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Introduction: Origins, Contexts, Transformations: Reviving The Fairy of the Lake

Origins, Contexts, Transformations: Reviving The Fairy of the Lake

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**Past and present ye have shown:
Make, O! make the future known**

1. John Thelwall's The Fairy of the Lake looks to legendary history to rise above the persecution of its own time and sustain hope for future liberation. In a hybrid form that combines the theatrical passion of Thelwall's early life with the seditious satire of his political maturity and his lifelong lyric originality, The Fairy anticipates the transformation that was realized at its spectacular premiere at Halifax, Nova Scotia in October 2009.

2. Thelwall wrote The Fairy of the Lake during his exile at Llyswen, Wales, between 1798 and 1801, when it was published as the first of his Poems, Chiefly Written in Retirement. [1] This was a critical turning point in a life of many metamorphoses. After pursuing the artistic, theatrical, medical and literary ambitions of his youth, with varying degrees of success, Thelwall had moved into the political limelight in the mid-1790s as England's leading radical orator and a tireless spokesman for the democratic "rights of man." As such, however, he became a lightning rod for the government and popular persecution that forced him to flee to Wales in late 1797, after a bittersweet visit with Wordsworth and Coleridge that galvanized his poetic ambitions. When he emerged from his "retirement" at the turn of the century, he had reinvented himself in the form of a peripatetic elocutionist, inventor and practitioner of the new profession of speech therapy that would help him rise to heights of prosperity in London, though never to regain the popularity he once enjoyed, despite his return to political journalism in the Champion and his continuing literary productivity.

3. For many years the hybrid fruit of Thelwall's varied and prolific career lay scattered in neglected archives, but the late 20th century revival of interest in his political significance as a 'mak[er] of the English Working Class' [2] has gradually garnered attention for his literary and elocutionary endeavours, and the critical transition represented by his turn-of-the-century writings, including *The Fairy of the Lake*. The eccentric and allegorical nature of this Arthurian "dramatic romance in three acts" has been noted by critics, who have begun to assess its role in relation to Thelwall's other work and the master themes of his age. Michael Scrivener reads this "experimental ... nationalist poem" as essentially "'Jacobin' in its celebration of the overthrow of old authority [and] the fall of empire." [3] Damian Walford Davies highlights the Welsh sources and analogues of Thelwall's "curious hybrid ... verse-drama," noting parallels between Thelwall in his own time and "haunted, hunted Vortigern, reviled as a traitor" in ancient British history. [4] While both Davies and Scrivener interpret *The Fairy of the Lake* as a "politicized dramatization of Thelwall's own trajectory and of contemporary political strife" (Davies 84-85), Patty O'Boyle draws more attention to its literary contexts, reading the Fairy in relation to the Lake poets and their battle with Frances Jeffrey, as an allegory which "stag[es] the overthrow of one order and commencement of another: the overthrow of gaudy poetic diction." [5]

4. As all commentators have pointed out, this mix of poetry and drama, myth and masque, music and spectacle is also notable for the way it transforms romance conventions, especially the mystique of the hero. While Thelwall's Arthur eventually triumphs over the Saxon invaders of Britain, he remains an oddly dull and ineffective protagonist: he does not enter the play until Act II, where "all he does is complain," [6] beating his breast and beating about the bush before throwing away his sword in despair at his inability even to find his beloved Guenever, much less save her from imprisonment and rape. In Act III he is sidelined by his satirical sidekick Tristram, who carries the action, infiltrating the castle to which the frustrated hero vainly lays siege. Eschewing traditional heroics, the play focuses much of its attention on its dynamic and insidiously attractive villain, the lovesick Saxon sorceror-queen Rowenna, who braves hell itself to win the champion of Britain to her side. A cross between Lady MacBeth and Prospero, she dominates a plot in which scenes of Shakespearean romance, Norse mythology and operatic melodrama between herself, Arthur, and various Tempest-like demons and spirits, alternate with scenes of farcical Falstaffian comedy centring on drunken Tristram and a turncoat Incubus. The moral, physical and verbal subversions of these reprobate spirits bring about an improbably happy ending that rises, from below, with *The Fairy of the Lake*, an elemental force of never-ceasing spring and providential materialism.

5. The nature of and reasons for Thelwall's romantic eccentricity may be better understood by locating the play in his own work, which offers two narratives of the origins of the Fairy, one prospective, the other retrospective. In the context of a debate on Dryden in his 1793 miscellany *The Peripatetic*, Thelwall introduces his ambitions to write an Arthurian 'Epic Poem' and confronts the difficulty of doing so in an antipathetic age. Almost 30 years later, in a curious 'Essay on Human Automatonism' published in the *Champion* in 1820, Thelwall revisits and extends that debate, as he recalls the composition of his "goblin romance" as a sudden and subversive countertext to his "national epic," *The Hope of Albion*.

