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Wild Wales: How Cultural Discrimination Transformed Merlin from Brittonic Legends to French Arthurian Romances

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How Cultural Discrimination Transformed Merlin from Brittonic Legends to French Arthurian Romances

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by

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Dedication

To Laura and William Lawrie

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my parents, Laura and William Lawrie, for homeschooling me and educating me in Latin and Greek, for introducing me to Arthurian legend when I was young through the Magic Tree House series and later Mary Stewart's Merlin Trilogy and the Mabinogion, and for giving me a medieval LEGO Advent calendar one Christmas and making me a wooden sword and papier-mâché shield. Thank you for listening and giving feedback every time I needed to talk through my arguments for this project.

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Table of Contents

Introduction

*"So, Britons, give a laurel wreath to Geoffrey of Monmouth. He is
indeed your Geoffrey . . ."* —Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Vita Merlini*[1]

The legend of King Arthur and his knights of the round table is one of the best-known stories in the Western world. Countless versions have been and continue to be made, from Lord Alfred Tennyson's nineteenth-century poems entitled *Idylls of the King* to the BBC TV series *Merlin* (2008–2012). Generally people tend to associate Arthurian legend with fifteenth-century English writing, starting with Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*; some are aware that these stories existed earlier, in high medieval French romances such as Chrétien de Troyes' twelfth-century poem *Lancelot, le Chevalier de la Charrette* (Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart). In reality, Arthurian legend seems to have had its origins even earlier, in Brittonic oral tradition, little of which exists in written form beyond various undateable poems in Middle Welsh that were later compiled into texts such as the *Llyfr Du Caerfyrddin* (Black Book of Carmarthen, c. 1250), the Mabinogion (c. 1350), the *Llyfr Coch Hergest* (Red Book of Hergest, c. 1382), and the *Trioedd Ynys Prydein* (Triads of the Island of Britain, undateable), but all of which contributed to the earliest accessible complete Arthurian legend in a form similar to the stories known today, written in the early twelfth century in Latin by the Cambro-Norman[2] cleric Geoffrey of Monmouth.

Geoffrey (c. 1095–c. 1155) was born in the Welsh marches, the borderlands between twelfth-century Wales and England, and he was educated on the continent, probably in Paris.

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[1]"Vos ergo, Britanni,/ laurea serta date Gaufrido de Monemuta./ Est etenim vester" (Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Vita Merlini*, ed. Clarke, 134, l. 1525–1527).
[2]Cambro-Norman refers to the population of integrated Normans and Welsh of twelfth-century Wales, brought about by the Norman conquest of England.

Very little else is known about him apart from the three texts that he wrote: *Prophetiae Merlini* (Prophecies of Merlin, c. 1135, later included in his *Historia*), *Historia Regum Britanniae* (History of the Kings of Britain, c. 1136)*,* and *Vita Merlini* (Life of Merlin, c. 1150), which he dedicated to Robert, Earl of Gloucester, one of Henry I of England's illegitimate but high-ranking sons. Geoffrey's *Historia* contains a full narrative of Arthur's conception, birth, and heroic deeds, and became the main source of material used in the first French Arthurian romances, via a Norman French[3] translation by the Norman poet Wace (c. 1110–c. 1174), titled the *Roman de Brut* (1155).[4]

The term "Brittonic" refers to the people living on the island of Britain and in Brittany in northern France, now known separately as the Welsh, Cornish, and Bretons. The Britons, the collective term for all Brittonic peoples, are considered by virtue of their language roots to belong to one of the branches of "Celtic" peoples, a term used not by the Britons themselves but by the Greeks and Romans, referring to the general population of what is now western Europe. The other Celtic language branch is Gaelic, which encompasses Irish, Scots, and Manx. The Greco-Roman use of the word "Celt" to refer broadly to any Brittonic or Gaelic tribe set a precedent for Latin-dominated cultures' treatment of Brittonic peoples and Gaelic peoples, often specifically the Irish, as barbarians, viewing them as a collective Other to themselves. This manifested especially after the subjugation of Brittonic populations, in three stages: first by the Romans from the first to fifth centuries, who viewed Brittonic culture as savage and imposed their own practices and beliefs on the Britons; then by the Germanic Angles and Saxons from the

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[3]A dialect of Old French that emerged from Viking integration in northern France.
[4]Julia Crick, "Monmouth, Geoffrey of," and Jean Blacker, "Wace," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography.* Online.

fifth to eleventh centuries, who did not attempt to assert themselves as culturally superior to the

Britons but who invaded eastern Britain and pushed the Britons into western Britain; and finally

by the French Normans in 1066, who continued forcing the Britons to the western extremes of

Britain.[5] Through that thousand-year period, Roman authors and Brittonic and Irish clerics

writing in Latin formed a perception of the Britons, and of the Irish, as savage, uncivilized, and

lesser, and of the places they inhabited as the "edge of the world." In the first century, Tacitus (c.

55–c. 120), a Roman historian and senator, described an army of Britons in his *Annales*:

> Standing on the shore was the opposing army, a dense formation of
> men and weapons. Women in black clothing like that of the Furies
> ran between the ranks. Wild-haired, they brandished torches.
> Around them, the Druids, lifting their hands upwards towards the
> sky to make frightening curses, frightened [the Roman] soldiers
> with this extraordinary sight. And so [the Romans] stood
> motionless and vulnerable as if their limbs were paralysed. Then
> their commander exhorted them and they urged one another not to
> quake before an army of women and fanatics. They . . . struck
> down all resistance . . . After that, a garrison was imposed on the
> vanquished and destroyed their groves, places of savage
> superstition.[6]

Tacitus' depiction reveals how Romans saw the Britons: a terrifying army with women who

resemble the Furies, Greco-Roman goddesses of revenge, and Druids bringing curses down on

them from the heavens. The majority of Romans did not start practicing Christianity until the

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[5]"Briton," "Norman Conquest," and "Roman Britain," in *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Online.
[6]"Stabat pro litore diversa acies, densa armis virisque, intercursantibus feminis; in modum
Furiarum veste ferali, crinibus deiectis faces praeferebant; Druidaeque circum, preces diras
sublatis ad caelum manibus fundentes, novitate aspectus perculere militem ut quasi haerentibus
membris immobile corpus vulneribus praeberent. dein cohortationibus ducis et se ipsi
stimulantes ne muliebre et fanaticum agmen pavescerent, . . . sternuntque obvios . . . praesidium
posthac impositum victis excisique luci saevis superstitionibus sacri" (Tacitus, *Annales*, Lib XIV,
Cap xxx; transl. Koch).

fourth century, so these Roman soldiers were pagans, which meant that for them the Furies and curses were the ultimate sign of doom. Tacitus' shift directly after expressing this fear to viewing the Brittonic army as "women and fanatics" who take part in "savage superstition" shows that the Romans, while being terrified, genuinely viewed the Britons as not only strange but also uncivilized and therefore lesser than the Romans themselves. Although Tacitus does not use the terms "civilized" or "uncivilized," this distinction is implicit in the way he describes the "savage" Britons in opposition to the Romans.

After Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century, a new genre of "Celtic" criticism arose: self-condemnation by Brittonic and Irish religious men writing in Latin. Gildas, a sixth-century British monk living in Brittany and educated in a Latin system, wrote in *De excidio et conquestu Britanniae* (On the Ruin and Conquest of Britain) that "The island of Britain is situated in almost the furthest limit of the world"[7] and that its inhabitants "present their backs, instead of their shields, to the pursuers, their necks to the sword . . . they hold forth their hands to be bound like women; so that it was spread far and wide as a proverb and a derision: the Britons are neither brave in war nor in peace faithful."[8] He writes about his own people with contempt, calling them cowards. The comment about the "furthest limit of the world," first appearing in Gildas' writing, seems initially to be a harmless geographical misconception, but it later becomes an insult used to refer to both Brittonic and Irish people as being as far from civilization as possible. The idea of Britons having their hands

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[7]"Brittannia insula in extremo ferme orbis limite" (Gildas, *De excidio Britanniae,* p.14, 3, l. 1–3; transl. Williams).

[8]"turga pro scuto fugantibus dantur et colla gladiis, gelido per ossa tremore currente, manusque vinciendae muliebriter protenduntur, ita ut in proverbium et derisum longe lateque efferretur, quod Britanni *nec in bello fortes sint nec in pace fideles*" (Gildas, *De excidio Britanniae,* p. 20, 6, l. 7–11; transl. Williams).

"bound like women" is reflective of Tacitus' reference to the army of Britons as "women and fanatics." Gildas' motivation for his negative portrayal of the Britons is unclear, but it would seem that because of his Latin education he viewed his origins in the same way that the Romans did.

Similarly, Adomnán of Iona (c. 624–704), an abbot of Iona Abbey off the western coast of Scotland, writes in the *Vita Columbae* (Life of Saint Columba) that he has used in this text "words . . . in the poor Irish language, strange names of men and peoples and places, names which I think are crude in comparison with the different tongues of foreign races."[9] He apologizes for his own language, being originally Irish himself; his apology is directed to his readers, who would all also be Latin-educated clerics. The same can be seen with Nennius, a ninth-century Welsh monk, who writes in his *Historia Brittonum* (History of the Britons, c. 828), "I . . . have endeavored to write some extracts which the dullness of the British nation had cast away."[10] Nennius himself is British, but refers to Britons collectively as dull. The Latin word he uses, *hebetudo*, can also mean "weakness," recalling Gildas' similar derision of the Britons.

All three of these authors—Gildas, Adomnán, and Nennius—are themselves part of the population that they condemn, and therefore their condemnation is bizarre. It is less surprising when it comes from non-Britons or non-Irish, such as Tacitus before them, and St. Bede the Venerable (c. 673–735), an Anglo-Saxon theologian and historian[11] who wrote in his *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (Ecclesiastical History of the English People, c. 731) that St.

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[9]"nec ob aliqua Scoticae, vilis videlicet linguae, aut humana onomata, aut gentium diversas vilescunt linguas" (Adomnán of Iona, *Vita Columbae*, Praefatio I; transl. Sharpe).

[10]"Ego . . . aliqua excerpta scribere curavi, quae hebetudo gentis Britanniae dejecerat" (Nennius, *Historia Brittonum*, Apologia, 3; transl. Giles).

[11]"St. Bede the Venerable," in *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Online.

Augustine attempted to get "seven bishops of the Britons" to join him in "preaching the Word of

God to the English nation" and promised that "we will gladly suffer all the other things you do,

though contrary to our customs" and when the Britons refused, Augustine "threatened them, that

. . . if they would not preach the way of life to the English nation, they should suffer at their

hands the vengeance of death."[12] The disrespect that Augustine shows to the Britons, by first

expecting them to join him in spreading Christianity as long as he deigns to accept their customs,

and then threatening them when they refuse, is typical of Bede's writing, throughout which he

depicts the Britons as unconciliatory and therefore impossible to respect; but this treatment of the

Britons makes more sense coming from Bede, who has no connection whatsoever with them,

than it does coming from Gildas, Adomnán, and Nennius. All three of these authors, however,

were educated outside of their original cultures, within the structure of Christianity which was

brought to the British Isles by Latin-speaking populations, mainly Romans, and therefore they

are all hybrids of Latin and Brittonic or Irish culture. Because the Latin culture was at the time

considered more civilized, their education within it led them to favor it and therefore to adopt its

opinion of the Britons and Irish.

