers yet another Trinity, the “three Fatal Sisters,” which mystery Tristram again lampoons as nonsensical and superfluous, since the myth of an All-Knowing Trinity of Fates fall apart once one realises that two of the Three cannot see into the future—the one the past, the other the present only (3.3, pp. 66-67). The Seneschal continues to justify the “Saxon” preoccupation with the number three, insisting upon Freyja’s three handmaids, the “three Giants of Frost; three Warhounds, that guard the Gates of Hela; and three Valkyries, that wait upon the banquet of Woden, in Valhalla” (3.3, p. 67). Tristram responds with his own torrent of triads that are actual reasons *for banqueting*, which I discuss above, but which as the Sewer observes are “good reasons for banqueting at all times—but they be no reasons for banqueting before battle” (3.3, p. 68). The Seneschal, however, disagrees, and is

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<sup>102</sup> Note Tristram’s respect for myth: “Hum!—A hum! I can smell it.” (3.3, p. 66).

apparently satisfied with Tristram's materialist reasoning. But, further in keeping with the "mitred Atheism" motif of Rowenna's Saxons, his agreement comes in the form of ("Jesuitical") casuistry, agreeing with Tristram's words, but himself withholding any *actual* justification for changes to an important ritual: "If they be good reasons for banqueting at all times, then they be good reasons for banqueting before, as well as after" (Coleridge, "RM" line 334; *FL* 3.3, p. 69). In other words, the Seneschal's overbearing insistence on (pagan) tradition embodies the Protestant, Dissenting, or Low Church anxiety towards Roman Catholic or High Church ritual, and the *ex post facto* justification of that ritual by especially the Jesuits<sup>103</sup> following the Counter-Reformation.<sup>104</sup> Or so it would seem, except that he is not defending the preservation, but *the reformation* of a ritual: the Sewer (who, perhaps like an early "Churchman," is eager to please but caught in the middle) seems appeased by the Seneschal's words, but remains troubled by the fact that the reforms prescribed are in direct opposition to the Saxon religion. "Good! master Seneschal. And yet our priests will have it that it is not orthodox: because, in Valhalla, Woden and his Monoheroes always fight first, and banquet afterwards" (*FL* 3.3, p. 70). As Tristram covertly attacks the "Saxon" ("English") Christian character, the "Catholicised" Seneschal and Steward combine to subvert Britain's Protestant identity.

But Thelwall is not content to challenge only the Test Act or the Acts of Uniformity; he also attacks, in this same scene, the specifically Unitarian Dissent of his fellow poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. In response to Sir Tristram's triad of "specifics"

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<sup>103</sup> i.e., only insofar as that order remained a special fixture of English anti-Catholicism.

<sup>104</sup> A tension felt all the more bitterly since Thelwall, an ethnic Welshman and cultural Anglican steeped in the revolutionary literature of radical English Puritan, was fond of slandering the Anglo-Irish Tory and self-professed "Englishman" Burke as an equivocating crypto-Catholic.

to appease the Sewer, the Seneschal assures both Tristram and the Sewer that “if these tripple [*sic*] reasons satisfy not the tender conscience, there is yet behind, a reason omnipotent, which is one and indivisible; namely, that The Fates would have it so” (*FL* 3.3, p. 69). But, the ostensibly Trinitarian juggernaut behind this mock-Protestant jingoism<sup>105</sup> is actually a mockery of the Unitarian credo from Coleridge’s “Religious Musings”: “There is one Mind, one omnipresent Mind, / Omnific. His most holy name is Love” (lines 105-106). To add insult to irony, the context of Saxon Communion also takes to the logical extreme Coleridge’s ecstatic prophecy that Love enriches he “Who feeds and saturates his constant soul” with it, and thereby attains *spiritual* (rather than a fleeting *physical*) union with God (lines 105-106, 108). More amusingly, the “reason omnipotent, [...] one and indivisible,” for altering Saxon “high festival” is entirely a false pretence: the Seneschal explains that “our mistress [i.e., Rowenna] has been making a journey into hell [...] And, as she reports it,<sup>106</sup> The Fatal Sisters ordered this banquet” (Thelwall; *FL* 3.3, p. 69). However, as we have seen in Chapter II, the Fates *do not*, in fact, *tell* Rowenna to stage a banquet or to poison Vortigern with wassail; rather, Rowenna *misinterprets* a prophecy *that mentions* the banquet where they first met, without giving instructions to spill the blood of (what she believes to be) a new covenant with them. The unassailably Unific reason for changing the Saxon ritual is not only a lie, it is a lie based on a misinterpreting a demonic prophecy of an already demonic religion, as decreed by the One True Ruler of those demons’ earthly kingdom. If the Seneschal is attempting to “justify” *any* sort of allegorised Christianity, then whether it is most importantly *not* Unitarian or *not* Trinitarian, it is certainly *not* Protestant; and it *cannot* be

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<sup>105</sup> The Seneschal’s last argument is essentially, “This Reform is THE WILL OF GOD.”