"Take the sample from the past"

6. In Volume III of *The Peripatetic*, a group of friends engages in a conversation about the poet Dryden and the proper hero for a British national epic: Arthur or Alfred. In debate with Wentworth, who finds Arthur "deficient in the grand requisite of ultimate success," Sylvanus (Thelwall's alter ego) defends him:

The traditions and records of this prince furnish as noble a theme as the epic muse could wish to dwell upon; the successes which frequently attended his arms were amply sufficient to entitle him to the honours of epic poetry: nor can I see that the final issue of the struggle between the Saxons and Britons throws the least shade upon his triumphs. Add to this, that the fabulous age in which he lived, gives to the imagination of the poet that latitude for daring exertion, which no later period of history can properly afford. [\[7\]](#)

We see here the germ of both Thelwall's "daring" and "fabulous" imaginative transformations of the Arthur materials and the ambivalent attitude to the hero that marks *The Fairy of the Lake*. More importantly, this passage suggests, albeit indirectly, that the most likely source and model for both the eccentric form and the ideological ambivalence of Thelwall's dramatic romance is Dryden's idiosyncratic 1691 "dramatick opera" *King Arthur*, product of Dryden's similarly frustrated epic intentions. [\[8\]](#)

7. Like *The Fairy of the Lake*, *King Arthur* has been neglected and misunderstood because of its hybridity, "avoided by literary scholars because it requires music for its realization and incompletely understood by musicologists because its tradition is literary." [\[9\]](#) Significantly, Dryden's eccentric form, like Thelwall's, is a response to political circumstance, as Curtis Price has argued, reading *King Arthur* as an allegory whose "dramatic plan ... is in fact an extension of the political design: heroism, passion, even patriotism are ridiculed by humorous juxtaposition." [\[10\]](#) According to Price, this design reflects the perilous complexity of Dryden's shifting political and religious allegiances during the so-called Exclusion Crisis at the end of the 17th century. [\[11\]](#) A century later, Thelwall's juxtapositions of satiric farce, mythic

masque and spectacular melodrama reflect his similarly tenuous and conflicted position at a time of equal crisis, dissent and transition, as he attempts to rescue the tradition of British democratic liberty from a nation that has betrayed it, and to reshape Arthurian materials into a form that will speak to and sustain the hopes of his disillusioned generation. Well-versed in the heroic and allegorical drama of the 17th century, [12] Thelwall recognizes 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 (Peripatetic 302-303).

8. In *The Fairy of the Lake*, then, Thelwall claims Dryden as the forefather of his own art of seditious allegory in an act of collaboration like Dryden's own with Purcell, [13] adapting the plot and characters of King Arthur to his own time, circumstances and principles. Rejecting the legacy of the "Norman Yoke," Thelwall, like Dryden, looks to Welsh rather than feudal and chivalric sources of and elements in the Arthur legend, in order to explore the collision and cross-fertilization between Romano-Briton and Saxon traditions in the development of British liberty. [14] According to Price, Dryden had dramatized the "quest for a unified Britain" through the rivalry between Arthur (representing the Royalists and/or William III) and Oswald, son of the Saxon Hengist (representing the Whigs and/or James II), for the hand of Emmeline (representing the "national conscience") (Price 292). While Oswald is an honorable adversary, almost interchangeable with the hero, he obeys an evil advisor, the magician Osmond, who attempts to rape Emmeline and enchant Arthur on Oswald's behalf, but whose plots are ultimately foiled by Arthur's good advisor, the wizard Merlin. A century after Dryden, Thelwall is less interested in the succession of kings, more interested in the rights of the people, and their betrayal and violation by the reactionary measures of the 1790s. He adapts Dryden's characteristic technique of "matching" or doubling characters [15] to dramatize the moral duplicity and rampant apostasy of his own era. Thus in *The Fairy* Oswald and Osmond are conflated into a single character, Rowenna (like Oswald a child of Hengist), whose "double-visag'd fate" (Fairy 13) matches her internally divided and duplicitous nature. At once warrior-lover and scheming antagonist of Arthur, she plays out within herself the romantic era's baffled battle between "conquering sword," "magic art" and "apostate heart" (Fairy 5). Likewise Thelwall combines two of Dryden's minor characters, the punning captain Albanact and the loyal friend Aurelius, into the much more fully-developed character of Tristram, at once a witty coward foil to and a stalwart companion of Arthur. Together, Tristram and Arthur illustrate the two faces of patriotic opposition, and of Thelwall, in the 1790s: the radical satirist and the patriotic idealist. Thelwall also replaces Dryden's Emmeline, daughter of loyal Conon, with Guenever, daughter and victim of incestuous Vortigern, in order to highlight the way the spirit of national liberty has been violated by its

athers (e.g. Burke) in his time. Guenever does not play as active a role in Thelwall as Emmeline does in Dryden, but is moved offstage, existing in Arthur's mind as both the goal of his actions and a test of his principles. The trials of perception and sensuality that Dryden had given to Emmeline are transferred by Thelwall to Arthur, in a series of seduction and enchantment scenes that rely heavily upon Dryden's originals in their musical form as well as their action centring on the conflict between power, principle and pleasure.