After the Norman Conquest and the arrival of the Normans and then the Angevins[13] in

Britain, degradation of the Britons became even more pronounced, not only due to cultural

imbalance but also for political reasons. Geoffrey of Monmouth, writing for the Angevin court,

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[12]"VII Brettonum episcopi . . . 'genti Anglorum una nobiscum uerbum Domini praedicetis; cetera, quae agitis, quamuis moribus nostris contraria, aequanimiter cuncta tolerabimus.' . . . Quibus uir Domini Augustinus fertur minitans praedixisse, quia . . . si nationi Anglorum noluissent uiam uitae praedicare, per horum manus ultionem essent mortis passuri" (Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, Lib II, Cap ii).

[13]The royal household of Anjou, a region in central France, ruled over England in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, specifically Henry II.

ends his *Historia Regum Britanniae* by saying of the Britons "they were given the name of

Welsh (*Gwalensis*) instead of Britons (*Britones*) . . . deriving either from their leader Gualo, or

from their Queen Galaes, or else from their being so barbarous."[14] Since he himself grew up in

Wales, calling the Welsh barbarous seems extreme. In fact, even the term "Welsh" is not

Brittonic in origin but Old English, introduced by invading Saxons, and the tribe that lived in

what is now Wales referred to themselves as *Cymru*, a term that Geoffrey does not use. Wace, in

his translation of the *Historia*, introduces Geoffrey's sentiment into the French language as "The

Welsh have quite altered and quite changed, they are quite different and have quite degenerated

from the nobility, the honor, the customs and the life of their ancestors."[15] Both Wace and

Geoffrey are hinting at previous greatness and current degeneration; this is one difference from

Gildas, who never suggested that the Britons were at any time noble but rather claimed the

opposite.

In his *Topographia Hibernica* (Topography of Ireland, 1187), Gerald of Wales

(1146–1223), the royal clerk of Henry II of England, calls the Irish "barbarous . . . a wild,

inhospitable people; living only on beasts and like beasts"[16] and says of Ireland that "sometimes

tired, as it were, of the true and the serious, [nature] draws aside and goes away, and in these

remote parts indulges herself in these secret and distant freaks."[17] The Latin word that he uses for

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[14]"Tunc autem Britones sunt appellati Gwalenses, sive a Gwalone, duce eorum, sive a Galaes regina, sive a barbarie vocabulum trahentes" (Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Britanniae*, Lib XI, xii. 19; transl. Thorpe).

[15]"Tuit sunt mué e tuit changié,/ Tuit sunt divers e forslignié/ De noblesce,/ d'onur, de murs/ E de la vie as anceisurs" (Wace, *Roman de Brut*, l. 14851–4).

[16]"barbarus . . . gens silvestris, gens inhospita; gens ex bestiis solum et bestialiter vivens" (Gerald of Wales, *Topographia Hibernica,* Dist III, Cap x).

[17]"Quoties quippe, tanquam seriis et veris fatigata negotiis, paululum secedit et excedit, remotis in partibus, quasi verecundis et occultis natura ludit excessibus" (Gerald of Wales, *Topographia Hibernica,* Praefatio II).

"wild" is *silvestris*, meaning "of the woods," which suggests a more explicit meaning for the difference between civilized and uncivilized, civilized people being those who live in cities rather than in the forest with animals. Gerald also refers to Wales in his *Itinerarium Cambriae* (Journey through Wales, 1191) as "Wild Wales"; on the one hand, he calls Wales "Kambriae," the Brittonic term, respecting the Brittonic language in a way that Geoffrey does not; but on the other, he refers to Wales as "horridos" which means wild, rough, frightening, or disgusting.[18] Gerald's writing reaches the pinnacle of anti-Brittonic and anti-Irish sentiment, and it is particularly telling that he, like Geoffrey, was born in the Welsh marches and then educated in Paris, where he received, according to Robert Bartlett, "the highest learning that the Latin West could offer" (Bartlett, 3).[19] He was firstly employed by Henry for an expedition to Ireland and later by the Archbishop of Canterbury for a journey through Wales, after which he wrote his *Topographia Hibernica* (Topography of Ireland, 1187), *Itinerarium Cambriae* (Journey through Wales, 1191), and *Descriptio Cambriae* (Description of Wales, 1194). All three of these were written in Latin for clerics, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the Angevin royal family, not for a general audience, and reveal a substantial amount of explicit anti-Irish and anti-Welsh prejudice, which either Gerald himself felt or which he portrayed in order to cater to his patrons. The perspective of Gildas, Adomnán, and Nennius as hybrids who favored the opinion of their dominant culture can also be applied to Geoffrey and Gerald, to explain why they would be so dismissive of a substantial part of their cultural origins.

Both the Welsh and the Irish were heavily targeted throughout these writings, from Gildas to Gerald, and specifically the concept of "Wild Wales," a place inhabited by barbarians,

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[18]"horridos Kambriae" (Gerald of Wales, *Itinerarium Cambriae,* Praefatio).
[19]Robert Bartlett, *Gerald of Wales*, 1982.

existing at the edge of the world or at least at the edge of England, became the perceived identity

of the Welsh by the twelfth century. However, this was not how the Welsh perceived themselves.

Very little Brittonic writing survives, but what does survive combats the "Wild Wales"

stereotype. The best example is in *Llyfr Taliesin* (The Book of Taliesin), a text made up of a

variety of poems by Taliesin, a Brythonic poet who lived during the sixth century and traveled

back and forth between Wales and Brittany.[20] The text itself is dated somewhere between the

tenth and fourteenth centuries. Taliesin briefly mentions Merlin and Arthur in these poems, and

in the largest, titled *Armes Prydein* (The Prophecy of Prydein), he presents a detailed and

depressing prophecy about the future of Britain. Part of it reveals the destruction of the Britons

and part of it is hopeful that the invaders will be driven out:

> "The Muse prophesies that the French will hie away—
> that their folk with their property will fly with them— . . .
> Remnants will the Brythons [Britons] be when they triumph . . .
> A world-sadness will arise, from insubordination, when the
> Normans shall be our lords.
> The Trinity will avert the blow that is meditated—
> the destruction of the Brython home by the Saxons."[21]

Taliesin's prophecy provides insight into the viewpoint of the conquered, rather than the

conquerors. He views all of these groups of people—French, Britons, Normans, and Saxons—in

an equal light, the only difference between them being that the French, Normans, and Saxons are

invaders and the Britons are his people. The idea of "world-sadness" is elegiac. The language

used is not derogatory, and there is no savageness in this poem or in any of Taliesin's poetry.

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[20]T.M. Charles-Edwards, "Taliesin," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography.*
[21]"Dygogan awen *Ffreine* dygobryssyn./ maraned a meued a hed genhyn . . . / Atporyon uyd
Brython pan dyorfyn . . . / dechymyd tristit byt a ryher./ Pan uyd kechmyn Danet an teyrned./
Gwrthottit trindawt dyrnawt bwyller./ y dilein gwlat Vrython a Saesson yn anhed" ("Armes
Prydein," in *Llyfr Taliesin*, ed. Evans, l. 1–2, 12, 39–42).

Considering that the Britons were vilified by their conquerors, specifically the Romans and the Normans, it is strange, almost inexplicable, that Brittonic oral and written folklore would become the backbone of an entire tradition of French literature, the Arthurian romances. It is even more questionable that Geoffrey addresses the Britons by saying that he is "indeed, your Geoffrey" and deserves a laurel wreath for writing his *Historia*; a history that is false because Geoffrey claims that all Britons were descended from the Trojans.[22] Geoffrey implies that he is doing the Britons a service, while he disparages their descendants, the Welsh. The nuance in Geoffrey's writing is that he does in fact appear to uphold the Britons in their former greatness. William of Newburgh (1136–1198), an English Augustininan canon[23] and a relentless critic of Geoffrey, says in his *Historia rerum Anglicarum* (History of English Affairs) that Geoffrey "has unscrupulously promulgated the mendacious predictions of one Merlin, as if they were genuine prophecies . . . I make no mention of his fulsome praise of the Britons, in defiance of the truth of history . . . he subsequently relates that the same Arthur was mortally wounded in battle, and . . . retired into the island of Avalon . . . not daring, through fear of the Britons, to assert that he was dead—he whom these truly silly Britons declare is still to come."[24] William perceives Geoffrey's *Historia* as a text written in praise of and sympathetic to the Britons, which complicates Geoffrey's intentions, complicated further by the fact that William's identity as English, descended from Anglo-Saxons with no connection whatsoever to the Britons, creates a

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[22]Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Britanniae,* Lib I, i. 3.
[23]John Taylor, "Newburgh, William of," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography.* Online.
[24]"cujusdam Merlini divinationes falacissimas, quibus utique de proprio plurimum adjecit . . . tanquam autenticas, & immobili veritate subnixas prophetias vulgavit . . . Omitto quaecunque in laudibus Britonum contra fidem historicae veritatis deliveravit . . . quod eundem Arturum postea refert in bello letaliter vulneratum . . . abiisse in illam . . . insulam Avallonis: propter metum Britonum non audens eum dicere mortuum, quem adhuc vere bruti Britones expectant venturum" (William of Newburgh, *Historia rerum Anglicarum*, Prooemium).

distinction between his total condemnation of the Britons as an outsider, like the Romans, and

Geoffrey's criticism of the Welsh as an insider. The *Historia* therefore appears to have both

criticism for the present and praise of the past, a distinction between the Welsh and the Britons,

although the Britons are not only a population of the past because William mentions that the

Britons still believe that Arthur will return.

Another nuance in Geoffrey's writing is his management of pagan material in a Christian

society. Although Britons had been exposed to Christianity since before the sixth century, when

Gildas was writing, the majority of what Geoffrey writes about Merlin in his *Historia* is derived

from pagan, or at least pre-Christian, Brittonic legends, which Geoffrey attempts to fit into the

confines of Christianity in which there is only one God and anyone not associated with that God

must be related to a demon. Geoffrey simultaneously includes several explicit pagan myths in his

Vita Merlini, without any need to make them fit into the concept of Christianity. This is because

the pagan elements of the *Vita Merlini* are largely Greek and Roman, from classical antiquity and

therefore even before the introduction of Christianity into Roman society. In particular Geoffrey

makes sense of the pagan aspects of Merlin by identifying them directly with Greek myths; he

refers to the people on the Isle of Avalon who will heal Arthur, in Brittonic legend the *Sidhe* or

fairies, as "nymphs."[25] He then includes a reference to the classical distinction between the

Greeks and the Celts, with Merlin giving a description of a type of bird that can tell whether

someone is "a barbarian or a Greek."[26] According to Geoffrey, Greek paganism is superior to

Brittonic paganism, and Geoffrey's association of Brittonic paganism with Greek myth makes

the Brittonic material fit explicably into his narrative despite not being Christian. Chapter I of

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[25]"nimpharum" (Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Vita Merlini,* ed. Clarke, 112, l. 1124).
[26]"barbarus an Grecus" (Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Vita Merlini,* ed. Clarke, 126, l. 1374).

this senior project will provide an extended analysis of paganism and Christianity in Geoffrey's Arthurian works.

