King Arthur needs no introduction. A pseudohistorical king with mythological antecedents, the literature concerning him runs continuously from the early Welsh material to last year’s miniseries *Merlin,* and last week’s ad for the Excalibur Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas. The Arthur of tradition has changed as he has moved from culture to culture and language to language, but a few works have served as watersheds, influencing almost everything that came after them. These include Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniam (History of the Kings of Britain)*; the works of Chrétien de Troyes; and Sir Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur.* Occasionally, however, a piece of literature has survived which is outside the loop. Lady Charlotte Guest brought some of these to international attention in 1848 with her translation of the *Mabinogion,* containing Arthurian prose narrative material.

One such work, “The Dialogue Between Arthur, King of the Bretons, and Gwenc’hlana,” is especially important because it is one of the few Arthurian narratives recorded from Brittany. As J. E. Caerwyn-Williams points out, Brittany was probably the conduit by which the Celtic tradition concerning Arthur found its way to a wider audience in France and England. Most of the evidence for this is inference and the sources claimed by later writers—for instance, Marie de France’s claim to have translated Breton *lais.*

The poem itself belongs to a branch of Arthurian tradition concerning the prophecies of Merlin. The two characters featured in this poem are
called Arzur and Guinclaff (also Guinglaff or Guynclaff). The identity of Arzur as King Arthur is secure. Arthur is a key figure in the Breton literary corpus, from the *Lais* of Marie de France to nineteenth-century fairy tales. Moreover, the sound change of -th-/ð/ to -z-/ð/ or /h/ is regular. 

Gwenc’hlan is a more mysterious figure. His wildness and his prophetic abilities tie him to Merlin, the Irish Suibhne Geilt, and the Scottish Lailoken. His name is unique to this poem, and something of a problem. In this article, I have followed French and Breton literary convention of using the modernization *Gwenc’hlan*. This form, often used for personal names, derives from Hersart de la Villemarqué’s *Barzaz-Breiz*. In the manuscript form of the name, the element -claff is cognate with Welsh claf and modern Breton klañv, meaning sick, weak, or ill. Gwin is the word for wine in both Welsh and Breton, and it is possible that the name simply means *Wine-sickness*. But the word for white or holy in Welsh is gwenn (gwenn in Breton), and if the name were part of insular tradition, as is Arthur, it might mean *Holy illness* or, more loosely, *Madness*. A better modernization might be Gwenglañ, voicing the c /k/ to g /g/ in the second element (already seen occasionally in our text) and the change from final -aff /af/ to -añ /ã/.

The poem opens with a strange scene: King Arthur “grabs” Gwenc’hlan, and forces him to prophesy. What follows is a long list of disasters, culminating in the English takeover of Brittany. The method of capturing a wild man in order to make him prophesy is a familiar theme in Celtic literature. In the folk-tale *Kontadenn Jozebig* (Little Joe’s Tale), the heroine must find a way to capture “wild Merlin who is in the woods over there.” Throughout the Merlin tradition, the wild man figure is elusive and marginal, but once captured his words take a traditional shape. The poetry and even the events prophesied are well attested in Celtic tradition, further linking this Gwenc’hlan to other aspects of Merlin.

Vaticinatory poetry is known throughout Europe and the Near East, but

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20 Jackson (n. 11 above) 593.
is particularly strong in Celtic tradition. 17 Geoffrey of Monmouth did bring
this tradition out of the Celtic vernacular, but later English, French, and
German writers did not continue it. 18 One of the earliest prophetic poems
is the Welsh Armes Prydein, which predicts the return of Cynan and
Cadwaladr to save their people. Armes Prydein dates from around A.D.
900. 19 The Breton material is not as old nor as well known as the Welsh
vaticinatory poetry, but it is equally interesting. The Dialogue Between
Arthur, King of the Bretons, and Gwenc’hlan is a dialogue poem, a
subtype of vaticinatory poetry, much like the Ymddiddan Myrddin a
Thaliesin, the Dialogue of Merlin and Taliesin. 20 It predicts a series of
disasters and describes the chaos of a then-future sixteenth-century
Brittany. The prophet Gwenc’hlan foretells the return of the “true heir” of
Brittany, Henry son of Henry, before the eventual takeover by the English.