9. Although Thelwall's Guenever plays a lesser role than Dryden's Emmeline, women are more central to Thelwall than Dryden.[\[16\]](#) Not only does fiery Rowenna overshadow Arthur, but Thelwall replaces Dryden's male wizard, Merlin, with the powerful Fairy of the Lake. According to Price, Dryden's Merlin is a political figure representing the "sagacious and flexible advisors [especially the Marquis of Halifax] who, through tactful manipulation, prevented their masters from blundering heroically from one disaster to another" (Price 291). But Thelwall's Fairy is a force of nature, rising from below rather than descending from above,[\[17\]](#) and her magic is associated with feminine rhythms of moon and water, with "secret bowers," veins and springs. At once romantic muse and proto-Shelleyian symbol of cyclical change, she is above all a spirit of revival, of hope's eternal return, rising with the powerful persistence of water to refresh and sustain the spirit of liberty during its long imprisonment.

10. The elusive power of "hope's vital fountain" (Fairy 48) is celebrated not only in the ascent of the Fairy at the end of the play, however, but throughout, including in the characters and episodes most memorably revived from Dryden: the famous Frost scene of King Arthur, and the secret agents who both implement and subvert its cold magic. In Dryden's play, Osmond is served by two Tempest-like spirits, earthy Grimbald and airy Philidel; the latter shifts his allegiance to Merlin and works as a double-agent to foil Osmond's nefarious plans, including the near-rape of Emmeline that is accompanied by a chillingly seductive frost pageant. In Thelwall's version, grouchy Grimbald and sentimental Philidel are characteristically combined in one character, the cynical yet good-natured Incubus, at once victim, instrument and cocky insubordinate of Rowenna in a series of Frost scenes that echo and play upon Dryden's originals while commenting satirically upon the chilling effect of the repression of the 1790s upon the tradition of British liberty. Just as Dryden's Philidel becomes a "renegado Scout" (King Arthur 37) for Merlin while pretending to serve Osmond, Thelwall's Incubus, whom Rowenna sends to "scout the country round" (Fairy 14) transforms into a turncoat upstart named Scout who suddenly appears at Tristram's side after he revives from his frozen state, and assists him in infiltrating the enemy's stronghold. Together, Tristram and Incubus/Scout allegorically represent the power of resistance and subversion that survives to revive and sustain hope within an

oppressed people, operating as the "tribute spring that wont its course to take / Thro secret veins, to feed [the] broader Lake" (Fairy 86) of Liberty. It is this secret power of populist laughter at the heart of Thelwall's play that bubbled up on the Halifax stage, where the close connection between Tristram, Incubus and the Fairy is signaled visually and musically. Both on stage and in the text, their wit, charisma and vitality charm the audience even as Tristram does the seneschal, allowing him to infiltrate the castle through a stream of words—puns, parody, song—as sparkling as Thelwall's own. His wit is the verbal embodiment of the Fairy's "Gurgling—tinkling, / Murmuring—sprinkling" power that penetrates the heavy structures of authority "thru the chinks, in many a rill" (Fairy 90-91), and eventually brings them down. [\[18\]](#)

"Present sorrows thicken fast"

11. It is not clear when or in what form Thelwall first encountered King Arthur; he may have seen rather than read it, for it was revived, adapted, performed and published with some regularity through the 1770s and 1780s (Dearing 283-84), when Thelwall was in the grip of his youthful passion for theatre, and remained popular well into the 19th century; the Frost scene in particular was often presented separately as a concert piece. It is possible that Thelwall did experiment with Arthurian subjects in his early years, and that these drafts were among materials lost when his papers were confiscated upon his arrest in 1794. But he did not begin to write the Fairy until 1798, when he moved to Llyswen in the wake of a massively and mutually inspiring ten-day visit with Wordsworth and Coleridge, during which the "literary & political triumvirate" shared plans for poems that might stir the frozen spirit of the nation and rekindle revolutionary hopes "for the amelioration of mankind." [\[19\]](#) Although there is no direct evidence that they discussed Arthurian subjects, we know that Thelwall's Peripatetic "sketches of the heart, nature and society" were at the forefront of their minds; [\[20\]](#) the list of topics that Wordsworth considered for his epic included "some British theme, some old / Romantic tale by Milton left unsung" as well as songs of "reposing knights" and "dire enchantments faced and overcome"; [\[21\]](#) and similar themes and character types appear in Coleridge's chivalric 'Christabel,' which dates from this time, [\[22\]](#) as do gothic dramas by Wordsworth and Coleridge, one of which has a character named Oswald. [\[23\]](#) This exuberant and electrifying encounter initiated a prolific period of poetic creativity in all three men; and although Thelwall's desperate desire to join the Romantic annus mirabilis was foiled, he collaborated from a distance, and his productivity was no less miraculous than theirs in the year following the visit, which saw the composition of most of his Poems, Chiefly Written in Retirement. [\[24\]](#) This includes the ambitious poems that bookend the volume, The Fairy of the Lake and specimens of The Hope of Albion; or Edwin of Northumbria, Thelwall's epic co-response to Wordsworth's nascent The Recluse and Coleridge's abortive The Brook.