If Greek legend is superior, and the Welsh generally are perceived as inferior, why would Geoffrey write about the Britons, and particularly about Arthur and Merlin? Despite criticism of the Britons and later the Welsh, Latin-speaking populations seem to have had a fascination with Brittonic stories, and even with Brittonic people and places themselves. The "wildness" that each author depicts seems to be both gruesome and attractive. Although wildness carries negative connotations in Gerald's *Itinerarium Cambriae*, it is the main plot point of Geoffrey's *Vita Merlini*, in which Merlin goes mad after a battle and flees to live like a wild animal in the woods, a story derived directly from a variety of Brittonic and Irish legends. Geoffrey does not condemn Merlin's wildness in the *Vita Merlini*; he appears to heroicize it, in the same way that William perceives him heroicizing the Britons in the *Historia*. There will be an in-depth examination of this perception of wildness in Chapter II.

Merlin, specifically, represents the concepts of Brittonic paganism and wildness more than any other Arthurian character. He has two separate origins: the legendary pagan Brittonic prophet who, like Taliesin, delivers prophecies on the doom of Britain; and the wild man of the woods, depicted in three poems in the *Llyfr Du Caerfyrddin*. Although Merlin's Brittonic origins seem to place him with the Britons, whom Geoffrey appears to praise, Merlin's actual characteristics are more specifically Welsh, reflective of the Latin-speaking populations' critical mindset of "Wild Wales." Both Geoffrey of Monmouth and Gerald of Wales struggled to fit Merlin into their notions of Christianity and civilization, and in the same way that they viewed the Welsh negatively, they created negative connotations around Merlin's paganism and wildness

in order to make sense of him. Curiously, the transition of Geoffrey's Latin material on Merlin into French Arthurian material does the opposite. The earliest French writings on Merlin are by Robert de Boron (13th century, birth and death dates unknown), who adopted the negative changes to Merlin which Geoffrey made, and turned them into something positive.

Almost nothing is known about Robert de Boron, except that he possibly came from Montbeliard in eastern France and he wrote three poems about Arthurian legend, one on the Holy Grail, one on Percival, one of King Arthur's knights (now lost), and one on Merlin.[27] His early thirteenth-century poem *Merlin*, also converted to prose form, later made up a substantial part of the *Estoire de Merlin* in the thirteenth-century *Lancelot-Grail* or the Vulgate Cycle (1215–30), the first full cycle of Arthurian legend, written by various unknown authors, and the foundation of Arthurian romance. Robert de Boron very likely knew about Geoffrey's *Historia* through Wace's translation, and he adopted Geoffrey's plot almost exactly, but he made specific changes to the character of Merlin that reverse the connotation of Geoffrey's alterations. This can be seen very clearly in three parts of the story of Merlin as it transitions from Brittonic to Latin to French material: firstly, Geoffrey and Robert de Boron transform Merlin's identity in opposite directions to explain the origins of his "magician" abilities, namely prophecy and magic, as will be examined through the lens of Christianity in Chapter I; secondly, they adjust, with very different methods, the concept of madness in order to make the figure of Merlin the madman or the wild man more "civilized," which will be explored in Chapter II; and thirdly, while Geoffrey represents Merlin's role at court as someone who serves the king, Robert de Boron changes Merlin into someone who controls the court, enabling a more intimate relationship between

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[27]"Robert de Boron," in *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Online.

Merlin and the various kings he meets, which leads to the sudden appearance in the Vulgate

Cycle of increasingly personal interactions between Merlin and Arthur, a concept which will be

analyzed in great detail in Chapter III.

There has already been a great deal of scholarly discussion on Brittonic sources and their

influence on French romances. As Roger Sherman Loomis argues in *Arthurian Literature of the*

Middle Ages (1959), the mass of Welsh and Breton personal names and place names in French

Arthurian legend are the result of such legends being transmitted orally among Wales, Cornwall,

and Brittany. Various scholars have disagreed with Loomis' argument on the basis that it is

impossible to prove anything regarding oral traditions; but Loomis' work provides an

explanation for these names appearing in their Brittonic form and not in their Latin form, as they

would have to if Geoffrey were the main source for all French authors of Arthurian romance, and

also provides a basis for possible sources for Arthurian French romance outside of Geoffrey's

Latin texts, which in turn suggests reasons for the difference in approach between Geoffrey and

French authors such as Robert de Boron.

Various works have examined the treatment of the Britons, particularly the Welsh, as

barbarous, in the context of Norman culture and politics in twelfth-century England. As Hugh M.

Thomas suggests in *The English and the Normans: Ethnic Hostility, Assimilation, and Identity*

(2003)*,* "a negative image of the Celts" meant that "the English [Anglo-Saxons] could be placed

alongside the Normans and French as part of the cultivated, civilized world."[28] Therefore the

reference to "Wild Wales" would have served to unify the Normans and the English, who the

Normans also treated as lesser, although not as much as the Welsh. In *Wales and the Medieval*

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[28]Hugh M. Thomas, *The English and the Normans: Ethnic Hostility, Assimilation, and Identity,*
311, 314.

Colonial Imagination (2014), Michael Faletra argues that Anglo-Norman and French authors appropriated Brittonic Arthurian legends; Arthurian romances were "the output of several generations of writers working for Norman and Angevin audiences" and because of this, Geoffrey's *Historia* "ultimately justifies the Normans and denigrates the Welsh."[29] Because Geoffrey was born in Monmouth, on the border of Wales, he had a "sort of 'dual citizenship'" which meant that he could "glorify the ancient Britons out of a sense of supposed pan-Celtic pride *and . . .* engage as an ally of the Normans with issues of topical concern to his English patrons."[30] As Faletra points out, Geoffrey uses the Anglo-Saxon word "Welsh" instead of the Brittonic word "Cymry" as a linguistic power move to subvert the Welsh, and he uses the myth of a Trojan lineage for all of the Britons to justify that Britain was meant to be colonized, firstly by the Trojans and then by the Normans.[31] Both Thomas and Faletra analyze the exploitation of the Welsh, Thomas more broadly and Faletra focused on Arthurian legend, but neither examine the cultural implications in French Arthurian romances derived from Geoffrey's *Historia* and a general degradation of the Welsh alongside a sudden interest in their legendary material.

Substantial work has been done specifically on Geoffrey of Monmouth, Gerald of Wales, and the political implications of their writings on Merlin and other Arthurian material, mostly regarding the in-between cultural position that both Geoffrey and Gerald occupy as a result of their birth in Wales but their education and employment as part of Anglo-Norman society. As Paul Dalton suggests in *The Topical Concerns of Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia Regum Britanniae: History, Prophecy, Peacemaking, and English Identity in the Twelfth Century* (2005)*,*

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[29]Michael Faletra, *Wales and the Medieval Colonial Imagination,* 10, 16.
[30]Michael Faletra, *Wales and the Medieval Colonial Imagination,* 21.
[31]Michael Faletra, *Wales and the Medieval Colonial Imagination,* 24, 41–42.

Geoffrey's *Historia* might have been a warning to the Anglo-Norman ruling class that they might lose their power over England in the same way that "the Britons [did] to the Saxons, [and] the Saxons to the Normans."[32] In contrast, as Julia Crick argues in *The British Past and the Welsh Future: Gerald of Wales, Geoffrey of Monmouth and Arthur of Britain* (1999)*,* Geoffrey and Gerald distanced themselves from their Welsh origins and simultaneously took advantage of the benefit of those origins: "[their] border connections proved an asset. These men had access to a body of lore and information enormously appealing to a twelfth-century audience, but inaccessible without the mediation of Welsh speakers."[33] Their use of this lore is considerably reprehensible: "Both [Geoffrey and Gerald] traded, more or less disreputably, on a British heritage and exploited their sources . . . Both put British material into the service of the Anglo-Norman king."[34] These arguments, when specifically applied to an examination of character changes in Merlin, help to give some understanding of the nuances in Geoffrey's contrasting treatment of the Britons and the Welsh, and paganism and Christianity, by suggesting that he struggled between his own two identities of Welsh and Norman.

Work specifically on Merlin often focuses on his prophecies rather than his character. As Paul Zumthor points out in *Merlin, le prophète: un thème de la littérature polémique de l'historiographie et des romans* (1945), later versions of Arthurian legend completely forgot about the prophecies of Merlin, and particularly lose the literary role of political prophecy, which Zumthor refers to as disappearance of the "thème du Prophete." Because Merlin's political

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[32]Paul Dalton, *The Topical Concerns of Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia Regum Britanniae: History, Prophecy, Peacemaking, and English Identity in the Twelfth Century*, 694.

[33]Julia Crick, *The British Past and the Welsh Future: Gerald of Wales, Geoffrey of Monmouth and Arthur of Britain,* 63–64.

[34]Julia Crick, *The British Past and the Welsh Future: Gerald of Wales, Geoffrey of Monmouth and Arthur of Britain,* 75.

prophecies, for example about the future of Britain, do not get adopted into French romance, and because they are somewhat separate from Merlin's identity, only associated with him by name, it is difficult to examine them alongside an analysis of Merlin's character transformation, and therefore this senior project will briefly acknowledge them but not analyze them in depth. The discourse on Merlin's character is often limited to the shift between Brittonic and Latin material, not including French; one exploration by Neil Thomas in *The Celtic Wild Man Tradition and Geoffrey of Monmouth's "Vita Merlini": Madness or "Contemptus Mundi?"* (2000) examines the possibility of Geoffrey's conversion of the character of Merlin in the *Vita Merlini* from a wild man to a saint, possibly to make Merlin more palatable to Geoffrey's Catholic audiences. Viewing this argument alongside an analysis of Merlin's French wild man identity reveals a substantial amount about the role of Christianity in the works of Robert de Boron and later French Arthurian romance authors, suggesting that it is not quite as important to them as it is to Geoffrey.

The changes made in the character and the narrative of Merlin, from Brittonic legend to Latin writing and then to French romances, reflect a political and cultural shift in Britain. While the Britons were being vilified, their legends about Merlin and other Arthurian figures were found to be entertaining and were adopted and altered to suit the values of the Anglo-Normans and then the French. An examination of Merlin in the various stages of his transformations, alongside contextualization of the relevant medieval concepts of prophecy, magic, madness, anger, servitude, and intimacy, will reveal the respective motivations of Geoffrey, Robert de Boron, and the authors of the Vulgate Cycle, and will suggest a subversion of the treatment of the Britons and later the Welsh. This examination will also reveal how the evolution of Merlin's

specific interactions with kings, particularly his relationship with Arthur, contributed to the

emergence of the high medieval romance literary genre through Robert de Boron's *Merlin.*

Chapter I: Demons and God

The Origin of Merlin's Abilities

When most people hear the name "Merlin," they immediately picture an old wizard like the one in Disney's *The Sword in the Stone* who helps the puny Wart (Arthur) escape his harsh life working in a castle and pull a sword out of a stone to become king. Others associate the name with the young warlock in the BBC TV series *Merlin* (2008–2012) who becomes Prince Arthur's manservant and is forced to hide his magical abilities because King Uther has proclaimed magic illegal, a show that made Merlin an LGBTQ+ icon for many. Some people with an interest in literature will have read *The Once and Future King* by T. H. White or Mary Stewart's *Merlin Trilogy,* or other novels based on Arthurian legend, and will have other similar images of Merlin which revolve around his magical abilities and his association with King Arthur. These various different storylines all stem from the French Arthurian romances of the Middle Ages, which depict Merlin as a powerful wizard who makes Arthur into a great king.