The poem is a 247-line work written in Middle Breton, probably
composed in the mid-fifteenth century. Breton is a Brythonic Celtic
language, still spoken by around 500,000 people in the departments of
Finistère, Côtes-d’Armor, Ille-et-Vilaine, and Morbihan. 21 It is closely
related to Cornish and Welsh, and more distantly to Gaelic. Largillière’s
date of 1450 was confirmed by Gwennole Le Menn: the poem was
composed toward the end of Brittany’s independence, at a time when the
power of the centralized French and English states were growing. 22
Brittany was annexed to France some eighty years after the composition of
the poem, and eighty-seven years before the 1617 date of the manuscript.
What we have now was copied in 1710 by Dom le Pelletier from two
manuscripts, one of which was dated 1619. Le Pelletier himself tells us
that there were once more than 247 lines, but he did not copy the addition.
In his dictionary Le Pelletier even cited a word, orzail, as used by
Gwenc’hlan, though no such word appears in the text. 23

No English translation has ever been published. The only available
edition in translation is in French, by Largillère in 1929. Breton lexi-

17Margaret Enid Griffiths, Early Vaticination in Welsh with English Parallels (Cardiff
1937) 26–55.
18The History of the Kings of Britain (n. 4 above) 170–185.
19Sir Ifor Williams, Armes Prydein: The Prophecy of Britain, trans. Rachel Bromwich
(Dublin 1982) xiv.
20Jean Balcou and Yves Le Gallo, Histoire Littéraire et Culturelle de la Bretagne (Paris
1987) 155.
22Gwennole Le Menn, “La Littérature en Moyen-Breton de 1350 à 1650,” Questions
d’Histoire de Bretagne: Actes du 107e Congrès National des Sociétés Savantes (Brest 1982)
92.
1929) 629.
cography and comparative Celtic linguistics have progressed immeasurably since then, and information is available to which Largillière could not have had access. Using these tools, I have presented the text and translation here with a short introduction but no in-depth analysis due to space limitations.

The Dialogue Between Arthur and Gwenc’hlan has been published three times in full, once within Largillière’s French translation in 1929, once in the journal Steredenn (1941), and once in the Breton journal Hor Yezh (Our Language) in 1994, with no translation.24 I have chosen to use the Breton text from the latter because of what appear to be errors in the former, such as the misreading of gourfenn as gourseann (n. 5 below). I have noted the variant readings from the Annales de Bretagne article in each case in notes at the end of the text.

Folklore and Mythology
UCLA
Los Angeles, CA 90095

An Dialog Etre Arzur Roe d’an Bretounet Ha Guynglaff
(testenn glok)
l’an de Notre Seigneur mil quatre cent et cinquante

Dre Gracz Doe ez veve,
N’en devoe ezdrez evo en beth
Nemet an delyou glas,
N’en devoe quen goasqet,
An rese en beve
N’endevoe quen boet.
Didan un capel guel ez voe

Nos ha dez en e buhez en beth,
Digant Doe en devoe e gloar en eff,
Ha ne manque quet.
Dre Graçç Doe ez gouuie,
Donediguez’ flam an amser divin illuminet.
An Roe Arzur en ampoignas da sul,
Pan savas an heaul un mintin mat,
Ha dre cautel ha soutildet
Ez tizas e dorn, hac e quemeret.
Maz goulennas outaff hep si
En hanu Doe; me hoz supply,
D’an Roe Arzur ez liviry
Pebez sinou a coezo glan,
E Breiz quent finuez an bet man2

Na pebez feiz, lavar aman:
Pe me az laquay e drouc saouzan.

GUYNGLAFF
Me a lavar dit adeffry,
Quement a crenn a goulenny,
Diouziff a gouvezey,3 nemet da maru ha ma hany,
Cals a fizio en beth muy evyt en Ilis,
An-tra-se a coezo dre vicz,
Huy guelo etre tut a Ilis
Baelien hep nep justicç,
Pep foll a goulenmo officcç.