12. The composition of the *Fairy* and the *Hope* as companion pieces is recalled in an essay published over 20 years later in Thelwall's newspaper *The Champion*. Here, speaking of himself in the third person, Thelwall recalls their common origin, "at the beginning of 1798," as a product of "human automatonism":

More than 30 years ago he formed the plan of a national Epic Poem ... Two-and-twenty years ago, he actually began it: but even this commencement proved him to be no free agent. Out of humour with himself and with all the world, in the very malice of his heart, he said "now will I spoil this long-meditated epopee, and turn the subject of it into a goblin romance." This first part of the resolution, perhaps, he too fatally kept; but as for the second—mark the issue. He seized the pen, dipped it, as he supposed, up to his very fingers in the ink of vulgar prose, and sat down to out-monk Monk Lewis himself in good circulating library rhodomontade; when lo! willy nilly, as tho the devil or destiny drove him on, or the master of the puppet-show drew the strings of his automaton fingers, blank verse came from him in a torrent, with proposition, invocation, action, colloquy and episode; and, for seventeen weeks successively, he went from his bed to his writing-desk, and from his writing-desk to his bed, and his Epic Poem seemed to be in a fair—or a foul way of being struck off at a heat—not by him, it should seem, but by the divine, or the demoniac "thrusting on" to which he was thus playing mere puppet. [\[25\]](#)

This fascinating image of the simultaneously obstructive and enabling relationship between romance and epic, goblin and patriot, political malice and poetic mastery, the demoniac & the divine, free agency and secret agency, offers rich insight into not only Thelwall's work and psyche, but the relationship between radicalism and romanticism. Given the date, it is clear that the goblin romance must be *The Fairy of the Lake* (though its first form seems to have been prose, like Matthew "Monk" Lewis's *The Castle Spectre*, a stage hit in London at the time the *Fairy* was written); the national epic is obviously *The Hope of Albion*, in which, as I have argued elsewhere, Thelwall "reproduces the psychological, socio-political and rhetorical conflicts and complexities of his own position" at the turn of the new century, identifying himself with "both victors and villains, invaders and defenders, redeemers and betrayers" (Thompson, 'Double Visag'd Fate' 127). In the light of this passage, *The Fairy of the Lake* may be read as an allegory of the poet in his struggle both to be and to write epic in an antipathetic age. Each of the play's three acts reveals a different aspect of this effort to sustain and deliver the *Hope of Albion* both poetically and politically.

13. We do not know in what sequence Thelwall wrote *The Fairy of the Lake*, but it may have begun as a monodrama, for its first Act, like Byron's *Manfred*, focuses almost exclusively on the gothic hero-villain Rowenna, battling with(in) her own mind, as externalized in various handmaiden and demon characters. This form of

"mental theatre," in which the action and characters dramatize aspects of "a protagonist's consciousness," [26] was common in the Romantic period, including in the plays that Wordsworth and Coleridge were finishing at the time that Thelwall was visiting Alfoxden, [27] which feature self-absorbed antagonist-protagonists similar to Rowenna, whose outward charisma hides a corrupt, malicious and manipulative soul. Like Coleridge's Osorio or Wordsworth's Rivers (later changed to Oswald), Thelwall's treacherous yet attractive Rowenna speaks to the mood of the times, and the conflicted traumatized response of Romantic radicals as they struggled with demons of despair, paranoia and misanthropy in the wake of the defeated ambitions, relentless persecution and crushing losses of the 1790s. Like Thelwall at Llyswen, Rowenna is a Saxon among the Welsh, a beleaguered leader beset by "storms of adverse destiny" (Fairy 12), resolute in pride but torn between her titanic ambition and her divided allegiances national and personal. As a woman she is also a muse figure, and the opening lines of the play, in which a chorus of invisible spirits calls her to rise from her "disconsolate attitude" and "exert [her]...Sovran power" of "magic numbers" and "Runic song" (Fairy 3), sound like an invocation for the Retirement volume and the frustrated epic ambitions of its author. Her emotional progress through the first scene of Act I clearly reproduces Thelwall's own attempts to write his *Hope of Albion*, as she moves from utter despair, to vain attempts "to sooth this storm-tossed bosom" (Fairy 5, echoing the hallmark shipwreck scene of his epic, as well as several other Llyswen poems), to a regathering of powers (in a passage that anticipates Wordsworth's inner "inquisition" of "elements and agents" in the *Prelude*), to a renewed determination: "Yet once more I'll try" (Fairy 6). [28] The object of her despair, her love and her determination, Arthur, represents both the soul of the nation, now turned away from Thelwall and his democratic patriotic ideals, and the success of the poem with which he still hopes to recapture that nation and those ideals. Rowenna's heroic but reckless descent into the "once-tried depths" (Fairy 22) of Hell in the final scene of Act I resonates with the calculated risks that Thelwall took at Llyswen, courting further jail time and persecution by his continued activism among miners and ironworkers in Merthyr Tydfil ("Sulphur! Nitre! Miner's damp/ fatal to the vital lamp" [Fairy 23]) and her climactic challenge to the "Fatal Sisters" (Fairy 25) of past, present and future dramatizes the anxious over-anticipation and poignant desire "my fate to know" so poignantly expressed in other poems in the Retirement volume:

But of Arthur I must know—
Doom of joy?—or Doom of Woe?
(Fairy 28)
Art thou, say,
Once more arriv'd a harbinger of woes
Or art thou come,
In most unwonted guise, O, fateful Day!

