Finding Fairyland and the Isle of Man: Layered Cartographies in *The Turke and Sir Gawain*

Piper Farmer
Bryn Mawr College

***

The Turke and Sir Gawain follows the adventure of the Arthurian knight, Gawain, when he accepts the challenge of a strange arrival to Arthur's court: a man known simply as "the Turke" (34). Their quest leads them through a variety of places and otherworldly spaces, such as a Fairyland-like locale and the Isle of Man, as Gawain travels to fulfill his end of the challenge, defeat the "heathen soldan" who rules over the Isle of Man, and transform the Turke into the knight Sir Gromer. The poem moves through multiple borders and environments as the Turke helps Gawain navigate unfamiliar territories. Though the setting is declared to be England at the beginning of the text, in "what adventures did befall / In England, where hath beene / of knights that held the Round Table," other environments appear and complicate the cartographical location (2-4). The English geographical claim is also undercut by Gawain's displacement and the fact that the Isle of Man, one of the narrative's central locations, constitutes a borderlands (Otaño Gracia 223, 225). By reading *The Turke and Sir Gawain* as if these environmental changes constitute a map, Fairyland and the Isle of Man reveal themselves to be a second layer of geography in relation to England which is akin to the "geographies of salvation" found within a medieval mappa mundi (Schmieder 23). The temporal compression of a mappa mundi reveals itself within the places of the poem, which constitute its internal cartography, showing how Fairyland is rationalized as a liminal space that reorients and compresses itself onto the English territorial imagination thus influencing the control

of border territories such as the Isle of Man.

Mappa mundi represent not only the territorial and political realities and imaginations of the period but also a "geography of salvation," wherein layers of ecclesiastical and eschatological destinations and timelines overlay real, navigable places and territories (Schmieder 28-29, 34). Locations are centralized not based on geographical reality but, instead, on their importance and ecclesiastical prominence (Schmieder 32). In the Hereford world map, for example, Jerusalem is centralized and the top edge of the map points eastward towards Paradise (Fig. 1). Though neither paradise nor the heavenly Jerusalem were accessible in that period, both are placed in positions of importance in the center or near to Christ, and both locations influence and are layered on top of other geographical locations. The multiplicity of geographies within a mappa mundi present cartography as a method to portray land and territory not only in their reality but also as a vector for political and religious conceptualizations of history and philosophy. These maps represent world geography as a model for salvific events which orient around a central place, wherein layers of both physical spaces and heavenly destinations can coexist and interact. Like a mappa mundi, *The Turke and Sir Gawain* uses cartographical language and other signifiers of space to indicate and separate different layers of land which orbit around and influence the perception of England within the narrative.

The main geographical axis of the narrative is made clear in the beginning of the poem, which specifies that the work will contain "what adventures did befall / In England, where hath beene / of knights that held the Round Table" (2-4). The position of the Arthurian court is additionally centralized by the statement that England is where "All England, both East and West," gathers (7). The cartesian language and direct territorial declaration anchor the narrative of the text to a contemporary geographical position. Centralizing England also establishes the nation as the *first* and central reference point to which all other spaces relate. Much like Jerusalem in a mappa mundi, England and Arthur's court become the lens through which all other space is perceived. The text claims the Arthurian legend for England and reorients the map of the world by suggesting that England is at the center—between "East and West" (7). *The Turke and Sir Gawain* reverses the view of England as

"enveloped in fogs and darkness" at the margins of the world (Lavezzo 93). In the context of the giants and marvels in the text, as well as the racialized bodies of the "heathen soldan" and the Turke, this proclaimed cartographical orientation towards England appears to be incongruent with the physical realities of the spaces in the story (130). Gawain's movement through the borderlands and the loss of explicitly named spaces emphasize this departure from purely English lands, as does the presence of the Turke, whose racialized description destabilizes the Englishness of the places he leads Gawain through (66).