However, Merlin's actual origins, found in Brittonic legends, are far from this depiction. For the Britons, the natives of Brittany in Northern France and of mainland Britain, now the Welsh, Cornish, and Bretons, Merlin was firstly known as a prophet, someone who could predict the future. There is limited access to Brittonic legends about Merlin, because many accounts would only have been circulating orally, and most written Welsh, Cornish, and Breton accounts are either entirely lost or difficult to date, but a few clear sources of Merlin as a prophet exist. One is the sixth-century Brythonic poet Taliesin. He refers to "Myrdin" in his Welsh poem

Armes Prydein (The Prophecy of Prydein), saying no more than "Myrdin prophesies . . ."[35] followed by a complex prophecy about the fate of Britain, called Prydein in Welsh, and its Saxon and Norse invaders. There are also three poems in the *Llyfr Du Caerfyrddin* (Black Book of Carmarthen, c. 1250), and three poems in the *Llyfr Coch Hergest* (Red Book of Hergest, c. 1382), which include prophecies made by Myrddin about the future of the Britons, one of which he makes during a conversation with Taliesin.

The transition from Merlin as a prophet to the wizard Merlin of Arthurian romances, and of today, partly emerged from a conflict between Merlin's identity as a pagan or non-Christian prophet, and binary Christianity in which prophecy comes from only either God or demons and therefore pagan prophets must fit into one of those categories. In fact, Merlin's prophetic abilities are particularly notable among other pagan prophets such as classical Greek mythology's Cassandra and the various sibyls, because while they all have pre-Christian narratives that do not change with the appearance of Christianity, Merlin's narrative unexpectedly expands within a Christian world. Christianity had been active in the British isles since around the third century alongside and combined with worship of various Celtic gods, but the Norman invasion of Britain in 1066 established the Catholic church as the main religious power there, leaving little to no room for pagan practices. Before that establishment, Taliesin presented Merlin's prophetic powers without any explanation, allowing Merlin to exist as a pagan figure. In contrast, twelfth-century Latin accounts about Merlin show that the source of his prophetic ability created consternation because of his pagan status.

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[35]"Dysgogan Myrdin" (Taliesin, "Armes Prydein" in *Llyfr Taliesin,* ed. Evans, 160, l. 17).

For Christians, particularly those writing about Merlin in Britain in the twelfth century, true prophecy could only come from God. Prophecy in the Bible, even in the Old Testament before the coming of Christ, was a message from God spoken through someone on earth: "the Lord God doth nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets,"[36] and God "hath promised through the mouth of his holy prophets, which have been since the world began." [37] The majority of Old Testament prophecies described the coming of the Messiah, for example Isaiah in the Old Testament saying that "a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel."[38]

The discourse on pagan versus Christian prophecy stems from various theologians such as Augustine of Hippo, who tried to make sense of prophets who existed outside of Christianity. Augustine, a late fourth- and early fifth-century Roman theologian, attributed the majority of pagan prophetic ability to the influence of the "evil spirit" or the devil. He says in *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber* (The Literal Interpretation of Genesis: Unfinished Book) that "when the evil spirit takes hold of a man, he makes him either devilish, or possessed, or a false prophet."[39] He creates a distinction between being possessed and being a false prophet, saying that being possessed by a demon does not automatically mean that possessed individuals will deliver false prophecy and that they might in fact deliver true prophecy. Augustine also allows for pagans to have received their prophetic powers from God, and claims in *De civitate Dei*

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[36]"non facit Dominus Deus verbum,/ nisi revelaverit secretum suum ad servos suos prophetas" (Saint Jerome, *Latin Vulgate,* Amos 3:7).

[37]"sicut locutum est per os sanctorum,/ qui a sæculo sunt, prophetarum ejus" (Saint Jerome, *Latin Vulgate*, Luke 1:70).

[38]"ecce virgo concipiet, et pariet filium,/ et vocabitur nomen ejus Emmanuel" (Saint Jerome, *Latin Vulgate*, Isaiah 7:14).

[39]"cum malus in haec arripit spiritus, aut daemoniacos facit, aut arreptitios, aut falsos prophetas" (Augustine of Hippo, *De Genesi ad litteram*, xii, 19).

contra paganos (On the City of God against Pagans) that the prophecies of the Erythræan sibyl, a Greek prophet, were influenced by the Christian God because she spoke of "Jesus Christ the Son of God, the Savior."[40]

Christian prophecy in accord with Biblical prophecy had existed in the British isles since at least the sixth century. The Irish abbot Adomnán of Iona, writing in the late seventh century, describes in his *Vita S. Columbae* (Life of Saint Columba, c. 700) how Columba, a sixth-century Irish saint, received the rare power of prophecy as a "special privilege"[41] from God. In Adomnán's account, Columba's special privilege of prophecy enables him to deliver God's message of victory to the English king Oswald when Oswald is fighting Cadwallon, the king of the Britons. The night before the battle, Oswald "had a vision of St Columba . . . [who] having revealed his name to the king . . . gave him these words of encouragement . . . 'This coming night go out from your camp into battle, for the Lord has granted me that at this time your foes shall be put to flight and Cadwallon your enemy shall be delivered into your hands and you shall return victorious after battle and reign happily.'"[42] Columba uses his prophetic powers the way a prophet from the Bible would, to help those who God wants him to help. His language is Biblical and in his prophecy about King Oswald's victory he attributes his message directly to God by saying that "the Lord has granted me that . . . you shall return victorious."

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[40]"dicens Sibyllae Erythraeae . . . Ἰησοῦς Χρειστὸς Θεοῦ Υἱὸς Σωτὴρ: quod est latine, Jesus Christus Dei Filius Salvator" (Augustine of Hippo, *De civitate Dei contra paganos*, xviii, 23).
[41]"talis honorificentiae" (Adomnán of Iona, *Vita S. Columbae,* "Incipit Liber Primus," i).
[42]"sanctum Columbam in visu videt . . . [qui] suum regi proprium revelans nomen . . . haec confirmatoria contulit verba . . . 'Hac sequenti nocte de castris ad bellum procede; hac enim vice mihi Dominus donavit ut hostes in fugam vertantur tui, et tuus Catlon inimicus in manus tradatur tuas, et post bellum victor revertaris, et feliciter regnes'" (Adomnán of Iona, *Vita S. Columbae,* "Incipit Liber Primus," i).

When asked how his prophetic revelations are revealed to him, Columba says, "There are some people—few indeed—to whom the grace of God has given the power to see brightly and most clearly, with a mental grasp miraculously enlarged, at one and the same time as if lit by a single sunbeam, even the entire orbit of the whole earth and the sea and sky around it."[43] Prophetic ability is rare, according to this statement, and in a sense reflects God's all-knowing power, because Columba can see the future in so many facets and in such a broad scope. The all-knowing aspect of prophecy links it to the omniscience of God. Columba, and Adomnán by extension, does not refer at this moment to any other kind of prophecy that would be influenced by demons, although Adomnán likely would have been aware of Merlin as a prophetic figure.

Geoffrey of Monmouth, a twelfth-century Cambro-Norman cleric, is the first to attribute Merlin's prophetic powers to a demon. He is also the first to write down a backstory and narrative for Merlin beyond something that Merlin prophesies. He creates the story of young Merlin in his *Historia Regum Britanniae* (History of the Kings of Britain, 1136), borrowing an episode from the *Historia Brittonum* (History of the Britons, 828) by Nennius, a ninth-century Welsh monk, in which a boy prophet named Ambrose prophesies to the Briton king Vortigern and tells him the meaning of two dragons underneath Vortigern's tower, which are making the tower collapse. Ambrose is "a child without a father"[44] but later reveals that "a Roman consul was my father."[45] Geoffrey replaces Ambrose with "Merlin, who was also called Ambrosius"[46]

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[43]"Sunt nonnulli, quamlibet pauci admodum, quibus divina hoc contulit gratia, ut etiam totius terrae orbem cum ambitu oceani et coeli uno eodemque momento, quasi sub uno solis radio, mirabiliter laxato mentis sinu, clare et manifestissime speculentur" (Adomnán of Iona, *Vita S. Columbae,* "Incipit Liber Primus," xxiii).

[44]"infantem sine patre" (Nennius, *Historia Brittonum*, 40).

[45]"unus est pater meus de consulibus Romanicae gentis" (Nennius, *Historia Brittonum*, 42).

[46]"Merlinus, qui et Ambrosius dicebatur" (Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Britanniae,* Lib VI, vi. 19).

and follows Nennius' story, making Merlin a boy without a father, but then instead of continuing

with Nennius' inexplicable contrast of the boy suddenly having a father (a Roman consul),

Geoffrey introduces Merlin's mother describing how she conceived Merlin by being impregnated

by an incubus demon,[47] a demon in male human form.

       The concept of Merlin as the son of a demon takes on a major role in Merlin's narrative

in the French poet Robert de Boron's twelfth- or thirteenth-century poem *Merlin*, the first text in

Old French about Merlin. The poem itself only exists in fragments, but the prose version of it,

which is also attributed to Robert, begins with a council of demons deciding to conceive Merlin:

> Then the Enemy spoke amongst themselves and said: "Those who
> do us most harm therefore are those who tell the news of his
> coming, they are the ones through whom great sorrows have come
> to us. Because the more they said it, the more we tormented them;
> and it seems to us that he hastens to come to help and succour them
> because of the torment that we inflict on them. But how could we
> have a man who disguises and suffers our senses and our powers
> and our character as we have it? Because we have the power to
> know all things done, said and happened, and if we were to have a
> man who had this power and who suffers these things, and he was
> with the other men on earth, he could really help us to trick them,
> just like the prophets who were with us tricked us and told us that
> which we do not believe could be. So he will say things that will
> be done and said both far and near, and will be through this greatly
> believed by many men."[48]

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[47]"inter lunam et terram habitant maligni et immundi spiritus quos incubos daemones vocant . . . Forsitan aliquis illorum huic mulieri stuprum intulit et in ea iuvenem hunc generavit" Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Britanniae,* Lib VI, vi. 18).

[48]Lors [li enemi] parolent entr'eus et dient: « Cil qui nos ont plus nuit si sont cil qui dirent noveles de sa venue, ce sont cil par qui li graindres domaiges nos est venuz. Quar quant il plus le diseient, et nos plus les tormentoiens: si nos est avis que se hasta de venir por els aidier et secorre por le torment que nos lor feismes. Mais comment porriens nos avoir un home qui pallast et deist noz sens et noz pooirs et nostre afaire si com nos l'avom? Car nos avons pooir de savoir toutes choses faites, dites et alees, et se nos avoiens .I. home qui de ce eust pooir et qui deust ces choses, et il fust avec les autres homes en terre, cil les nos porroit mout aidier a engingnier, ansi

Robert would have adopted the idea of Merlin as the son of a demon from the Norman poet

Wace's Norman French translation of Geoffrey's *Historia*, the *Roman de Brut* (1155), but rather

than just using Geoffrey's story about Merlin being born of an incubus demon and leaving it at

that, Robert goes into depth about how and why this could happen. He shows that the demons

needed someone on earth, more specifically among the people, to influence them into demonic

control. The demons, referred to as "the Enemy" for the obvious reason that they are enemies of

God, compare such a figure to the prophets on the side of Christ and God, and their desire for an

equivalent man arises from their resentment of these prophets. They were "tricked" and they

want someone who can trick everyone similarly. They frame Merlin as the antichrist version of

the prophet, someone who is both parallel and completely opposite, and is intended for similar

use to the antichrist.