With cheering prophecy of kindlier times?—
(*'Lines Written at Bridgewater'* 9-23)

14. To use the terms of his 1820 essay, in Act I of the *Fairy Thelwall* finds power in indulging "the very malice of his heart"; in Acts II and III, with the entry of Arthur and Tristram, he plunges into the "ink of vulgar prose" and "blank verse ... in a torrent." In an allegory of the two-faced relationship between Thelwall and his fellow citizens at the radical round tables of the 1790s, Arthur laments the desertion and enchantment of his "warrior knights" and attempts to reconvene them:

At such a time!

They could not all desert me. Dastards all!

(*Fairy* 28)

Chieftains renown'd for hardiest enterprise

Turn dastards on the spur?—I'll not believe it.

Thro the night thickened labyrinths let us wind,

Wakening the sullen Echoes; if perforce,

With their reverberate aid, our shouts may reach

The chance-bewilder'd straglers—if but Chance,

Not Hell, or fouler Treachery, have sapt

Their faith till now undoubted.—Ho! What ho!

(*Fairy* 36-39)

15. Chief among these apostate contemporaries are, of course, Wordsworth and Coleridge, and most of Act II plays like a seditious allegory of Thelwall's visit to Nether Stowey and Alfoxden, from his arrival at Coleridge's cottage to his disappointed departure, having knocked and found them "Hollow as a false friend, who preaches and moralizes when Necessity is at the door: and then he rings, just like this—all his swelling words being nothing but emptiness" (*Fairy* 36). Most of this scene focuses on the conversation and contrast between Arthur and Tristram, which plays out the simultaneously demonic and divine "thrusting on" of the friendships that both inspired and obstructed Thelwall's epic endeavour. The epic rivalry among the poets is referred to directly in Act II scene 2, much of which revolves around a cask of ale inscribed with the letters CWRW (the Welsh word for ale), which may be the initials of members of the Wordsworth circle (O'Boyle 65-69). But whether or not it is possible to identify them conclusively or consistently, the poetic allegory is undeniable, as Tristram asserts that by drinking "this genuine water of the muses" he will "eclipse all the Knights of the Round Table, and bear away the prize, in the bardic circles" (*Fairy* 41). Like the goblin fingers of the 'Essay on Human Automatonism,' Tristram "spoil[s] [Arthur's] long-meditated epopee" ('Essay' 115) by consistently

undercutting his idealistic apostrophes in much the same way that Thelwall mocked the "sacred wax" of Coleridgean religious metaphysics in their correspondence:

Ar. Oh! Sacred wax!

(pulling out a pair of Tablets and pressing them to his lips)

My Guenever!—disastrous Guenever! [Exit

Trist. Oh! My Costrel!—my sweet, lovely—poor, miserable, empty Costrel!

(Fairy 37-39)

16. As in the 1820 essay, however, "vulgar prose" not only subverts but also facilitates Thelwall's epic aims, as is shown in Act III of the Fairy, which may be read as an allegory of the release of the Hope of Albion, both poem and act, from the lonely Welsh citadel wherein it has been imprisoned, with the ambivalent assistance of Wordsworth and Coleridge. Tristram's infiltration of the castle succeeds by the "ink of vulgar prose," insofar as he baffles and tricks the seneschal by means of a scurrilously brilliant prose parody of holy trinities and bardic triads. Once inside, he takes Guenever to a "*Keep, or round Tower ... detached from the rest of the fortification*," where he keeps her safe "*upon the Walls*" (a pun on Thelwall's name, answering Coleridge's 1796 sonnet addressed to him) "*hurling back the brands, as they are thrown*" (Fairy 77-78), as Thelwall did in his letters and publications from Llyswen. His tirelessly rhetorical delivery of "Fire for your fire, ye Salamanders!" is interrupted by a "*Trumpet-chorus of Bards and Knights, as Arthur and his Train*" (Fairy 78) enter, in an allegory of the visit of the Wordsworths and Coleridge to Llyswen in July 1798. Arthur first pays tribute to "Tristram's politic valour" in securing "from chance of war, / Or worse internal treason, the fair prize / Of all our sleepless perils" (Fairy 78), then sounds "*A parley*" in which Saxon and British spokesmen engage in lengthy and fruitless debate about war and peace, "empire" and "equal brotherhood," "Eternal Truth" and "idolatrous blood," "cordial sympathy" "Nature's strong propension" and "the pride of ethic reason" (Fairy 78-82), in Thelwall's version of the debate that Wordsworth would go on to dramatize in Books 2-4 of The Excursion [29]. The discussion ends with a sudden "rush" of assault in which "*The BARDS join in*" (Fairy 82), in an allegory of the "willy-nilly" ('Essay' 115) marathon of epic composition that may have been touched off by their visit. In this "Rush to conquest! Rush to glory" (Fairy 82), the sundered spirits, vulgar reprobate and epic redeemer, within and between Thelwall and his friends, unite to destroy Rowenna with her own weapons:

Ar. ... Tristram, a brand! A brand!