The Dialogue Between Arthur, King of the Bretons, and Gwenc’halan
(complete text)
the year of Our Lord 1450

Through the grace of God he lived,
He had, beside [the fact that] he was
in the world,
Nothing but the green leaves.
He didn’t have as much of a shelter
As the other ones who lived.
He didn’t have as much food.
He was seen beneath a hood
[or: behind a chapel]
In his life in the world he had glory
From God night and day
And he didn’t lack [anything].
Through the grace of God he knew
How to illuminate the bright gift of
holy time.

King Arthur grabbed him on Sunday,
When the sun rose one fine morning
And through guile and subtlety
He seized his hand, and took him.
If you asked me without fault
In the name of God, I beg you,
You will tell King Arthur
What holy signs will befall
In Brittany before this world comes
to an end.
By my faith, tell (me) here:
Or I will put you into wicked confusion.

GWENC’HALAN
I will tell you seriously,
As much as you will ask
You will know from me, except your
death and my name.
Many will trust in the world, more still
in the church
The former will fall through vice.
You will see among the people of the
church
Priests without any justice.
Every madman will seek office.
"THE DIALOGUE"

ARTHUR

Lavar Guinglaff, me a pet,
En hanu Doe, so Roe dan beth,

Quent evit an guez da donet.

Tell, Gwenc’hlan, I pray,
In the name of God, who is king
of the world,

What signs will certainly befall,
Before the time still to come.

GWENC’HLAN

You will see before it comes
The summer and the winter mixed,

And you will not know the time in
the world

Even from the trees in leaf,
Or from the official feasts.

Then extreme troubles will come.
The hair on the head of the young
will turn gray

With the ephemeral trouble
[which has] arrived.
The world will be so sparse,
No one will live to see it manifest.

You will see, if you live,
Before the time to come,
The people of the church disguised.
The worst earth will produce the best,
And the debauched married best;

And a heresy will be published
Throughout Christianity, you will see,
And will hold to the greatest sorrow
Before the earth comes to an end.

You will see, before the end,
Heretics with wicked minds,
How everyone will look to tear
apart custom

The faith that God is king and chief,
And because of that will punish you
heavily,

If pity sees you
Before the time still to come.

ARTHUR

Lavar diff Guinclaff, me a pet,
En hanu Doe me a pet dan beth,

Quent evit an guez da donet.

Tell me Gwenc’hlan, I pray,
In the name of God who is king of
the world,

What will befall
Before that thing arrives.
ANTONE MINARD 173

GUINGLAFF

Pan vezo Duc en Estampes,
Ne vezo den en Breiz hep reux,
En bloaz mil pemp-cant, triuent,
ha dec,
Ez vezo an peuch criet,
Maz lavarer e pep kaer—⁶ gouezet!
Ez vezo an bresel finisset.
En bloaz mil-pemp-cant hac unnec
Ez savo mension meurbet
A bresel ha ne pado quet.
En bloaz douzec ha triuent
Ez vezo bresel ha meruent.
En bloaz triuent ha trizec
Ez vezo an beth dipreder
En esamant tout entier.
Goude-se⁷ ez deuy deury
Sauson cals ha diamesidy
A deuy hep si diouz Orient,
Dren bro gant gourdroux⁸ ha cry,
A laquay Breiz e mil sourcy,
Oz breselquuat peur defry.
E truigent ha pevarzec
Pan vezo da sul dez Nedelec.
Guerz⁹ da cezec, ha pren yt,
Ha martese ez vezo ret.
En bloaz triugent ha pemzejec,
Ez vezo an yt difiget.
En bloaz seiz ha pevaruguent,
Ez collo en Autronez ho rent:
Ilis ha terrien antier oll e collint sederⁱ⁰
Doufarz ha trederenn ez ranner.
En bloaz mil pemp cant pevarugent
hac eiz,
Ez vezo truez gant bresel e Breiz:
Ha quent pevarugent¹¹ hac eiz,
Ez vezo adare he guir aer e Breiz
Herry map Herry, ha dou baron