<sup>106</sup> This phrase suggests that the Seneschal might not believe what he is obliged to report.

Catholic without implicitly—or perhaps openly—embracing its association with atheism. For his part, Tristram wants nothing to do with any alcohol associated with the promise of death after life: “And ere ale in a scull, I’ll drink Adam’s ale the brook in; / And [...] I’ll be damn’d if I go to Valhalla!” (*FL* 3.3, p. 67). Tristram, in other words, would rather live forever on Water (“Adam’s ale”)—an element we know to be sacred to the iconoclastic and Revolutionary Fairy of the Lake—than be forced to drink *any* Ale sacred to Woden. Tristram has no wish to pledge himself a soldier or subject of Woden, by being a Communicant in a ritual in which he does not believe; neither do Tristram or Thelwall acknowledge Woden’s descendants as Kings of Britain, whether Rowenna of Saxony or George of Hanover. But, if Sir Tristram, as a figure of opposition to the Saxons, can be neither Trinitarian, Unitarian, Catholic, nor Protestant, and *certainly* not a member of the Church of England; if he is so effective a satirist against Saxon (Christian) Communion; in short, if he *might as well* be an atheist; then, at the very least, what *can* Tristram *claim* to believe in?

#### **IV.v. THE ATHEIST’S EUCHARIST (*IN CERVESIA VERITAS*)**

THEIR drink is a liquor prepared from barley or wheat corrupted into a certain resemblance of wine.  
— Publius Cornelius Tacitus (*Germania* 23, p. 69)

Tristram is only tempted into drinking Saxon ale is when that ale’s name is not *called* wassail but when it is disguised as Cwrw, the Welsh ale (or *name* for ale) with which Tristram is so intimately familiar. However, just as Rowenna is seduced into apostasy because of Arthur’s resemblance to her own gods, Tristram is only tricked into drinking *what he thinks* is his beloved, superstition-banishing Cwrw. Cwrw, “the Cambrian word for Ale,” is what Tristram promises to relinquish when he promises to

drink “Adam’s ale” only (*PCWR* 207).<sup>107</sup> Being a Welsh knight, however, this vow would presumably mean that Tristram would perpetually imbibe *Welsh* water. This water becomes, in Tristram’s song, the natural enemy to Saxon wassail; but it is also the supernatural enemy of the Anglo-Saxon power, thanks to the magical influence of the Lady of the Lake. Furthermore, ale can only properly be called *cwrw* if made with Welsh water: the drinking of *Cwrw*, then, is for Tristram is an act of cultural, religious, and political defiance; a belated rejection of modern “England” by an Ancient Briton; in short, an act of national pride. Even before Tristram reveals himself to be *proudly* Welsh, the Saxon Incubus—who has, by *FL* 2.2, “laid the whole Round Table (knights, squires, and all) as quiet as Mead and Wassail ever laid them at high festival”—realises he has been unable to capture Tristram because he has forgotten to take into account the fact that Tristram is Welsh (p. 35). Or, more specifically, that if he cannot lure him from the straight and narrow with Saxon wassail, then the Welsh variant of (or, name for) the same drink might be better bait: “What sort of angler,<sup>108</sup> for a devil, must I be, when a Welchman was to be caught, and not to think of *Cwrw*?” (2.2, p. 35). Ignoring Arthur’s command to “Follow me,”<sup>109</sup> Tristram laments the empty barrel he has been carrying, insisting that if he only had some “all-conquering *Cwrw*” left in it, then he and Arthur could vanquish not only the Saxon kings, but their gods (2.2, p. 39). “[A]nd what could stand before us?—Caer Gwrtheyrnion?—Pho!—nor all the Cares in the universe. Why we shouldn’t care for Pandemonium itself. We’d storm old Belzebug in his grand keep; and make a rareeshow

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<sup>107</sup> The *OED* defines “Adam’s ale” as “Water (as a drink),” and cites its first use in the Puritan William Prynne’s *Sovereign Power of Parliaments and Kingdoms* (1643).