Tristram throws several brands to ARTHUR and the KNIGHTS

If not for preservation, we are arm'd

At least for vengeance. Hell-hag! Thus I light
The fated flame in which thy woes expire.
(Fairy 83)

17. The release of Guenever, however, comes only with the providential and climactic appearance of the Fairy (uniting Wordsworthian naturalism, Coleridgean spirituality and Thelwallian populism). She rises out of the water of the muses, in a poetic chariot that delivers both Tristram and Guenever to Arthur on shore (with Scout swimming up behind), in a celebration and validation of the spirit of romantic-radical compromise and cooperation: a promise of the epic deliverance that will come at last, if one remains resilient and patient, willing to "keep" faith with the past and wait for the future.

"So the bard, yet unborn, shall your triumphs proclaim"

18. In choosing The Fairy of the Lake to lead off a book of poems "written in retirement," prefaced by a memoir in which he vows to "observe the most inviolable silence respecting his opinions" ('Memoir' xxxvi), Thelwall deliberately distanced his "dramatic romance" from the political stages on which he had made his fame and sealed his fate, thereby ensuring that, insofar as it was read at all, it would be read in private, poetical silence rather than voiced in a transformative and potentially treasonous public act. A similar fate has befallen much romantic verse-drama, which was long regarded as unperformable, thanks to the "irrevocable fissure" between page and stage that was long accepted as a "virtual orthodoxy in English literary history" [\[30\]](#). Only recently have we come to understand the extent to which romanticism and the "lively and politically fraught theatrical culture" [\[31\]](#) of the early 19th century informed one another. This is especially true for Thelwall, who, unlike his contemporaries, never drew a line between poetry and performance, and whose work, as he himself says of Milton's and Dryden's, "gain[s] so much by the process of vocal utterance" (Letter to Cline 7). The measure of that gain is recorded in the video documentaries that accompany this introduction, which reflect upon the challenges and dramatize the rewards of reviving "this play [which] has never been performed before." [\[32\]](#)

19. Recent revivals of Romantic-era theatre, including [those documented with video footage on Romantic Circles](#), have generally aimed at historical accuracy, quite rightly endeavouring to reproduce theatre conventions and cultural conditions of the Romantic period. Such was not the case in the Halifax production of the Fairy, however, where the fortunate conjunction of pragmatic necessity and creative opportunity resulted in a collaboration between a university theatre department with the academic freedom to challenge students and audiences with

"plays that can't be done anyplace else" [33] and an experimental theatre company that unites historical materials and postmodern practice in a form of collaborative, playful and physical "devised" theatre [34]. What was potentially lost in political and historical resonance was more than made up by the attention to long-overlooked aspects of Thelwall's theory and practice. Confronting a script that had never been produced, and barely ever read, untrammelled by preconceptions or expectations born of years of performance history or scholarly commentary, the three directors of Zuppa Theatre and the students from Dalhousie Theatre Productions instinctively zeroed in on several key principles of Thelwall's art: his playfully self-conscious theatricality, his materialist "animal vitality," and above all, his non-hierarchical, anti-authoritarian collaborative pedagogy.

20. The structured play of Zuppa's postmodern production development methods perfectly harmonized with the Sterneian self-consciousness and satiric skewering of conventions that was always a feature of Thelwall's art. In the Fairy his persistent puncturing of high romance with farce is most memorably shown in the conclusion, where the melodramatic union of Arthur and Guenever ("My hero! O! My Love!" [Fairy 85]) is interrupted by Tristram's waterlogged apostrophe to Scout ("Huzza! Huzza! ...Why, how now, Scout?—What, my amphibious! My water-spaniel!" [Fairy 85]). The deliberate incongruity of this (anti)climactic moment is heightened in production, when Tristram (Robert Murphy) sticks his head from between the bars of the makeshift "tower" of industrial scaffolding in the black-box bowels of the Dalhousie Studio Theatre, to greet Scout (Christine Milburn) climbing amphibiously up it. [35] Such bathetic but entertaining elements in Thelwall's play are reinforced by the patchwork miscellaneity and creative anachronism of the costumes, sets and music in the Zuppa/Dal production, combining minimalism and spectacle, Scandinavian and Shakespearean influences, Pythonesque collage and romantic illusion. Scenes which when read silently might be interpreted as ethereal, supernatural or sentimental are brought down to earth on stage, as seen in the frisky-whisky wackiness of the Fairies, the multiplicitous metamorphoses of icy Incubus, and Tristram's scene-stealing table-top rendition of the Valhalla Song, with its ad-lib parody of Hamlet's meditations on death. Language that seems stilted and artificial to a modern audience is likewise brought to life through the original music of David Christensen, Jason MacIsaac and Robert Murphy (Tristram himself), whose freely varying contemporary styles and voices (from piano lounge tinklings to six-part a-capella harmonies) capture the spirit rather than the letter of Thelwall's hybrid lyrics.