GWENC’HLAN

When the duke comes to Estampes,
There will be no man in Brittany
without hardship.
In the year 1570
Peace will be cried,
When it is spoken in every town, [*] known!
The war will be finished.
In the year 1511
(=1571, 1500+[60]+11)
A great rumor will be raised
Of war which won’t last.
In the year [15]72
There will be a war and they will die.
In the year [15]73
The world will be carefree
In complete happiness.
After that a flood of Englishmen
will come,
Many and solitary,
And will come without a doubt
from Lorient
Through the country with couriers
who cry
And put Brittany into a thousand cares,
Waging war quite seriously.
In [15]74
When Christmas falls on a Sunday,
Sell your mare, and buy corn,
And perhaps it will be necessary.
In the year (15)75,
The corn will be unappetizing.
In the year (15)87,
The lords will lose their rent:
Every church and landowner will lose
[his] cheerfulness
Two thirds and one third will be divided.
In the year 1588,
There will be mercy along with war in
Brittany,
And before [15]88,
The true heir will once again come into Brittany.
Henry son of Henry and two of
A deuy, ne fazio quet,
Diabell bro, hag a vezo enoret
Hac a laquay Breiz hep moneyz.
Cals a calon mam a vezo rannet,
Hag yvez lazet;
Hac ez vezo entre pep ty
An bresel criet.
Un laez a savo a Goelou,
Hac a taulo Breiz oar he guenou.
Neuze ez lazer pep Autrou
Gant clezeffiou dir hac armou.
Her dre-vezo a savo a Goelou.
Pep tieuez a vezo goazha e rann.
Hac e metou tnouen Ry
Ez duy Jacob d’auber e ty.
Ha gode se glan damany
Ez vezo eno defry,
Ma forcher eno Abaty.
Da pep sort gant an flechy.
Oar creis pont Ry, hep nep si,
Ez savo alarm diboell ha cry,
Ha ne pedo nemeur ho cry.
Maz duy muguet mil digentil diblas,
Na vezo dezo comparaig,
Hac an rivier so hanvet Dourgaoat,
A chencho he liou, ha he stat.
Hac a hano ez duy an rivier un tro.
An tra se so estimet d’en bro,
Nep a vezo a guelo hep sy,
En guelo glan damany.
Cals a vezo a listry
Azrouantet digoezien.

Lavar Guinglaff, me a pet,
En hanu Doe so Roe d’an beth:
Petra vezo a coezo quet,
Pan vezo an-tra-se hoarvezet?

Huy a guelo oar an douar an guez
Discaret gant rust amser,
Hac an rivierou debordet,

Henry’s barons
Will come, there will be no mistake,
From a far country, and will be esteemed
And will leave Brittany with no money.
Many a mother’s heart will be divided,
And killed as well;
and between every house
War will be cried.
A thief will rise in Goëlo,
And will throw Brittany onto its knees.
And then each lord will be killed
With steel swords and arms.
Water will imitate them in the holy hills;
Every household will be worse in part.
And among the hills of Ry
Jacob will come to make his house.
And afterwards a holy domain
Will in truth be there,
When the abbey there is deprived
Of everyone but the gentlemen.
On the center of the Ry bridge, with no sign,
A hue and a cry will be raised from afar
And not much will endure their cry.
Where a lily-of-the-valley replaces
1000 noblemen,
There will be no comparison to them.
And the river called Bloodwater
Will change its bed [or color]
and its state [or bed].
And thence the river will come to a tower.
That thing is esteemed in the country:
There will be no one who sees faultlessly
In seeing the holy realm.
There will be many vessels,
Devils will fall.

Speak, Gwenc’halan, I pray,
In the name of God who is king
of the world,
What will befall
When that thing has happened?