<sup>108</sup> Note the pun on “Angle”; “angler” also sounds like the German *Engländer*.

<sup>109</sup> Cf. Matt. 9.9, Mark 2.14, Luke 5.27, John 1.43; Tristram’s ignoring Arthur’s command is thus a refusal of type.



of all his family” (2.2, p. 39).<sup>110</sup> Tristram, in other words, yearns to take political atheism to its logical extreme, by raising hell against a dynasty of false gods, and to make a public example of the lowest (or lewdest, or most “democratic” order) of those “Saxon” devils who dared to threaten British liberty. Unfortunately, he lacks the means at least until he prays, “Send us, ye Guardian Angels! send us but a costrel of Cwrw!” (2.2, p. 39). However, despite his self-assurance that “The prayers of the drunken shall be heard[,] for they pray in The Spirit,”<sup>111</sup> no liquid manna showers down from heaven (2.2, p. 39; my italics). As with Rowenna, “no aid from pitying heaven descend[s]”; instead, mirroring the Fairy’s ascent from below, “A large cask *rises out of the ground*” (2.2, p. 39). Unaware that this new cask is actually a trap laid for him by the Saxon Incubus, Tristram, upon seeing *cwrw* spelled out on the barrel, is ecstatic that what he feared was “Some magical inscription” actually spells out his favourite Tetragrammaton that can, in fact, help him fulfill his desire for revolution against Saxon magic (2.2, p. 39). “What are your Runic Rhymes, your Riddles, your Pharmaceutrias—your Cabals, your Abracadaberas, to the magical combination of C—W—R—W?” (2.2, p. 40). He then boasts that “the Welchman’s best friend” is far more powerful than any magic with which (for instance) Rowenna can hope to control the Britons:

Of spells you may talk,

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<sup>110</sup> The *OED* defines “raree-show” as either “an exhibition, show, or spectacle of any kind, *esp.* one regarded as lurid, vulgar, or popular”; “spectacular or lurid display”; or, “A set of pictures or a puppet show exhibited in a portable box for public entertainment; a peep show.” Thelwall perhaps has in mind the humiliation Louis XVI and the Royal Family endured when, in the early days of the French Revolution, they were apprehended three miles from the Belgian border, arrested, and carted by open wagon in a very public procession all the way back to Paris.

<sup>111</sup> Thelwall parodies St. Paul’s request that the Ephesians “pray[] always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit,” and shows how ineffective those prayers are (Eph. 6.17).

Writ in ink, blood, or chalk,  
 With which Wizzard and Witch have to do;  
 But each Welchman can tell  
 That there never was spell  
 Like C—W—R—W!            Fal de rol. &c. (2.2, pp. 40-41).

Not only does Tristram believe Cwrw to be exactly what he needs for a Revolution against the Saxon gods, being far superior to any magic “that god-smiths can invent or priests devise,” but he also recognises this “Cwrw” as the God missing from Thelwall’s materialist worldview; i.e., as the quintessence that shall allow him to give his body’s constituent parts renewed vigour: “One draft of this genuine water of the muses, and thou wilt eclipse all the Knights of the Round Table, and bear away the prize, in the bardic circles, from Taliesin himself” (Dryden, *AA* line 50; Thelwall, *FL* 2.2, p. 41). Tristram’s praise of Cwrw thus reveals him to be a wholly post-Jacobin figure:<sup>112</sup> who, on the one hand, promises to raze hell in a Revolution against the Saxon and therefore the “Gothic customary”; and who, on the other hand, presents himself as a potential paragon of Burkean chivalry, while secularising and fermenting the hops of Don Quixote’s humanistic heresy that (here, *drunken*) knights are God’s *true* ministers (Cervantes 1.2.5, pp.103-105). Furthermore, even while Sir Tristram is satirising the Eucharist<sup>113</sup>—the *literal* body and blood of God—by “venerating” Cwrw in the same way, Thelwall’s intensely ironic meta-satire is against Tristram’s unawareness that he is, in fact, singing

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<sup>112</sup> In *RN*, Thelwall “use[s] the term Jacobinism simply to indicate *a large and comprehensive system of reform, not professing to be built upon the authorities and principles of the Gothic customary* (n. 2:32).