21. In the documentaries, the producer, directors and actors of The Fairy of the Lake extol the educational and creative benefits of Zuppa's magical "book of what ifs" and "sandbox" games. [36] Here too the "Zuppa method" correlates with Thelwall's practice; for play is fundamental not only to his theatrical art but to his elocutionary

pedagogy, whose origins coincide with the composition of the Fairy at Llyswen. According to Thelwall's autobiographical Letter to Henry Cline, theatrical "grimace and buffoonery" played an essential role in the therapeutic treatment and transformation of his first students, a pair of Welsh hatters' sons, whose speech impairments disappeared under the influence of the "ridiculous rumble" of "conjuror" Thelwall's speech exercises (Letter to Cline 11-13). Such playfully physiological pedagogy anticipates the aims and methods of Zuppa and Dalhousie, as reflected in the comments of student actors, who are seen in the documentary footage practicing stilt work and talking about muscle memory, speech impulses and the challenges and rewards of approaching a 200-year-old text through twenty-something bodies. "We researched every word, every sentence" says Matt Peach, one of four students who united to play Incubus; so even when lines were later cut, "all that work was still in our bodies." Another of the Incubi, the aptly-named Myrthin Stagg, might almost be a descendant of Thelwall's Welsh pupils in her awareness of the therapeutic, unifying, transformative power of speech play: "A lot of it was working with each other, and finding some sort of common ground ... where we could all be together and breathe and think as one ... We ended up doing a lot of games for our scenes so that we could get the fun out of it ... because the text is so difficult, we needed to get ourselves playing with it." [\[37\]](#)

22. In fact the common foundation for Thelwall's politics, poetry and elocutionary science turns out to be remarkably similar to the Zuppa Theatre motto—"theatre that uses the whole animal" ---or what Thelwall in an important early essay called "animal vitality" and in a later one "that universal principle of action and reaction which forms the paramount law of all reiterated or progressive motion" (Letter to Cline 24). [\[38\]](#) In the Fairy, Thelwall's philosophical materialism is personified in the character of Tristram, whose solid cask is played off against the fragile ineffability of Arthur's sacred wax, and whose drunken ramblings on appetite conceal a well-reasoned materialist critique on romantic metaphysics. In his earthiness, his verbal and physical mobility, and his devotion to the "water of the muses" (Fairy 41), Tristram is allied with the elemental physicality of the Fairy, which is conveyed on stage through her markedly unconventional costume: slimy, weedy and decidedly unethereal, crowned with a pair of moose antlers (an apt nod to the Nova Scotia site of the production which further confirms the populist powers of good ale). [\[39\]](#) In the green strength and solidity of her stance and her delivery, she stands out visually and verbally against the desperate glamour of Rowenna, dressed in the Saxon warrior colours of blood, fire and fur, and the stiff, passionless idealism of Guenever and Arthur, costumed in bloodless white and gold, whose immobility, verbal and physical, signals their limitations as hero figures. For Thelwall, who defined life as the state of action produced by the union of stimulus and organized matter, motion was more

important than idea, and his plot is the working out of this notion—another reason why his play needs to be heard, seen, and felt on stage rather than read in silence.

23. But the aspect of theatricality that most closely unites the long-forgotten turn-of-the-nineteenth-century political radical and the innovative turn-of-the-twenty-first century theatre company is its collaborative nature. With its triumvirate of directors and its insistence on process, cooperation and the equality of all participants in the development of a production, Zuppa is radically non-hierarchical: "costumes, crew, actors, stage management ... everybody pitch[es] in with their ideas, working collaboratively to create something as a whole as opposed to a top-down hierarchy." [\[40\]](#) But of course theatre is an inherently collaborative medium; and this is one of the reasons that romantic-era theatre has been neglected, given the pervasiveness of the "myth of solitary authorship" that for many years prevailed in Romantic Studies. Like Zuppa's, Thelwall's commitment to collaboration runs much deeper than the norm, judging not only by the "literary & political triumvirate" that he sought to realize with Coleridge and Wordsworth, but by his later published theatre criticism. His reviews in *The Champion* (like his drama lectures and the Selections he recited at them) go against the grain of his contemporaries' better-known work (eg. Coleridge's and Hazlitt's lectures on Shakespeare) by emphasizing multivocality, interaction and equality rather than monodrama, inner action and the solitary "great" mind. According to Thelwall, *Julius Caesar* rather than *Hamlet* is the play that best shows the principles of Shakespeare, who "never appears to have been content with one hero," he says in an extended critique of the "great" Edmund Kean's "monopoly" and "presumption" in *Othello*. "In Shakespeare, indeed, and in all our best dramatists there is generally one character supereminent over the rest; but there are always others, of considerable prominence, to relieve, contrast and harmonize." Such "good seconds" and "tempered gradations" are necessary for the "full development" of the lead's powers and the audience's understanding. [\[41\]](#)