You will see the trees on the earth
Fallen with rough weather,
And the rivers overflowed,
En amser maz metter an yt.
Car tut gaillard ha paillardet
Sicour a rencont da monet
Dre ho bezaff quent langouret.
        Pan vezo baeleien hep quet a reiz,
Ha gant an groaguez collet mez,
Hac eat caranter oar divez
Arriff eu gant Guengamp he guez,
Un Duc a deuy da Breiz a Francz,
A laquay an bro hep chevanz,
Ha hennez a collo gant tut e ty,
Dre re fiancz.
        Taillou a laqay cals meurbet,
Unan a deuy ne paehor quet.
En divez ez vezo cry gant manier, 16
Ha hoary creff.
Hac an trede a deuy a vezo defry
Maz dezrauo an devet gant cry,
Hep quet a si, ha tagaff a deufri,
Ha trechiff oar an holl beleien.
Er17 bloaz pevaruguent hac eiz,
Ez duy an Saouson e Breiz.
Donet a rahint a flot meurbet
Pa ne gouuezhor quet an pret.
An peuch querz a vezo criet
En bloaz quent evit ho donet
E Breiz e pep kaer gouuezet.
        Un duc a yalo a Breiz e Francz,
Gant meur gallout puissanzez,
Ha goude querz hep setancz
Er punisser dre martirizancz.
Hep faut pan vezo un guez couezet
Saouson e Perzell disquennet,
Ha Brest, ne fazio quet,
Da Leon ha da Guengamp—credet.
Pan ay an Saouson oar an mor
Da breselequat gant enor,
Ez deut an avel tempesteux
Maz vizint groet morehedus.
Ha dre hir spacz ez digachor,
Ha da Leon, ha da Treguer
Maz disquennint e teir bandenn,
E Brest, Goelou, han Praz guenn.
Sech vezo an bloaz maz deont
        In the time when the corn is gathered.
        Because people, merry and bawdy,
        Will need help to go
        Since they will be so languid.
        When the priests come with no right,
        And the women have lost shame,
        Let amity follow shamelessness.
        Guingamp’s time will arrive:
        A duke will come to Brittany from France
        And leave the country without wealth,
        And that one will lose through his
        household’s efforts,
        Through too much faith (in them).
        Taxes will be levied to such an
        extreme extent,
        One will come which will not be paid.
        Shamelessly it will be cried in a way,
        Which is mighty trouble.
        And the third one that comes will be serious.
        If the burning begins with a cry,
        With no sign at all, and serious strangling,
        And all the priests will be defeated.
        In the year [15]88,
        The English will come into Brittany
        They will come in a huge fleet.
        When, the moment will not be known.
        A usufructuary peace will be cried
        In the year before they come
        In every town in Brittany.
        A duke will come from Brittany into France,
        With great ability and power.
        And after walking without judgement,
        He will be punished, and made into a martyr.
        Without fault when a time will fall,
        Englishmen go down into Perzell,
        And Brest, there will be no mistake,
        To Leon and Gwengamp: believe it.
        When the English go to sea
        To make war with honor,
        A storm wind will come.
        They will be made late.
        And through a long space it will be sent
        Both to Leon, and to Tregor,
        Where they will come in three troops:
        In Brest, Goelo, and White Harbor.
        The year when they ought to come
down will be dry,
Rac an profecy a quelenn,
Hac pan prederhor bihanaff
Ez arrivint a credaff
Un sul beure e creis an haff.
Maz savo alarm gant armou
En Bretonery knech a thnou,
Hac etre tut burzudaou
Gant an alarm ha marvailou.
Brest ha Leon, han Porz-guenn
A quemerhint goude henn.
Sauson a futin arrivet guenn
A vezo quen theo ha guelvenn
Ahet an douar hac an lenn.
Goa nep a vezo o tifenn,
Ma ne vez e graçc Doe Roen glenn,
Y a losquo canoliou,
Evit lazaff an tut a armou,
Ha laquat sig oar an kaeriou,
Diquar questel ha thourellou,
Pan crier en Breiz an bresel18
Neuze ez vezo quen cruel,
Maz renquo an ezech fall ha groaguez
Monet da meruel ditruz.
Didan poan da vezaff dipennet,
Gourchemennet19 don dan Bretonet,
Couls dan-re diarm ha re armet,
Da stourm oz ho azraouantet monet
Maz dastumont fall ha seven,
Dre gourchemenn a un Capiten,
Gant armou fall ha paltogou,
Hac an groaguez a sicouro,
Maz maruint oll a strolladou:
Oar menez Bre a bagadou
Hac an Saouson dren hent hepmuiquen20
A vezo meurbet armet guenn.
Gouaz a vezo an Bretonet,
Mar techont oll eval deuet
Peur muhaff21 ez vezint lazet
Gant an Saouson dresonet.
Neuse ez ahint gant vaillantis
Da laquat sig oar Guengampis,
Maz vez Boy Ivon estonet
Rac ne gouuzie quet ho donet.