With this, Robert's demons do more than just conceive Merlin: they explain why he has

the ability to prophesy. The demons "have the power to know all things [that have been] done,"

and they will give their creation this power and "he will say things that will be done." Merlin is a

prophet because the demons make him one, which gives an entirely new context to his long

history of prophecy and his fame from it, because of the malignance of anything demonic.

Whereas Merlin was formerly a figure vaguely featured in a narrative, in a neither benign nor

harmful position where his prophecies were the center of the events of that narrative, through

first Geoffrey of Monmouth and then Robert de Boron he takes on a seemingly dark role where

he has the potential to be evil.

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com li prophete nos engingnoient qui estoient avec nos et nos disoient ce que nos ne cuidoions
pas que estre poïst. Ansi diroit il les choses qui seroient fetes et dites et loing et pres, si seroit par
ce molt creu de maint home » (Robert de Boron, *Merlin,* ed. Micha, 21–22, l. 60–77).

William of Newburgh, a twelfth-century English historian and Augustinian canon,

condemns Geoffrey for this version of Merlin. He writes in his *Historia rerum Anglicarum*

(History of English Affairs, 12th c.) that Geoffrey "declares that . . . Merlin was the issue of a

demon and woman, and . . . attributes to him the most exact and extensive knowledge of futurity;

whereas, we are rightly taught, by reason and the holy scriptures, that devils . . . can never by

meditation arrive at the cognizance of future events; though from signs themselves, more evident

to them than to us, they may predict events to come rather by conjecture than by certain

knowledge."[49] William voices what many twelfth-century Christians would have thought, that

demon prophets are usually lying if they claim to predict the future, and therefore that any

prophecies which they deliver are entirely false. However, as William allows, through some

method which no one can properly understand, certain demonic-influenced people can be true

prophets.

Indeed, Merlin is not the only Brittonic prophetic figure whose prophetic ability is

ascribed to demons in the twelfth century. Gerald of Wales, a twelfth-century Norman-Welsh

archdeacon and historian living just after Geoffrey and influenced by him, refers to a group of

soothsayers called "Awennithion" in his *Descriptio Cambriae* (Description of Wales, 1194) who

he says act as if they are possessed. The elements of this possession manifest in three ways:

"When you consult them about some problem, they immediately go into a trance . . . [and] do not

answer the question put to them in any logical way . . . If by chance they are questioned a second

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[49]"Et hunc quidem Merlinum patre incubo daemone ex femina natum fabulatur: cui propterea tanquam patrissanti excellentiffimam atque latiffimam trbuis praescientiam futurorum: cum prosecto & veris rationibus & sacris litteris doceamur, daemones à luce Dei seclusos futura nequaquam contemplando praescire: sed quosdam futuros eventus ex signis sibi quam nobis notioribus, conjiciendo magis quam cognoscendo colligere" (William of Newburgh, *Historia rerum Anglicarum,* Prooemium, 7).

or a third time on the same matter, they give completely different answers."[50] Gerald, attempting to make sense of the strangeness of the trance and riddles, suggests, "It is possible that they are speaking through demons which possess them, spirits which are ignorant and yet in some way inspired."[51]

The features of possession that Gerald describes—specifically going into a trance, illogical responses or responses in riddles, and different answers the second and third times of being questioned—are also found in nearly all of the texts about Merlin prophesying, the only exception being that the trance state disappears in French accounts. In Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Prophetiae Merlini* (Prophecies of Merlin, c. 1130), which he later included as a brief interlude in his *Historia Regum Britanniae*, Merlin "went into a prophetic trance"[52] right before revealing to Vortigern a series of prophecies about the future of Britain, and all of Merlin's prophecies are full of riddles.[53] The three separate answers form the core of an undateable Scottish legend about a madman Lailoken, also called Myrddin, who foretells his own death three different ways and then dies all three ways.[54] This story becomes known as the *triple death* and appears again in a slightly different form in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini* (Life of Merlin, 1150) and then changes yet again in Robert de Boron's *Merlin.*[55]

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[50]"Hi super aliquo consulti ambiguo, statim frementes spiritu quasi extra se rapiuntur . . . Nec incontinenti tamen quod desideratur edisserunt . . . Unde et, si forte super hoc iterum vel alio consulti dicere debeant, aliis omnino verbis et alienis enuntiabunt" (Gerald of Wales, *Descriptio Cambriae*, Lib I, Cap xvi).

[51]"forsan sicut per phanaticos et energumenos spiritus interdum loquuntui, quanquam ignaros" (Gerald of Wales, *Descriptio Cambriae*, Lib I, Cap xvi).

[52]"Mox ille in fletum erumpens spiritum hausit prophetiae" (Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Britanniae,* Lib VII, vii. 3)

[53]Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Britanniae,* Lib VII.

[54]*Lailoken (or Merlin Silvester)*, ed. Ward, transl. MacQueen and MacQueen, *Vita Merlini Silvestris.*

[55]See Chapter II.

Gerald gives another example of a demon prophet in the *Itinerarium Cambriae*, in a passage about a man named Meilyr, "who could explain the occult and foretell the future" and "acquired his skill" by meeting a beautiful girl who turned into a beast while he was "tasting her delights," at which point "his wits deserted him and he became quite mad."[56] During this bout of insanity, he suddenly gains the ability to prophesy, and although "[e]ventually he recovered his health . . . All the same, he retained a very close and most remarkable familiarity with unclean spirits, being able to see them, recognize them, talking to them and calling them each by his own name, so that with their help he could often prophesy the future."[57] Meilyr's prophetic ability comes to him through demonic influence, beyond any doubt, in a more definite connection than the Awennithion for whom demonic interaction was only "possible." Gerald even draws a line to the Bible to illustrate the state of demons on Meilyr's body: "When he was harassed beyond endurance by these unclean spirits, Saint John's Gospel was placed on his lap, and then they all vanished immediately, flying away like so many birds. If the Gospel were afterwards removed and the *History of the Kings of Britain* by Geoffrey of Monmouth put there in its place, just to see what would happen, the demons would alight all over his body, and on the book, too, staying there longer than usual and being even more demanding."[58] Demons control Meilyr's abilities

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[56]"futurorum pariter et occultorum scientiam habens; cui talis hanc eventus scientiam dedit . . . deliciis cum indulsisset . . . quod in ipso ejusdem aspectu dementire coepit et insanire" (Gerald of Wales, *Itinerarium Cambriae*, Lib I, Cap v; transl. Dimock).

[57]"optatam sanitatem recuperavit. Semper tamen cum spiritibus immundis magnam et mirandam familiaritatem habens, eosdem videndo, cognoscendo, colloquendo, propriisque nominibus singulos nominando, ipsorum ministerio plerumque futura praedicebat" (Gerald of Wales, *Itinerarium Cambriae*, Lib I, Cap v; transl. Dimock).

[58]"Contigit aliquando, spiritibus immundis nimis eidem insultantibus, ut Evangelium Johannis ejus in gremio poneretur: qui statim tanquam aves evolantes, omnes penitus evanuerunt. Quo sublato postmodum, et Historia Britonum a Galfrido Arthuro tractata, experiendi causa, loco ejusdem subrogata, non solum corpori ipsius toti, sed etiam libro superposito, longe solito

and "harass" him; but at the same time he has "familiarity" with them, which suggests that he enjoys his interactions with them.

Despite this demon control, Meilyr is not entirely evil. He helps Cynan, the Abbot of Whitland, repent of the sin of lusting after a woman, and reassures Hywel of Caerleon that King Henry II will not attack him.[59] This is not the only contemporary occurrence of a demonic figure playing a helpful role. Caesarius of Heisterbach, an early-thirteenth-century German Cistercian prior, discusses another "good" demon in his book *Dialogus Miraculorum* (The Dialogue on Miracles, 1223) in which he writes about "a demon who in human form was a faithful servant to a knight."[60] This demon rescues the knight from an attack by helping him safely to ford a river at an impossible point, and the man chasing the knight says, "none but the devil could have carried him across."[61] The demon also cures the knight's wife, and then confesses that he is a demon, and the knight discharges him but says, "Never did man serve man so well and faithfully."[62]

Merlin similarly displays characteristics of a "good" demonic figure. In the same way that Caesarius' demon is a "faithful servant to a knight," Merlin is a faithful servant to a series of kings in Geoffrey's *Historia*: first Vortigern, whose tower is collapsing and to whom Merlin explains that there are two dragons underneath the tower causing it to collapse; then the Briton king Aurelius, who asks Merlin to create a memorial for fallen Britons at Salisbury, to which

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crebrius et taediosius insederunt" (Gerald of Wales, *Itinerarium Cambriae*, Lib I, Cap v; transl. Dimock).

[59] Gerald of Wales, *Itinerarium Cambriae*, Lib I, Cap v.

[60] "De daemone, qui in specie hominis militi fideliter servivit" (Caesarius, *Dialogus Miraculorum*, Dist V, Cap xxxvi).

[61] "Non alius nisi diabolus illum transvexit" (Caesarius, *Dialogus Miraculorum*, Dist V, Cap xxxvi).

[62] "Nunquam homo homini servivit tam fideliter" (Caesarius, *Dialogus Miraculorum*, Dist V, Cap xxxvi).

Merlin offers to bring the rocks of Stonehenge all the way from Ireland; and finally Aurelius'

brother Uther, who is in love with Igerna of Cornwall, and Merlin disguises him as Igerna's

husband so that he can sleep with her.[63] The fact remains, however, that people were wary of

even a good demon; Caesarius' demon is dismissed from serving the knight, and both Meilyr and

Merlin are vaguely unwelcome at court, according to Gerald and Geoffrey, only brought there

when their powers can be of use to the king.

Gerald discusses prophecy itself in another passage from the *Descriptio Cambriae*, where

he tries to explain the origins of prophetic ability and flounders back and forth between prophetic

ability as demon-influenced or God-given. Gerald acknowledges something other than Christian

prophecy when he briefly refers to Calchas and Cassandra, who predicted the fall of the Trojans

in Homer's *Iliad*,[64] only saying that they were "endowed with the spirit of prophecy"[65] and not

attributing their prophetic powers to either God or demons. He does not give the same lenience

to Merlin, but he does not leave Merlin as a demon-influenced prophet either, as he does the

Awennithion and Meilyr. He begins by addressing the question "by what supernatural agency

such prophecies are made possible" and insists, "I do not necessarily say by sorcery or by the

intervention of evil spirits."[66] He quotes Saint Jerome, a fifth-century Roman priest, saying

"Prophets and all learned men admit that knowledge of events to come belongs to God above and

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[63]Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Britanniae*, Lib VI, vi. 19; Lib VIII, viii. 10; Lib VIII, viii. 19.

[64]Calchas and Cassandra are often Anglo-Norman writers' prototype for pagan prophets who can exist outside of the influence of either God or demons, mainly because Greek mythology substantially predates Christianity and Greek myths were used as anecdotes by medieval Anglo-Norman Christians. This is reflected in Geoffrey's constant comparisons between Brittonic legend or geography and Greek or Roman legend or Geography in his *Vita Merlini*.

[65]"vaticinii spiritum habentes" (Gerald of Wales, *Descriptio Cambriae*, Lib I, Cap xvi).

