In the broad historical narrative of the Brut, Laȝamon’s brief narrative of King Leir in lines 1450-1861 is easy to pass over in favour of the more amplified or celebrated accounts of Arthur and his immediate predecessors, such as Vortigern or Constantine. In contrast, the more familiar story of Leir and his daughters seems like an interlude. This brief narrative passage nonetheless plays a significant role in the Brut’s historiography. To overlook it would be to overlook an important episode in Laȝamon’s developing conception of history and its relation to land and ruler. It is important to note that Leir is the fourth and final king in a series of early eponymous founders of cities, in company with Ebrauc (York: l. 1334), Leil (Carlisle: l. 1388), Bladud (Bath: l. 1241), and Leir (Leicester: l. 1455). As such, the Brut’s Leir narrative contributes both to the development of the British landscape and to insular history. In Laȝamon’s account, more so than in those of his precursors Geoffrey of Monmouth and Wace, the Leir narrative addresses fundamental questions of succession and the relationship of successful interpretation to leadership.¹ In the latter capacity, Laȝamon’s Leir resonates with his own role as historian and translator.

¹ In Geoffrey of Monmouth, the narrative covers 126 lines of prose (Historia Regum Britanniae, II, §31, ll. 133-259). Wace expands Geoffrey’s account to 402 lines (Wace, Roman de Brut, ll. 1655-2050). Laȝamon’s expansion to 431 lines is not extensive. Quotations from Geoffrey’s Historia are taken from Geoffrey of Monmouth: The History of the
In examining the three versions of Leir – Geoffrey of Monmouth’s, Wace’s, and Laȝamon’s – we find that the narrative outlines appear almost identical: Wace follows Geoffrey in portraying Leir as an ageing king who arranges his own succession by dividing the land among his three daughters, with the stipulation that each daughter publicly profess her love to him. Laȝamon follows this narrative outline, but places emphasis on the impact of the succession upon the kingdom and the nature of the verbal exchanges between Leir and his daughters. While Wace follows Geoffrey closely in highlighting Leir’s need to marry his daughters well because of his advancing age, Laȝamon – not even mentioning marriage in his plan – directs attention in his translation to the succession crisis and to the fate of the land.

Besides succession, Laȝamon’s translation of the Leir story foregrounds the issue of reading and interpretation as central to the transition of authority. In Laȝamon’s Brut, Leir’s ultimate failure and loss of authority are also exemplified through his inability either to

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2 The plan for division reiterates, or perhaps parodies, the inherited Galfridian narrative of the subdivision of the land among the three sons of Brutus, with each giving his name to the province he inherits, the obvious difference being the continued hegemony under the eldest son Locrin in the earlier episode.

3 “Cumque in senectutem uergere coepisset, cogitauit regnum suum ipsis diuidere easque talibus maritis copulare qui eadem cum regno haberunt” (Geoffrey, Historia Regum Britanniae, Book II, ll. 139-41, 38-39): “When Leir began to grow old, he decided to share his kingdom with them and give them husbands worthy of themselves and their realm.” Wace shifts the emphasis even further in the direction of marriage: “Quant Leir alques afebl / Come li huem ki enveilli, / Comensa sei a purpenser / De ses tres filles marier’ (Roman de Brut, ll. 1675-78): “When Leir became rather feeble, as a man does on growing old, he began to think of marriages for his three daughters.” In Laȝamon’s version, two daughters are apparently already married, so Leir’s concern is only with partitioning the kingdom among his daughters according to their degrees of filial affection.