Outside of England, rather than cartesian descriptions or direct names, spaces are distinguished by Gawain's familiarity with them, which is signaled by the use of "adventure." After the Turke arrives at Arthur's court, and his "buffett" is accepted, Gawain deals his blow and the Turke asks the knight to follow him (17). He leads Gawain away from England "northwards two dayes," and the pair encounters a "hill soe plaine" where the earth "opened and closed againe" (51, 66, 67). After Gawain and the Turke arrive at the hill, directional and temporal descriptions vanish. It is clear that the "hill soe plaine" is somewhere different from Arthur's court—Gawain complains that it is "in noe stead there I have beene stood"(66). Earlier in the narrative, Gawain boasts to the Turke that he will "never from thee flye; / I will never flee from noe adventure. / justing, nor noe other turnament" (44-46). However, at the hill, he expresses reluctance and discomfort rather than bravery. Adventure, to Gawain, is not a "quest," as it is described in the *Middle English Dictionary*. Instead, adventure is knightly activities that would occur at home in Arthur's lands and within Gawain's social class. Calling "adventure" jousting and tournaments ties the term to Gawain's personal knowledge and experience, which is entangled with familiar English lands and modes of social engagement. At the hill, a space that will soon be revealed to resemble Fairyland according to Richard Firth Greene's definition, "adventure" is *not* used because it is not an English space that Gawain is familiar with. Despite the fact that the Turke clearly *has* knowledge and familiarity with Fairyland, his knowledge is discounted. The Turke is racialized as an othered body. His name comes from the fact that he is built "like a Turke," and his intelligence is constantly questioned. Gawain must defend him from the "crabbed knight" Kay by virtue of the possibility that the Turke

is "want of his witt," and he is frequently described at the end of the tale as Gawain's "boy" (29-31, 219). The Turke's knowledge is neither valuable nor English, and therefore it does not fall under Gawain's definition of adventure. Because the hill—Fairyland—is not labeled as "adventure," and the Turke, not Gawain, knows of it, the space must necessarily be detached from the English territorial boundaries.

Fairyland's location outside of English space is not a matter of geographical borders but instead Fairyland occupies a different vertical layer than that of the terrestrial world. When Gawain arrives at Fairyland, beyond being simply unfamiliar with the land, he is deeply uncomfortable. He complains, "sighing sore" about the weather, and the poem narrates that "Thereof enough they had" (71-72). Gawain's fear and annoyance is allowed to be displayed because he is not within England's boundaries. However, the position of Fairyland, other than where it is *not,* is still undetermined. On a mappa mundi, according to Schmieder, spaces like Paradise and the heavenly Jerusalem must be placed terrestrially on the map if people are able to reach it in eschatological times (26). Therefore Fairyland, too, must be placed *somewhere* on the map of the text, because Gawain and the Turke are able to reach it. However, rather than tracking the difference between Fairyland and England by considering distance across land, the text uses the term "middlearth" to conceptualize a sense of *vertical* cartography, wherein Fairyland acts as an underlayer of the existing cartographies of the text. The Turke, before the beginning of the journey, told Gawain that he would make him "thrise as feard / As ever were man on middlearth, / This court again ere thou see" (39-40). The use of middle-earth is especially of note. The Turke effectively tells Gawain that he will be as afraid as *anyone*, and in doing so, places *everyone* on the level of middle-earth, naming England and the inhabited world as middle-earth in the process. According to the *Middle English Dictionary*, middle-earth functions as a descriptor of the natural inhabited world not geographically, but in a salvific sense: the living world is the middle, heaven is above, and hell is below. Therefore, in England, Gawain and the Turke were not only at the center of the world both "East and West," but within a stack of vertical layers, of which England is the middle (7).

This centralized middle-earth is also expressed as a normalizing space. When Kay responds to the Turke's arrival, his proposed mode

of winning the challenge is described as to "grope thee to the ground" (24). This statement simultaneously threatens to assert the dominance of the knight over the racialized body of the Turke and emphasizes their proximity to the earth. Instead of threatening to put the Turke six feet under, the real danger being expressed is that of assimilation to middle-earth's level, contradicting the Turke's presentation as an othered body. This warning, repeated twice in the Turke's introduction, presents the terrestrial level of middle-earth as a space of normalization to the bodies and norms of Arthur's court (and thus England). Middle-earth becomes proxy for England and a term by which the descent into Fairyland can be judged. When Gawain arrives at Fairyland, the "earth opened and closed againe" (67). This pattern of movement suggests a descent to the subterranean, which is reinforced by the vanishing of the sunlight—"the merke was comen, and the light is gone" (69). Fairyland appears to be underground, or otherwise on a lower layer than that of middle-earth England. The otherworldly weather solidifies this sense of difference and otherness. Fairyland is also described in terms of interiority. As the Turke leads Gawain into the castle, they find "chamber, bower, and hall" (80). The physical descriptions of the land are reminiscent of caves and dark entrances and the pattern of descent suggests that Gawain has entered some sort of hell. The entrance into Fairyland emphasizes vertical difference through the dread and anxiety that it provokes in Gawain, the representative of English knowledge and imperial power. Like a geography of salvation, Fairyland layers beneath England within the text's internal cartographies. However, the entrance into Fairyland does *not* require the explicit crossing into a new territory—Fairyland is a place of otherness that, while not situated in England (as made clear through the lack of the word adventure), underlies England on a different vertical level, acting as a liminal geography that influences but is separate from England.