<sup>113</sup> i.e., as opposed to “Communion” or “the Lord’s Supper,” which Protestant terms deny transubstantiation, unless used by Roman Catholics (and conservative Anglo-Catholics).

these praises over a barrel of a *pagan* drink. In a word, Tristram is fooled into thinking that something *he is told* will allow him to celebrate his own (un)belief is a snare laid for him by devils, which allegory against Christian orthodoxy is made plain when he opens the spout. He *thinks* he has the real thing before him (“Genuine! genuine! entire! I’ll be sworn”); and, in a demotic mockery of Christian Platonism,<sup>114</sup> he believes this ale to be sent from heaven: “A choice drop out of the celestial cellar; brewed by my Guardian Angel for his own private drinking” (*FL* 2.2., p. 41). He makes the link between *Cwrw* and Communion explicit, when *he kneels* after saying, “Let me take it devoutly”—“*meekly kneeling*” being the position in which parishioners were to receive Communion as of 1662 (*FL* 2.2, p. 41; *BCP* 403).<sup>115</sup> But the minute Tristram “*Drinks[,] The head of the Cask flies off, out of which INCUBUS rises, and seizes him by the ears,*” and freezes him (*FL* 2.2, p. 41). Even if *Cwrw* were as enervating as Tristram professes, and as repellent against Satanic magic as he pretends, because of the Welsh word *writ* large on the cask, he is utterly hoodwinked into drinking the ale (the wassail) prepared for him by a pagan hireling—under a “Christian” name. But does Tristram, having essentially repeated Vortigern’s transgression, have a similar fall from grace? Yes and no.

If I have made anything clear in this chapter, it is that both Saxon *wassail* and Welsh *cwrw* are co-essential beverages sharing the same allegorical function: to replace, in one way or another, the wine and the God of Christian Communion. In *FL*, Saxon wassail is meant to turn its drinker’s heart away from God, and towards those devils

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<sup>114</sup> Gibbon denounces the Divine *Logos* as a Platonic, and the incarnation of that *Logos* as a Neoplatonic, doctrine perpetuated by Alexandrian Jews of the Hellenistic Period (Philo in particular); and as simply borrowed by early Christians (*DF* 2:301-307).

<sup>115</sup> The 1559 BCP’s direction is for the Communicants to be “kneeling”; the 1662 Book changes this to “all meekly kneeling” (*BCP* 137, 403). Thelwall’s stage direction reads only “*Kneeling*” (*FL* 2.2, p. 41).

masquerading as the Norse pantheon. Cwrw allows *its* drinker to see through the allegorical illusion of Saxon paganism, and acknowledge that religion as the satirical proxy for Christianity that it is. But, finally, *cwrw* completely *replaces* the *vino* of Communion; even if the former barley-wine is treated with the same reverence as grape-wine, Cwrw is *not* the Eucharist. For all its pretence to magic, what Cwrw is, literally at the end of the day, is nothing more than a drink. Even Incubus realises that Cwrw is the means to an end—more specifically, one’s fundament. Soliloquising that “to hazard the vengeance of [Arthur’s enchanted sword] requires a little more of the fool-valiant than belongs to any devil of my kidney,”<sup>116</sup> simply voicing those words aloud makes him realise his blunder in having tried to tempt the (apparently *uniquely*) Welsh Tristram with *cwrw* (*FL* 2.2, p. 35). Superficially, there is no direct connection between that sentence and Cwrw; yet, Incubus’ lines suggest that the perfect way to lure Tristram away from Arthur’s sword (a phallic symbol) is through something that passes, unreservedly, through the kidneys (and “sword”) of a militantly zealous atheist (“fool-valiant”). Just as we are initially fooled by Tristram’s supposed Christianity, and just as Rowenna is tempted to embrace the Christian Arthur as another god made in her Ancestor’s demonic image, so is Tristram naturally fooled into drinking the idolaters’ wassail so long as it masquerades as the iconoclast’s *cwrw*. If Incubus *does* make “Cwrw” a pagan deity (i.e., an idol) as much as the Saxons do Arthur, then, just as the Fairy descends back into the earth following her flood, so will Cwrw abdicate its divinity once Tristram’s kidneys perform their own miracle of transubstantiation. Cwrw will relinquish its power over

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<sup>116</sup> Cf. “fools rush in where angels fear to tread” (Pope, *An Essay on Criticism* line 625).

Tristram's mind and his body politic once Nature fulfills her course as at least one Briton,  
*even* he that pisseth against the wall, "miraculously" rids *himself* of his god.