24. The same democratic, multivocal dramatic principles are at work in the structure, characterization and theme of the *Fairy*, as Rowenna's monodrama is defeated by "good seconds" and thirds in Acts II and III which, as I have shown, originate in and dramatize the collaborative dynamics of the Wordsworth circle. In fact, it is possible to see the entire play as a conflict between solitary and multiple, linear and cyclical, authority and authorship, as Rowenna's demanding and commanding, intrusive manner with her subordinates and attendants collides with and is finally superseded by the *Fairy*'s more inclusive, cooperative, expansive, and ultimately self-effacing one. The *Fairy*'s power is that of the natural cycles and secret spaces with which she is associated and into which she disappears at the end of the play, places of resounding voices and redoubled movements. She underlies all action but remains hidden for most of the play, arising only to release the actors from the

tyranny that has numbed them, freeing them to pursue and achieve their own independent actions. Breaking the impasse at the end of the play, her chariot is an image of the art that bears her name, as it has room for both Guenever and Tristram; and the phrase with which Arthur greets it, "All-gracious powers" (Fairy 85), is an apt summary of the democratic nature of Thelwall's aesthetic. That inclusivity was realized in Kristin Coral Sinel's innovative stage design in the Halifax production, which made the audience part of the action, "literally in the middle of it and not just passively observing." Face to face with the actors and one another and "set for battle," [42] audience members were encircled and penetrated, journeying from side to side with the actors, united in enchantment by the drama to which they add their own voices at the end, liberating it, the actors and themselves in the traditional release of applause.

"And the nations around thus re-echo your Fame--"

25. A recently-rediscovered verse prologue from the long-lost Derby manuscript offers a final Thelwallian intertext for *The Fairy of the Lake*. One of several prologues that Thelwall wrote throughout his 50-year career, it dates from the Llyswen period, and though it doesn't mention the Fairy, it offers a fascinating perspective on the transformation that the Fairy, as text and performance, worked on author, actors and audience. "Spoken in the character of a Welsh peasant," in a comical dialect, it records local response to the appearance of "a Company of Strollers, who were performing in a little Village in South Wales" (MS II: 615). [43] As the speaker's attitude wildly wavers between fear and attraction, he registers the liberating, equalizing, but "double-visag'd" potential of the spoken word and the "game" of "playing," for himself and the nation.

26. Like Thelwall's Welsh neighbours the peasant is deeply conservative by nature and culture, and so he begins by criticizing the play's disturbing reversal of gender and class hierarchies and routines, and its dangerous political potential:

"Got bless every body!" what have a' here?
Players and plays at Glasbury appear!
Thro all the village there is such a rout!
The tevil a wench knows what a' is about.
There's Peggy, there, within,--in such a flutter—
The cheese uncurtlet, and unchurnt the putter;
The Cows unmilkt, the sow and pigs unserv'tt
The Broth not hot,--we ploughboys boun to starv't,
Such grunting, growling! While our Peg so fine!
Is all agog the player folks to join.

But what "the Jowl" can't be this playing means,
Wi' Cantles lightet, and their painted screens,
An' a green curtain all afore them spreat?
Just like fine folks there, when tha go to bet.
Faith it looks off, and a'd almost be certain,
The girls expect a jig behint the curtain.

I wish it mean no harm:--no smugkling trick
To land the French at Brecon;--or Old Nick
(MS II: 615-17)

27. In spite of this, however, the speaker feels "a sort of playing itch" which he articulates in the middle of the prologue, where he resolves to "plough no more" but instead to "learn the game" so that he may join in "something where our Peg coot take a part" (MS II: 617). The play (like Thelwall's political lectures and elocutionary pedagogy) both ignites and satisfies a lower-class desire for change, social (and sexual) mobility and increased awareness of and participation in other lives, through taking broader roles. Like the four student Incubi at Dalhousie, the speaker welcomes the opportunity to enhance his own individuality by finding common ground with another person. Ultimately, the speaker's transformation lasts but a moment—fearing the play's potentially dangerous effect on family values ("If Bairns should come on't, we are all aground"), he asserts "This is no play for living by, a' fear," and he returns to his plough (MS II: 619). But in spite of his conservatism and panic, a transformation has taken place—for "an't please the pigs," the peasant decides "first to night ... I'll go / To see the player folk their antics show" (MS II: 619). He concludes by looking forward to the refreshment, personal and national, that the play will bring him on the morrow:

Then fresh tomorrow, trive a's teem afield
And shew what grain our Cambrian mountains yielts,
Then will a' sing while o'er the share a's pow—
Pritain for ever! And God speet the plough!
(MS II: 619)

28. This final line of Thelwall's 'Prologue. Written for a Company of Strollers' is undeniably clichéd and patriotic; but it also parodies its own conservative resolution in a rousing validation of lower-class values that recalls Blake's "drive your cart and your plough over the bones of the dead." The value of the peasant's ploughing, like playing and poetry (his song), is in the grain it yields for the future. Thus beneath its conventional but realistic reassertion of the status quo, this 'Prologue,' like The Fairy of the Lake and the Llyswen period of Thelwall's life, ends with cooperation between

plough and play, agricultural and literary labour, creation and recreation, action, reaction and imagination. For the peasant, as for the playwright, and the actors and audience of the Halifax production (on stage and online), the play is a temporary but necessary enchantment, an opportunity to resound the past, and in so doing, to reshape the present and reimagine the future. When the lights fade, it releases all of us to venture into the transformations that lie ahead, taking from it a voice, a song and refreshment for the road.