[66]"Sin autem quo spiritu proferantur hujusmodi, . . . inquiras, non dico quod pithonico, non daemoniaco" (Gerald of Wales, *Descriptio Cambriae*, Lib I, Cap xvi).

not to men. Therefore the prophets who foretold the future spoke by the spirit of God."[67] This

quote suggests that all prophetic knowledge comes from God, similarly to Augustine's argument,

which does not fit with Gerald's earlier discussion of the Awennithion being possessed by

demons. Gerald then examines exactly how prophecy must be connected to God. He writes, "if

they [prophets] were guided by the spirit of God, they would add, 'Thus spake the Lord God', or

some such words, when they were making their prophecies; . . . no such method of prophesying

is found in Merlin, so . . . what he said is merely sorcery."[68] This argument states that a reference

to God while prophesying is the sign of true prophecy, in the same way that Saint Columba

always referred to God or Christ when he was prophesying.

Addressing the state of possession in a prophet, as with the Awennithion, Gerald says,

"the prophets were not possessed when they prophesied, whereas we read that when Merlin

Silvester made his prophecies he was in a frenzy, and in the same way the other soothsayers

about whom I have written in this chapter [the Awennithion] seem to be possessed."[69] Gerald's

distinction between types of prophets seems to be that they are either prophets of God, or

soothsayers who appear to be possessed when they reveal the future, or Merlin, who is not yet

categorized. The naming of Merlin Silvester and reference to his frenzy is an allusion to the

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[67]"Confitentur arioli, et omnis scientia secularis, prsescientiam futurorum solius Dei esse, non hominum. Unde probatur prophetas spiritu Dei locutos, qui dixerunt futura" (Gerald of Wales, *Descriptio Cambriae*, Lib I, Cap xvi; transl. Dimock).

[68]"Ad hoc autem, quod objiciunt quidam, quia si spiritu Dei ducerentur, quandoque praemitterent, 'Haec dicit Dominus Deus,' vel aliquid in hunc modum, more prophetico; et quia talis prophetandi modus in Merlino non reperitur, eum potius pithonico spiritu locutum esse plerique conjectant" (Gerald of Wales, *Descriptio Cambriae*, Lib I, Cap xvi; transl. Dimock).

[69]"Objiciunt etiam quia prophetae non extra se fiebant, quando prophetabant: sicut de Merlino Silvestri legitur, quod amens factus prophetabat; et de his similiter quasi arreptitiis, de quibus hic locuti sumus" (Gerald of Wales, *Descriptio Cambriae*, Lib I, Cap xvi; transl. Dimock).

Scottish Lailoken, who gained his prophetic ability from going mad during a battle.[70] Gerald

adds that "evil men prophesy"[71] and that "we do not read that [Merlin] was saintly or that he

performed miracles,"[72] firmly placing Merlin on the evil, non-Godly and therefore demon side of

prophecy. He then contradicts that by alluding to the possibility that "those who suddenly receive

the spirit of God . . . for a time seem to have lost their reason"[73] suggesting that Merlin's "frenzy"

was a reaction to receiving the spirit of God. In the end Gerald seems not to know what to do

with Merlin, and leaves him hanging awkwardly somewhere in the space between a possessed

madman and a prophet with divine inspiration from God.

Whether or not Robert de Boron was aware of the tension surrounding Merlin's place in

the saint-or-demon prophetic divide, or whether he questioned Merlin's assigned demon status of

his own accord, he was clearly attempting to make sense of Merlin beyond demonic influence.

He does this by adding an element to Merlin's birth that had not been seen before in literature

about Merlin: the gift of prophecy directly from God.

> Our Lord who recognizes and knows all things, because of the
> repentance of the mother . . . and because of the power of baptism
> from which she had been washed at the [baptismal] font, Our Lord
> desired that the sin of the mother could not harm him [Merlin]: and
> he gave him power and the sense to know the things that were to
> come. For this reason he knew the things done, said, and happened,
> because he has them and retains them from the Enemy; and more
> than this Our Lord wanted him to know things that are in the future

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[70]*Lailoken (or Merlin Silvester)*, ed. Ward, transl. MacQueen and MacQueen, *Vita Merlini Silvestris.* This story of Merlin, a separate narrative from the Ambrose of Nennius, will be analyzed in Chapter II in the context of Merlin as a wild man in the woods.

[71]"prophetabant . . . mali" (Gerald of Wales, *Descriptio Cambriae*, Lib I, Cap xvi).

[72]"Merlini itaque fidem legimus, prophetiam legimus; sanctitatem ejus vel miracula non legimus" (Gerald of Wales, *Descriptio Cambriae*, Lib I, Cap xvi).

[73]"Nec mirum si illi, qui spiritum Domini, datamque desuper gratiam tantam subito suscipiunt, a terrenae mentis interim statu alienari videantur" (Gerald of Wales, *Descriptio Cambriae*, Lib I, Cap xvi).

that he had against the other things that he knew through the
character of the lower part [the demons]: and so he will take from
each what he wants, because if he wishes, he can return to the
devils their right and to Our Lord his own[.][74]

In the space of this single passage, Merlin goes from struggling through all of that tension and demonic identity to being God's man. Using this, Robert de Boron introduces a new way to explain Merlin. He acknowledges and accepts that Merlin's father is a demon, and accounts for it in detail by giving a reason for Merlin's conception. But then he needs to find a way to explain how Merlin does not end up as an antichrist figure, because Merlin is in danger of doing exactly what the demons want, turning the world toward demonic influence. Instead of allowing that narrative to follow itself through, Robert de Boron creates the opportunity for Merlin to turn to the side of God through his mother's repentance of having slept with an incubus demon.

And not only that; now Merlin has the power to choose either side. In Robert de Boron's version, God has given Merlin the power to see and foretell the future, and the demons have given him knowledge of everything in the past, and even through his mother's penance he does not lose what the demons gave him. He has prophetic power from both sides and he can freely choose to follow one or the other. At this moment Merlin seems to be more powerful than either a saint or a demon-influenced prophet.

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[74]"Nostre Sire qui tot conoist et set, por la repantance de la mere . . . et por la force de baptesme dont ele ot esté lavee au fonz, vost Nostre Sire que le pechié de sa mere ne li poïst nuire: si li dona pooir et sens de savoir les choses qui estoient a avenir. Par cestes raisons sot cist le choses faites, dites, et alees, car il les a et tient de l'enemi; et le surplus qu'il set des choses qui sont a avenir volt Nostre Sires qu'il deust contre les autres choses qu'il savoir por endroit de la soue partie: si se tenra a laquele que il veura, car se il volt, il puet rendre as deables lor droit et a Nostre Seingnor le suen" (Robert de Boron, *Merlin,* ed. Micha, 50–51, l. 18–39).

Merlin and Magic

As shown, Merlin's foremost power in the Brittonic tradition is prophecy. Since he will become a wizard by modern versions of stories about Merlin, it follows that there must also have been some origin of him having magical powers. However, magic in the middle ages was not defined exactly as it is today, and it is important to examine the historical role of magician figures in order to understand Merlin's magic, particularly within the context of Christianity.

Augustine defines magicians in comparison with holy men, saying, "When magicians do what holy men do, they do it for a different end and by a different right. The former do it for their own glory; the latter, for the glory of God: the former, by certain private compacts; the latter by the evident assistance and command of God, to Whom every creature is subject."[75] Although Augustine does not associate magicians with demons, he does not associate them with God either, but he says that both magicians and holy men can do the same thing. This strikes a parallel with his point, mentioned earlier, about possessed individuals having the ability to tell true prophecy as much as any of God's prophets, while not receiving the gift of prophecy from God.

Isidore of Seville, a sixth- and seventh-century Spanish cleric whose *Etymologiae* (c. 600–625) were for medieval scholars the most influential collection of information from Classical antiquity, notes the specific use of *magi* in the Bible: "The first interpreters of the stars

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[75]"Cum ergo talia faciunt magi, qualia nonnunquam sancti faciunt, talia quidem visibiliter esse apparent, sed et diverso fine et diverso jure fiunt. Illi enim faciunt quaerentes gloriam suam, isti quaerentes gloriam Dei: et illi faciunt per quaedam potestatibus concessa in ordine suo, quasi privata commercia vel veneficia; isti autem publica administratione, jussu ejus cui cuncta creatura subjecta est" (Augustine of Hippo, *De diversis quaestionibus*, VXXIX, 4).

were called Magi, as we read of those who made known the birth of Christ in the Gospels."[76]

Interpreters of the stars means people who could see the future by reading the stars, who were

therefore prophets. Isidore's pointing out that early magicians in Christianity were prophets is

relevant to the role magicians play throughout Latin material on Brittonic traditions.

In the *Vita Columbae*, Adomnán frames wizards (*magi*) in opposition to Columba. For

example, "The saint [Columba] was saying vespers as usual with a few brethren . . . and some

wizards came quite close to them, trying as best they could to make them stop. For they were

afraid that the heathen people would hear the sound of God's praise"; Columba responds by

"chant[ing] the forty-fourth psalm, and at that moment his voice was miraculously lifted up in

the air like some terrible thunder, so that the king and his people were filled with unbearable

fear."[77] Here the wizards are trying to avert Columba's godly power and influence, appearing as

enemies to Columba as a result, and Columba defeats them by chanting a psalm, in response to

which God makes the saint's voice miraculously loud and terrifying. The wizards later want to

prove that they can overcome Columba, and they do this by summoning a storm over Columba's

boat on Loch Ness "by the art of devils."[78] At first, "the wizards began to congratulate

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[76]"Primum autem iidem stellarum interpretes magi nuncupabantur, sicut de his legitur qui in Evangelio natum Christum annuntiaverunt; postea hoc nomine soli mathematici" (Isidorus Hispalensis, *Etymologiae*, Lib VIII, Cap ix, 25).

[77]"Nam ipse Sanctus cum paucis fratribus extra regis munitionem dum vespertinales Dei laudes ex more celebraret, quidam Magi, ad eos propius accedentes, in quantum poterant, prohibere conabantur, ne de ore ipsorum divinae laudis sonus inter Gentiles audiretur populos. Quo comperto Sanctus quadragesimum et quartum psalmum decantare coepit, mirumque in modum ita vox ejus in aere eodem momento instar alicujus formidabilis tonitrui elevata est, ut et rex et populus intolerabili essent pavore perterriti" (Adomnán of Iona, *Vita S. Columbae,* "Incipit Liber Primus," xxix; transl. Sharpe).

[78]"arte daemonum" (Adomnán of Iona, *Vita S. Columbae,* "Incipit Liber Secundus," xxii).

themselves, seeing a great mist covered the loch and a stormy wind was blowing against them"[79] but then "Columba, seeing that the elements were roused to fury against him, called upon Christ the Lord . . . In only a little time the contrary wind backed round and, to everyone's wonder, turned in their favour."[80] Adomnán's wizards, in contrast to Augustine's magicians, have their ability through devils, and with devils being the source, Adomnán creates a very clear divide wherein the wizards are the enemy, supported by devils, but Columba wins in the end because he calls on Christ. Similarly to the divide in prophetic power, wizards get their "art" from the devil and Columba gets his from God.