The Isle of Man, while containing many similar traits to Fairyland, paradoxically *also* exists outside of its liminal space and is described as adventure. After travelling in Fairyland, where Gawain stops at a castle and rests at a never-ending feast, the Turke leads Gawain to the Isle of Man, which is inhabited by giants and a "heathen soldan" (130). At the Isle of Man, the word adventure reappears. The Turke promises Gawain that "adventures shalt thou see"—in other words,

telling him that soon, he will return to the familiar space of jousting and tournament that Gawain associates with England (62). During the time contemporary to T*he Turke and Sir Gawain's* writing, the Isle of Man was under English control. By explicitly naming the Isle of Man, the narrative emphasizes the island's Englishness. Despite the Isle of Man being situated as English, it retains many of the markers of Fairyland. When Gawain enters Fairyland, his reaction is defined by his fear: "then Gawaine was adread" (68). Upon arriving at the Isle of Man, his reaction is much the same; his nervousness is implied through the fact that the Turke feels the need to comfort him, telling him that his horse "shal be here when thou comes againe / I plight my troth to thee— / within an hower, as men tell me" (117-120). In the entrance to Fairyland, Gawain's anxiety comes from a lack of familiarity with the space that he is entering, a uniting affective response which implies that crossing the ocean to the Isle of Man is affiliated with the entrance into Fairyland.

While the Isle of Man's identification is English through the island's name, the land's physical characteristics suggest otherwise. The approach to the "castle faire" led by the Turke is a shared element between the Isle of Man and Fairyland, and there is a consistent pattern of arriving at a feasting table (125, 76, 166, 83). The fact that the giants who reside on the Isle of Man know of Arthur's court suggests that the two locations are on the same plane but the presence of the Sultan simultaneously others the space (231). The use of the word middle-earth illuminates this complexity between Fairyland and England's attributes. Gawain's dread when he is challenged by the Sultan on the Isle of Man is characterized as being "never soe adread / *sith* he was man on midle earth" (213-214). He has not been afraid *since* he was on middle-earth, so therefore he cannot be there now. While the Isle of Man is not liminal like Fairyland and exists within English space, it also occupies the vertical layer of Fairyland. Much like Jerusalem, the Isle of Man occupies *both* a physical place on the territorial map of *The Turke and Sir Gawain*, and also a space on one of the map's non-literal layers where Fairyland exists.

This paradox of the Isle of Man's location within *The Turke and Sir Gawain*'s internal map changes at the conclusion of the narrative. Gawain, with copious assistance from the Turke, finishes the challenges that the Sultan lays before him and eventually defeats the

Sultan and his giants. The Turke finally agrees to let Gawain finish his challenge as well, and at the Turke's request, Gawain beheads him. Instead of dying, the Turke transforms into the knight Sir Gromer. The party relocates to Arthur's court and Gromer is installed as the leader of the Isle of Man. Unlike upon their arrival, during the return journey, there are no emotional changes or uncertainties. The return to Arthur's court and England appears to occur instantaneously, an entirely different process from the arduous journey away from England and towards Fairyland. Though there are gaps in what is extant, the sensation of crossing between places is absent; it is as if Gawain and Sir Gromer are suddenly in England. The transformation of the Turke from a racialized body to a familiar knight, as well as the replacement of giants with English and continental captives on the island, amplifies this change. It is as if after the Turke transforms, something occurs in the Isle of Man which assimilates it fully to England.

This assimilation results from the acceleration of the Isle of Man's temporalities from Fairyland's compressed time to England's literal time. Medieval mappa mundi collapse time: on the non-literal layer of the map, both the beginnings of the world and the eschatological destinations of it are present (Schmieder 29). During the journey to the Isle of Man via Fairyland, unlike the trip back, travel takes at least two days (and most likely more) within the narrative (51). A section of the narrative is missing during the return trip, and there might be temporal indicators in the parts of the text that do not survive. However, the tone of the return is casual, and Gawain's lack of complaining or fear upon arrival suggests that the journey did not incorporate a difficult crossing. In either case, a change in tone and a reduction in tension are present. Time in England is remarkably real and consistent. Distance is passed quantitatively and directionally, almost the textual equivalent of a Portolan line. However, in Fairyland, time ceases to exist. Weather occurs simultaneously in a mix of "thundering, lightning, snow, and raine" (70). In addition, there is a never-ending and never-decaying "bord… spred within that place," despite the lack of other people or creatures (86). Fairyland seems to not have any time at all—it is perpetually frozen. While time is referenced on the Isle of Man, it never appears with the surety of England's temporality. The Sultan mentions natural ways of reckoning time, such as his comment that