## CHAPTER V. - CONCLUSION

“[King Håkon the Good of Norway] took the drinking horn, which Sigurd had already blessed in the name of Odin, and made the sign of the cross above it. People demanded to know what he was doing. Sigurd reassured them that their king was merely blessing the goblet in the name of Thor.”  
— Robert Ferguson (*The Hammer and the Cross* 267)

*The Fairy of the Lake* is an allegory serving a radical political thesis; a parable of what for the past two hundred years had been the hidden slogan at the centre of English radicalism: that the King is not a God. Old-fashioned in its radicalism, but revolutionary in its re-imagining of a past lost to myth, legend, and the genocide wrought by the Saxon Invasions, for all its laughter and rhapsodic exultations, *The Fairy of the Lake* is a triumph muted by its almost Joycean paralysis. Its author, adjusting from his own romantic quest for a New Britain to the realities of the old one he recognised all too well, walks an incredibly fine line between his deeply-held radicalism and the mores of a traditional society he wished so dearly to change. The result, borne of the fear of its own censorship, is an incredibly energetic union of opposites; an atheist’s call for a Christian revolution, voiced in the language of Burke’s reactionary medievalism, but in an English Revolutionary dialect spoken with Thelwall’s thick (if melodious) Jacobin accent. In any parliamentary (i.e., proto-democratic) society, the King cannot be called a god, unless he also be placed above the Law; in any Christian nation, the King must not be worshipped as a god, except his blasphemy against the LORD of Hosts justify a Revolution against him; therefore, under the British Constitution, the King shall not call himself a God without declaring himself an enemy of the people.

Rowenna is that Saxon Queen, the necessarily pagan foreigner who has no regard for the Christianity that constitutionally limits her authority. Her attempts to legitimise her rule through wedding a prince who is not an apostate only ends in failure. Wrongly

believing that Fire shall burn away her last barrier to win the heart of Arthur and the love of the British people, and anoint her once and for all as Britain's divine queen, her royal residence becomes her funeral pyre as *she* is instead sacrificed to those same devils whom she would have rule over Britannia. But her victor Arthur is the living image of that Devil whom the Saxons would have fight their battles for them. The substantial expression of Woden on earth, Arthur's command of hell fire on the field of battle is a ruse by the Father of Lies; an attempt to convince the Britons that they are no longer under the rule of pagans or false gods, when in fact the Daughter of God's proxy rule has been replaced by the direct rule of Woden Himself. Arthur, as the English *as well as* a British Champion, is thus an idol worshipped far too fervently by the Britons to expect a Revolution against him, but Thelwall lays the foundation for just such a paradigm shift in his other characters. Whereas Arthur is a god masquerading as a "political atheist" in order to seize the throne from the ostensibly idolatrous Saxons, the Fairy of the Lake is a "political atheist" masquerading as a goddess in order to justify Revolution against a Divine King. Her disguise makes her role as *dea ex machina* possible—as it does Thelwall's quest for a Revolution beyond moral reproach. She holds a local title to hide her defense of a national ideal; she wears and rides in the accoutrements of the British Navy in order to hide the ideological threat she represents to the traditional establishment; and she, and the god-killing Water she inhabits and controls, are far too chaste even for myth in order to make her an acceptable Athena-cum-Madonna who can replace the Britannia worshipped by the Tories. As a result, in a miracle that certainly goes against the will of the same god who would *want* Arthur on His throne, the Water the Fairy commands drowns even the ashes of at least one false goddess; and even though

she essentially *is* water, and unto water returns at the play's end, when she does so, it is with the promise that she, a Spenserian personification of Revolution too Thelwallianly abstract to *actually* be a goddess, *will* rise again against any king—including Arthur—who would rule as a Divine Tyrant, rather than as a patriot king. Yet, the struggle to keep foreign gods from the throne remains incomplete so long as the romance of Arthur's reign is invoked by future monarchs. However, Thelwall offers future revolutionaries absolution from their sins against the English Church in the form of blasphemy against it. Thelwall's Britain exists in a fallen state, its earthly king, Vortigern, having succumbed to the charms of a young devil, whose exotic beauty and whose decadently spiced beer—and with it, the temptation to rule as a god on earth—ensure the spiritual death of Britain, and in a bizarrely revolutionary twist, is literally the poison that leads to the physical Death of the King. But if Arthur himself, unlike the Lady in Milton's *Comus*, is never tempted by Rowenna's cup of iniquity, then the Fall of Britain is redeemed by Ancient Britain's *true* Second Adam—Sir Tristram, whose drunken state makes him unafraid to regard the Saxon gods as gods, even as a matter of political convenience. Like the Britons whom Thelwall tries to make aware of centuries of their deception, the Everyman Tristram may indeed be deceived, at first, by the pagan Wassail calling itself by the “Christian name” of Cwrw—and even his mock-veneration of this pagan “Host” betrays a Christian *form* of devotion he never suspects amounts to idolatry. But, by Act III, he has learnt his lesson. Rather than skulk in disillusion, Tristram (still drunk) instead liberates himself by using the proxy of the Saxon religion to mock any and all manner of Christian—and therefore pagan—symbolism that ever threatened to leave his Revolution unfinished. So complete is his new zeal against any symbol that could be used against