Because of the prophecy which teaches [it].
And when it is considered most minutely,
They will come, I believe,
One Sunday morning in midsummer.
When the alarm is raised with arms
In Brittany, hillside and hollow,
And there will be miracles among the people
With alarm and wonders.
Brest and Leon, and White Harbor,
Which they will take after this.
Englishmen from [???] arrive white
And will be as fat as souring milk
Along the land and the lake.
Nobody's lance will be there to defend them
If it’s not through the grace of God, 
king of this world,
They will fire the cannons
To kill the men at arms,
And put a sign on the towns.
When war is cried in Brittany.
Then it will be so cruel
Where the wicked men and women must
Go to death without mercy.
Under the pain of being beheaded,
[It will be] firmly commanded to the Bretons
As much to the those without weapons
as to those with arms
To struggle against the devils coming
Where they will gather, wicked and polite,
Under the command of a captain,
With evil arms and cloaks.
And the women will help
If all of the troops die.
In Ménébré both the troops
And the English, by means of the road and no more,
Will have a ton of bright arms.
The Bretons will be the worse
If they all flee like they came
When the greatest [of them] are killed
By the mad English.
Then they will go with valor
To put a siege on Guingamp
When Boy Ivan is astonished
Because he didn’t know they were
An madou a vezo cuzet,
Hac en toullou cuz taulet,
Hac an porziou clos a hast serret,
Dre hasart don gant canoliou
Ez pilhont fier an mognueriou
Hac ez disquarhont an muriou,
Ha terrif e Guengamp an holl camprou,
Ha pillat oll an oll madou,
Hac an oll tut en em rento.
Hac entre breman ha neuse
Ez vezo spount bras, rac se,
Rac en divez n’arriuie.
Pan vezo Guengamp disquaret,
Ez forzhor groaguez ha merchet
Hac ez lazher ezech ha pautred
Ha Doe an fet a permetto
Dem reuengiaff hon punisso.
An Saouson a yal a darre,
Hep nep remed, a eston
En un bandenn an oll Saouson
Da quemeret e Breiz possession.

Ego d.y. Queu escripsi die decima sexta Augusti anno Dñi 1619.

I Kev (cave) wrote this on August 16, Anno Domini 1619.
1. Doediguez—AB 1929.
2. Pebez sinou e Breiz a coezo glan, Quent finuez an bet man, AB 1929.
4. guelo, mar—AB 1929.
5. goursenn—AB 1929 (untranslated)
6. AB 1929 has kaer gouezet with no omission noted.
7. Goud-se—AB 1929.
8. gourdrousc—AB 1929.
9. GuezAB 1929
10. oll a commanço seder—AB 1929
11. pevaruguent—AB 1929
12. laerz—AB 1929
13. drevezo—AB 1929
14. Abbaty—AB 1929
15. deza—AB 1929
16. mainer—AB 1929
17. En—AB 1929
18. breseliou—AB 1929
19. Gourchermennet—AB 1929
20. equipet—AB 1929
21. mihaifi—AB 1929
22. groaguez—AB 1929
23. dan—AB 1929
24. Hon punissa evit em reuengaff
25. yalo hoaz—AB 1929
26. remod a estoc—AB 1929
27. Quen—AB 1929