Geoffrey of Monmouth refers to magicians in his *Historia*, in opposition to Merlin. Geoffrey only introduces the magicians to his narrative right before the appearance of Merlin, which might suggest that he is setting the scene for Merlin to be presented as a magician, but Geoffrey never does present Merlin that way. The Saxons are attacking the Britons, who are under the rule of King Vortigern, and "[i]n the end Vortigern summon[s] his magicians" who advise him to build a tower.[81] The tower does not stay up and the magicians advise Vortigern that the only way to stop the tower from collapsing is to find a boy without a father and obtain his blood (the boy, of course, ends up being Merlin). Merlin proves that the magicians lied to Vortigern by revealing to him that two dragons are lying under the tower.[82] In this opposition,

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[79]"Magi vero gaudere tum coepere, magnam videntes superinductam caliginem, et contrarium cum tempestate flatum" (Adomnán of Iona, *Vita S. Columbae,* "Incipit Liber Secundus" xxii; transl. Sharpe).

[80]"Noster itaque Columba videns contra se elementa concitari furentia, Christum invocat Dominum, . . . et post haud grande intervallum venti contrarii ad itineris ministeria cum omnium admiratione revertuntur" (Adomnán of Iona, *Vita S. Columbae,* "Incipit Liber Secundus" xxii; transl. Sharpe).

[81]"Cumque id Vortigernus comperisset, consuluit iterum magos" (Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Britanniae,* Lib VI, vi. 17).

[82]Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Britanniae,* Lib VI, vi. 19.

Merlin is the hero because he tells Vortigern the truth about the tower, and the magicians are evil, having intended to kill Merlin, but there is no mention of where the magicians get their power, whether from demons or not, or even what sort of power they have, besides a certain amount of wisdom to give advice to their king.

Wizards, interchangeable at this point with magicians, occupied a definite space in history and legend by the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, in which they were either directly associated with demons or they were antagonists in their narrative. Their powers varied from ability to see the future and to give advice because of it, to the ability to command storms. Merlin's prophetic power fits exactly in the first category, but he also has a power other than prophecy, which Geoffrey was the first to write about in his *Historia*. It is similar to Adomnán's wizards' "art of the devils" in that it is referred to as *artistry* or *skill*, which is the origin of what evolves into the part of Merlin's identity that turns him into "Merlin the magician" or "Merlin the wizard" in the most well-known Arthurian legends of today. It is with this power that Merlin, in the *Historia*, moves the stones of Stonehenge and creates disguises for himself and for King Utherpendragon when the latter wants to sleep with Igerna of Cornwall, at which point they will conceive Arthur. The account of Stonehenge includes strong Brittonic themes and was most likely in oral circulation long before Geoffrey wrote it down. The stories of Merlin's magical artistry are directly adopted by Gerald of Wales, who read Geoffrey's *Historia* and cites it throughout his writings, and expanded upon by Robert de Boron from Wace's translation of the *Historia*, the *Roman de Brut*.

Gerald of Wales says in his *Topographia Hibernica* (Topography of Ireland, c. 1188), "According to British history, the king of the Britons, Aurelius Ambrosius, arranged through the

divine help of Merlin that these stones be brought over from Ireland to Britain. He got them put

up in exactly the same order and with the same skill as before."[83] When he says "British history,"

he is referring to Geoffrey of Monmouth's account of British history, in which King Aurelius

wants to build a memorial for men slaughtered by Saxons at Salisbury Plain and Merlin suggests

using the stones from the Giants' Ring in Ireland.[84] It is an impossible task, because the stones

are enormous, but Merlin is able to transport them when Aurelius' army cannot because his

"artistry was worth more than any brute strength."[85] Merlin's artistry or skill is not associated

with demons, but it is considered inexplicable by those around him.

Robert de Boron describes the same event, calling Merlin's ability to move the stones

"force of art":

> So Merlin through the force of art carried from Ireland the stones
> which are at the cemetery at Salesbury, and when they had come,
> then he went to see Uther-pendragon and took there many of his
> people to see the marvel of the stones. When they were there and
> they saw them, they said that the whole world could not lift even
> one of such stones nor dared anyone take them over the sea in
> ships. They marvelled greatly how he had made them come,
> because no one had seen him nor known it. And Merlin told them
> that they should have them erected, because they would be much
> more beautiful than if they were lying down. And Uther answered:
> "No man could do that except God, let [it be that] you do it for us."
> [86]

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[83]"Juxta Britannicam historiam, lapides istos rex Britonum Aurelius Ambrosius, divina Merlini diligentia, de Hibernia in Britanniam advehi procuravit. Et ut tanti facinoris egregium aliquod memoriale relin- queret, eodem ordine et arte qua prius in loco constituit" (Gerald of Wales, *Topographia Hibernica*, Dist 2, Cap xviii; transl. O'Meara).

[84]Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Britanniae*, Lib. VIII, viii. 10; tranls. Thorpe.

[85]"ingeniumque virtuti praevalere comprobavit" (Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Britanniae*, Lib VIII, viii. 12; transl. Thorpe).

[86]"Lors fist Merlins par force d'art apporter d'Irlande les pierres qui sont au cimentire a Salesbires, et quant eles furent venues, si ala veoir Uitier-pandragon et i mena molt de son peuple pour veoir la merveille des pierres. Quant il furent la et il les virent, si distrent que toz li mondes

Robert de Boron's description of the event of moving Stonehenge from Ireland to Salisbury reflects the marvellous side of Merlin's abilities. Aside from Uther likening Merlin to God, and the reference to "force of art," there is no explanation of how Merlin managed this task. It is certainly not through the use of magic, and Robert leaves it as a marvellous occurrence. This points to the difference between "marvels" and "miracles." After Columba defeats the wizards on Loch Ness, Adomnán moralizes, "Consider, reader, how great was that venerable man [Columba] . . . in whom almighty God declared his glorious name in the sight of a heathen people through these miracles of power."[87] In contrast to this, Gerald of Wales points out in the *Descriptio Cambriae,* "We read of the faith of Merlin, and we read that of his prophesying; but we do not read that he was saintly or that he performed miracles."[88] Gervase of Tilbury, a twelfth- and thirteenth-century English lawyer, creates a definitional divide between miracles and marvels when he says in his *Otia Imperialia* (Recreation for an Emperor, c. 1200), "We generally call those things miracles [*miracula*] which, being beyond Nature, we ascribe to divine power . . . while we call those things marvels [*mirabilia*] which are beyond our comprehension, even though they are natural."[89] Merlin is never depicted as a saint, and even after according to

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n'en deust pas une lever ne que tiels pierres n'ossast en pas mestre sor mer en vaissiaus. Molt se merveillent coment il les avoir faites venir, que nus ne l'avoit veu ne seu. Et Merlins lor dist que il les feissent drecier, car eles seroient molt plus beles que gisanz. Et Uitiers respont: « Ce ne porroit pas hom faire fors Dieu, se tu nou faisoies »" (Robert de Boron, *Merlin,* ed. Micha, 180–181, l. 58–70).

[87]"Perpendat itaque lector, quantus et qualis idem vir venerandus fuerit, in quo Deus omnipotens talibus praescriptis miraculorum virtutibus coram plebe gentilica illustre suum manifestavit nomen" (Adomnán of Iona, *Vita S. Columbae,* "Incipit Liber Secundus," xxii; transl. Sharpe).

[88]"Merlini itaque fidem legimus, prophetiam legimus; sanctitatem ejus vel miracula non legimus" (Gerald of Wales, *Descriptio Cambriae*, Lib I, Cap xvi; transl. Dimock).

[89]"miracula dicimus usitatius que preter naturam divine virtuti ascribimus . . . Mirabilia vero dicimus que nostre cognicioni non subiacent, etiam cum sunt naturalia" (Gervase of Tilbury, *Otia Imperialia*, ed. and transl. S. E. Banks and J. W. Binns, bk. 3, preface, p. 558).

Robert de Boron he has the power of prophecy from God and the ability to move the rocks of

Stonehenge in a way that only God could, his actions are not described as miracles. Therefore,

Merlin's skill is not ascribed to divine power but remains beyond comprehension in a way that

matches his status of prophetic ability being between God and demons and simultaneously

including both, and suggests that his skill fits in a similar frame.

The other use of Merlin's artistry or skill, this time not ever associated with God, is his

ability to disguise himself and others. In Geoffrey's *Historia Regum Britanniae,* King Uther

orders Merlin to give him the appearance of Gorlois, the Duke of Cornwall, so that Uther can

sleep with Gorlois' wife Igerna, and Merlin uses "drugs"[90] to accomplish this. Robert de Boron,

writing about the same scene, describes the process in slightly more detail: "Merlin . . . went to

the king, and carried to him a herb, and said to him: 'Rub this herb on your face and your hands.'

And the king took it, and rubbed it on himself; and when he had rubbed it on himself, then his

whole appearance had the resemblance of the duke."[91] Merlin does not always create a disguise

with a herb or drug; in the Vulgate Cycle, the next and expanded French version of Arthurian

legend after Robert de Boron's *Merlin*, Merlin's disguises are attributed to necromancy. The

Vulgate Cycle, unattributable to any single author, includes the first account of Arthur and

Merlin's first meeting, and various subsequent meetings in which Merlin disguises himself and

gives Arthur a hard time. At one point he reveals his true identity to Arthur and a group of lords,

and one of King Arthur's servants says, "My good lords, do not marvel at all about the affairs of

Merlin because he will show you plenty of appearances, because anytime that he wants, he

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[90]"medicaminibus" (Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Britanniae*, viii, 19).
[91]"Merlins . . . vint au roi, si li porta une erbe, si li dist: « Frotez de ceste herbe vostre vis et vos mains. » Et li rois la prist, si s'en frota; et quant il s'en fu frotez, si ot tout apertement la semblance dou duc" (Robert de Boron, *Merlin*, ed. Micha, 227, l. 3–8).

changes and transforms himself through the power of the art of necromancy in which he is well-versed."[92] This language "art of necromancy" is very similar to Adomnán's wizards' "art of the devils," but unlike the wizards, Merlin is not the enemy of the king or the other lords with him. The space Merlin occupies at this point fits neither with Adomnán's wizards nor entirely contrary to them.

The Vulgate Cycle also includes the first clear depiction of Merlin using object transformation, an element of magic. When Merlin goes into battle with Arthur's army he carries Arthur's standard, which has a dragon on it, and he makes the dragon come alive; "he carried the dragon in his hand which let forth such great brilliance of fire through the mouth that the air turned completely red, and those who had never seen it before said that our lord was very harshly angry with them when he made such a sign appear to them."[93] Here, Merlin's magical ability of transformation is linked to God, combining the supernatural with Christianity.