him that he vows to forgo his favourite drink so long as there is *any* chance that he can ever again be fooled into partaking of the communion of a pagan regime. The King is not God; but, so long as God (either YHWH or CWRW) is at the root of a temptation to seek out His earthly type in the figure of a mortal King, then it is better to throw off that god entirely so that no king can ever again become an idol unto Israel. Political atheism's struggle against the divine rights of kings is thus ended once atheism wins its struggle against God—after which the King may finally be recognised as no more than the people's chief magistrate, sitting on the people's throne, by men themselves called a mortal man, and accountable to the Laws and Rights of Man alone.

Thelwall Studies is an emerging field, but because modern scholars' interest in Thelwall's poetry cannot even properly be regarded as a revival, there is astonishingly little written about *The Fairy of the Lake*—especially when compared to the wealth of scholarship on works by any of his more famous contemporaries. What has been written, as I explain in my first chapter, has only recently begun to appreciate *The Fairy of the Lake* for the Revolutionary ethos behind this founding work of the Romantic movement. In my own analysis, I have tried to avoid in-depth discussions of anything other than the ideological (if rhetorical) root of at the heart of early modern British conservatism—namely, the Divine Right of Kings. Though my close reading may seem perhaps *too* close at times, both for my own research and for the sake of future scholarship, it was necessary to produce a single, thesis-length, comprehensive analysis of the symbolism behind *FL*. I don't expect this master's thesis to redefine Thelwall Studies, but I hope my research can at least inform others' studies of topics I scratch at the surface of. For instance, though I allude to the influence of Dryden and Purcell's opera *King Arthur*, on

which the characters *The Fairy of the Lake* is based, I have instead opted to focus on the source texts on which Thelwall bases the plot of *FL*. However, I hope I might spark someone to investigate Thelwall's secularising of the specifically Anglican symbolism from Dryden's drama. In the interest of close reading, I have also done my best to write something able to be regarded on its own merits; for that reason, but perhaps to this thesis's detriment, I have avoided constant allusions to Continental or structuralist theory, and especially to post-colonial scholarship. But, I would be extremely interested to see what a post-colonial reading of Thelwall's textual constructs of either the Welsh or the Saxons might yield—particularly in light of the various political meanings behind the word “Saxon,” and especially given Rowenna's debt to Spenser's *Duessa* and Tasso's *Armida*. Finally, I have not had time to explore in-depth *FL* as a radical response to Burke's idealised constitution, in which monarchy (*King Arthur Rowenna*), aristocracy (*the Fairy of the Lake*), and “democracy” (*the squire Tristram*)—supposedly combining in the most stable government—unite *as one society* (“One Nation”?) against the Divine Right of Kings. But, having come to appreciate this other *display* of social conservatism in the advancement of radical politics, I would be very curious to see if any stones I overturn might help others understand Thelwall's career as a poet in relation to either the similarly ambitious “Cockney School” of Romantic poetry, or the similarly Romantic political vision behind the radical Toryism of William Cobbett—or, for that matter, of Benjamin Disraeli. In any event, while this thesis is by no means the first political interpretation of a “literary” Romantic work, I hope I have at least shown how Thelwall's play was in a unique position to negotiate the “terms of surrender” during the transition from Revolutionary politics into “harmless” Romantic poetry.

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<sup>117</sup> All citations made from this edition, except where otherwise noted.

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<sup>118</sup> This article is a review of the *Kristni saga* preserved by Haukr Erlandsson (d. 1334).

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<sup>119</sup> Text and page numbers taken from this translation.

<sup>120</sup> Section numbers taken from this translation.

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<sup>123</sup> The actual attribution of this work is to "Mrs. Thelwall"; Scrivener describes *LT* as Thelwall's "final work, [...] ostensibly 'written' by [his wife] but constructed almost entirely by Thelwall himself" (Scrivener, *SA* 257).

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