there will be adventures "befor me at this tide" (197), but specific dates and distances measured in days are never given. Distance is referred to as "yonder" (129). The Isle of Man's time exists and progresses, yet the island does not contain the temporal features of England. Key is Gawain's declaration to the Sultan, before his defeat, that "eaten is all thy bread" (261). Hahn glosses "eaten is all thy bread" as "your time is up," and in the context of the progression of temporalities in the Isle of Man, "eaten is all thy bread" does indicate that time is now moving and was not before (261). To eat the bread is to end the never-ending feast of Fairyland and to force time to move again; the line also suggests that time is progressing in the sense of changing rulership and kings. Before the defeat of the Sultan, though, temporality in the Isle of Man remained skewed from that of England.

The features of the Isle of Man, specifically its giants, indicate that, before the Turke's transformation, the temporality of the island is that of a pre-Christian Britain. Geoffrey of Monmouth writes that England, before the arrival of people, was a land populated by giants who had to be defeated to make room for the soon to be British settlers (Monmouth 20). As the Isle of Man is treated as an English territorial space, the presence of giants might suggest that the island exists in the timeline of pre-arrival Britain rather than the contemporary England in which the poem was written. The appearance of a heathen Sultan, as well as other marvels, also suggests pre-Christian life and historical territories. By positioning the Isle of Man's temporalities as delayed and stuck in the past, and without completely populating the Isle of Man with the non-English, the narrative creates space for the inevitable assimilation of the Isle of Man into "modernity." The acceleration of time when the Sultan is defeated changes the Isle of Man from a layered space that is part Fairyland and brings it into the fold of fully English territory. This assimilation excavates layers of meaning from the text's internal cartographies, as if the text itself is mirroring the change from the traditional mappa mundi used to signify more than just geographical boundaries to Portolan charts used primarily for navigation and border-setting.

Reading *The Turke and Sir Gawain* through its internal cartographies reveals how Fairyland is rationalized as a second geography that reorients itself onto the English territorial

imagination and influences the management of border territories like the Isle of Man. Fairyland functions as a geography of salvation, albeit a lay-culture version of a mappa mundi's allegorical and eschatological layers, which complicates the central cartographical axis of England. The temporal compression and liminality of Fairyland acts upon the other spaces within the text, which use the signifiers of Fairyland to express otherness in a way that can eventually be assimilated. The Isle of Man functions not only as a borderland but as a layered space, both Fairyland and England, that is then complicated through the racial conversion of the Turke at the end of the text and its temporal re-alignment. Reading *The Turke and Sir Gawain* like a mappa mundi reveals the tension between layered, polyvalent spaces and the dominance of England's imagined territories, which is rationalized through the conduit of Fairyland to create a cohesive textual cartography.

Figure 1 – The Hereford Map. 1250. unesco.org.uk via Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org. Accessed 29 May 2024.

Works Cited

"Aventure - Middle English Compendium." *umich.edu*, quod.lib.umich.edu.

Firth Greene, Richard. *Elf Queens and Holy Friars: Fairy Beliefs and the Medieval Church*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016.

Lavezzo, Kathy. *Angels on the Edge of the World*. Cornell University Press, 2006, pp. 93-113.

"Mappa Mundi Exploration | Mappa Mundi Hereford." *Themappamundi.co.uk*, 2019, www.themappamundi.co.uk.

"Middel-Erd and Middelerd - Middle English Compendium." *umich.edu*, quod.lib.umich.edu.

Monmouth, Geoffrey of, and Michael A. Faletra. *The History of the Kings of Britain*. Broadview Editions, 2008.

Otaño Gracia, Nahir I. "Gawain, Race, and the Borders in the Turke and Sir Gawain." *Exemplaria*, vol. 34, no. 3, July 2022, pp. 222-32.

Schmieder, Felicitas. "Geographies of Salvation: How to Read Medieval Mappae Mundi." *Peregrinations: Journal of Medieval Art and Architecture*, vol. 6, no. 3, Jan. 2018, pp. 21-42.

"The Turke and Sir Gawain | Robbins Library Digital Projects." *D.lib.rochester.edu*, edited by Thomas Hahn, 1995, https://d.lib.rochester.edu.

Unesco.org.uk, "Hereford Mappa Mundi (world map), Displayed at the Hereford Cathedral, England." Wikipedia, 16 Jun. 2015. https://en.wikipedia.org.