Merlin's two abilities, that of prophecy and that of artistry or skill, are difficult to categorize. Because Merlin's prophetic ability has its origins in pagan Brittonic tradition, and because very likely his magical ability as well, Christian Anglo-Norman writers such as Geoffrey of Monmouth and Gerald of Wales struggle to make sense of them, and therefore associate them with demonic influence. When Robert de Boron writes *Merlin*, he adds God's influence to all of Merlin's powers, creating a loophole which puts Merlin in a space that encompasses demons and God at the same time, justifying Merlin's demonic origins. If Robert de Boron had left Merlin as

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[92]"& ulfins lor dist biaus signors ne vous esmeruellies mie des afaires merlin car il vous monstera de samblances asses. Car toutes les fois quil veut se change il & mue par force dart dingremance dont il est tous plains" (Sommer, *Estoire de Merlin*, 123, l. 39–41).
[93]"il tint le dragon en la main qui rendoit si grant clarte de fu par la goule que li a[i]rs en deuint tous rouges. si disoient cil qui onques nel auoient ueu ke nostre sires estoit courecies enuers els moult durement quant tel signe lor faisoit aparoir" (Sommer, *Estoire de Merlin*, l. 272–3).

a demonic figure, as Geoffrey and Gerald did, he could have attributed Merlin's prophetic abilities to the same vague strangeness as Gerald does with the Awennithion, but instead he introduced the plot point of Merlin receiving the gift of prophecy from God, giving him more power than Geoffrey's Merlin because he has a strong place within the structure of Christianity. Robert could have followed Geoffrey exactly on the subject of Merlin's skill, particularly on the erecting of Stonehenge, but instead he changes the tone with the addition of the event's marvelousness and elevates Merlin's ability because it is only made possible through God, which leaves Uther and the crowd at Stonehenge awestruck. Whereas according to Geoffrey, Merlin's ability to create disguises is only important when a king needs them, particularly Uther, Robert's treatment of Merlin as both godly and demonic creates a shift in the Vulgate Cycle at which point Merlin can disguise himself through the "art of necromancy" and not be demonized for it, leading to the appearance of the aspect of magic in the Vulgate Cycle where magic can coexist explicably with God. When Robert associates him with God, Merlin gains more respect, more ability, and more nuance as a character, and with this new identity Robert enables Merlin to take on a more involved, powerful role in his own narrative and in the broader narrative that becomes the Arthurian romances.

Chapter II: Madness and Anger

The Taming of Merlin the Wild Man

When Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote the *Historia Regum Britanniae*, he did not mention

anything about Merlin beyond his prophetic ability, magical powers, and service to kings.

Merlin's gaining of autonomy and authority in Robert de Boron's text *Merlin* appears to be the

result of a desire to make Merlin a more powerful, Godlike figure than Geoffrey allowed him to

be. However, Robert's emphasis on giving Merlin a personality also comes from another

tradition of Merlin in which he went mad during a battle and fled the company of other people to

live in the woods. This story can be found in the *Annales Cambriae* (Welsh Annals, c. 950), a

collection of Welsh historical events which claims that in 573 there was a battle at Arfderydd

"between the sons of Elifer and Guendoleu the son of Keidiau; in which battle Guendoleu was

killed: Merlin went mad,"[94] and in three poems in the *Llyfr Du Caerfyrddin* (Black Book of

Carmarthen, c. 1250), which reference Arfderydd and Merlin's madness in the forest of Calidon,

which is now Scotland. The legend of the Scottish madman Lailoken, also called Merlin, follows

a similar storyline. The *Trioedd Ynys Prydein* (Triads of the Island of Britain, c. 1250) refers to

the Battle of Arfderydd as one of the "Three Futile Battles of the Island of Britain,"[95] alongside

Camlan. Notably, Geoffrey did not mention the battle of Arfderydd or Merlin's madness in the

Historia, although the entry in the *Annales* predates the *Historia* by about two hundred years,

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[94]"573. CXXIX. Annus. Bellum Armterid [inter filios Elifer et Guendoleu filium Keidiau; in quo bello Guendoleu cecidit: Merlinus insanus effectus est.]" (*Annales Cambriae,* ed. John Williams, v. 20, 5).
[95]""Teir Ouergat Ynys Prydein" (*Trioedd Ynys Prydein,* ed. Rachel Bromwich, Triad 84, 400).

and the *Trioedd,* the poems in the *Llyfr Du,* and *Lailoken* would likely have been in oral circulation before Geoffrey started writing.

Geoffrey himself wrote a version of the story of Merlin's madness, called the *Vita Merlini* (Life of Merlin, c. 1150), in which Merlin goes mad after watching his friends die in battle and disappears to live in the Calidonian forest. Gerald of Wales also briefly references the madness of Merlin Celidonius in his *Itinerarium Cambriae* (Journey through Wales, 1191). The language used to define madness differs strikingly between Geoffrey and other authors writing about the Merlin the madman in Latin. Whereas Merlin's madness is represented in the *Annales* with the word *insanus*, Lailoken's with *demens*, and Gerald's Merlin Celidonius' similarly with *dementire,* Geoffrey exclusively uses the Latin words *furor* and *rabiem* to represent Merlin's madness. *Insanus* and *demens*, literally "not healthy" and "out of the mind" respectively, straightforwardly refer to madness as an imbalance in the brain, whereas *furor* and *rabiem* have additional definitions of anger and animalistic behavior that change the way Merlin's madness would be viewed in the *Vita Merlini* by both Geoffrey and his readers.

Isidore of Seville, a late sixth- and early seventh-century Spanish cleric whose work became significant in twelfth-century Latin-based education, defines *furor* in his early seventh-century *Etymologiae* (c. 600–625) as anger, a component of madness. He writes, "Madness (*mania*) is so-called from insanity (*insania*) or anger (*furore*). The ancient Greeks used to call *furorem* μαντικὴν, either from their imbalance, which the Greeks called μανίαν, or from divination, because to divine in Greek is said μανεῖν."[96] Divination, as seen in Chapter I, is a

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[96]"Mania ab insania vel furore vocata. Nam Graecorum vetustas 176 furorem μαντικὴν appellabat, sive ab inanitate, quam Graeci μανίαν vocaverunt, sive a divinatione, quia divinare Graece μανεῖν dicitur" (Isidorus Hispalensis, *Etymologiae*, Lib IV, Cap vii, 8).

central part of Merlin's identity. Isidore suggests here that both divination and an imbalance in the brain can lead to *furor*; whether *furorem,* a declension of the word *furor,* means anger or madness here is not exactly clear. Certainly it is not the same type of madness as *insania*. Whereas Gerald of Wales used the word *insanire*[97] when talking about Meilyr's madness and resulting prophetic power in the *Itinerarium Cambriae*, Isidore connects *furor* with prophetic power. In Book Eight of the *Etymologiae*, in the chapter titled *De sibyllis* (On the sibyl), Isidore says that "There are two kinds of divination: craft and madness/anger (*furor*)."[98] Again, it is uncertain whether *furor* means anger or madness here, or if it is a combination of the two, a type of madness that heavily involves anger.

Isidore separately defines *furor* as God's anger, in the context of someone who "appeased the fury of the Lord,"[99] giving the word a very different resultant meaning. The fury of God cannot stem from madness, and therefore in this case *furor* is only anger, specifically righteous anger. Isidore also addresses *ira*, human anger not used to denote God's righteous fury, and connects it with *furor*. He says, "An angry person (*iracundus*) is so called, who is compelled into a fury (*furorem*) by inflamed blood, and in fact it means 'flame,' and anger (*ira*) inflames."[100] *Furor* means anger here, but is different from *ira* and therefore does not exactly mean the type of anger that *ira* means, which is "inflamed"; neither is *furor* necessarily associated with the anger of God. It means a type of animalistic fury, Isidore says: "A fight with wild animals involved

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[97]Gerald of Wales, *Itinerarium Cambriae*, Lib I, Cap v.
[98]"Duo sunt autem genera divinationis, ars et furor." (Isidorus Hispalensis, *Etymologiae*, Lib VIII, Cap viii, 14.)
[99]"Domini furorem placavit" (Isidorus Hispalensis, *Etymologiae*, Lib VII, Cap vi, 49).
[100]"Iracundus dictus, qui accenso sanguine in furorem compellitur, ut enim flamma dicitur, et ira inflammat." (Isidorus Hispalensis, *Etymologiae*, Lib X, Cap i, 130.)

youths confronting released beasts, and battling against them, voluntarily courting death, not because of a crime, but from rage (*furore*)."[101]

Saint Gildas, a sixth-century British monk, connects the word *furor* and its definition with the Brittonic Latin world. In *De Excidio Britanniae* (On the Ruin of Britain, c. 510–540), Gildas mostly uses *furor* in the context of "furor Domini" (the fury of God)[102] and "divini furoris" (divine anger).[103] He warns, "Behold the day of the Lord shall come cruel, and full of indignation and wrath and anger (*irae furorisque*)."[104] This definition is the same as Isidore's application of *furor* to the righteous anger of God. Gildas also defines *furor* as "rabidi furores" (mad/rabid fury),[105] meaning the anger of those who persecute saints, exactly the opposite of God's anger. He appeals to the Welsh king Cuneglase to "*Cease,* I pray, *from anger* (*ira*), as the prophet says, *and forsake* the deadly wrath (*furorem*) that shall torment thyself, which thou breathest against heaven and earth, that is, against God and His flock."[106] Cuneglase's *furor* is ungodly and is strictly anger, not madness. Nowhere does Gildas use *furor* to mean madness, unless he believes that the un-Godly type of *furor*, that of Cuneglase and of those who persecute saints, results from madness, but he never indicates this.

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[101]"Ferarum pugna erat emissas bestias juvenes excipere, et pugnare adversus eas, ultroneo funere certare, non crimine, sed furore" (Isidorus Hispalensis, *Etymologiae*, Lib XVIII, Cap lviii, 1).

[102]Gildas, *De Excidio Britanniae*, transl. Hugh Williams, Pars II, Cap vi, 108.

[103]Gildas, *De Excidio Britanniae*, transl. Hugh Williams, Pars III, Cap xi, 202.

[104]"Ecce dies Domini veniet crudelis, et indignationis plenus et irae furorisque" (Gildas, *De Excidio Britanniae*, transl. Hugh Williams, Pars II, Cap vi, 108).

[105]Gildas, *De Excidio Britanniae*, transl. Hugh Williams, Pars I, Cap vii, 24.

[106]"*Desine*, quaeso, ut propheta ait, *ab ira, et derelinque* exitialem ac temetipsum maceraturum, quem coelo ac terrae, hoc est, Deo gregique ejus spiras, *furorem*" (Gildas, *De Excidio Britanniae*, transl. Hugh Williams, Pars II, Cap vi, 74).

The other word that Geoffrey uses in his *Vita Merlini* to define Merlin's madness is *rabiem*, and Isidore identifies *rabiem* entirely with animals. He uses the word to explain the way a human can become mad: "if a human or beast should touch [the foam of a rabid dog], he is either filled with madness (*dementia*), or he becomes crazy (*rabiem*)."[107] It is difficult to translate *rabiem* here, because it does not mean the madness that *dementia* means; *rabiem* is the kind of madness seen in an enraged animal attacking, seemingly without reason. Isidore also associates *rabiem* with the mating habits of snakes, when the female bites off the male's head "turned from the passion of lust to rage (*rabiem*),"[108] again depicting an animalistic madness, since rage here means crazed behavior rather than anger.

Based on Isidore and Gildas' definitions and contextual uses, it would appear that *rabiem* is specifically associated with the inexplicably enraged behavior of animals, and that *furor* can mean either divine wrath, prophetic madness tinged with anger, or animalistic fury similar to *rabiem* but different in that it is never applied to animals. Neither of these words have the foremost meaning of insanity; both have a large element of anger or rage. The deduction from this is that Geoffrey has provided a new connotation for Merlin's madness wherein that madness is not entirely insanity, and instead is either divine fury, or crazed animal behavior, or some element of both.

In order to understand why Geoffrey uses *furor* and *rabiem* rather than *insanus* and *demens*, it is necessary to look more closely at the origins of the story of Merlin the madman. There are three prophetic poems in the *Llyfr Du Caerfyrddin* (Black Book of Carmarthen, c.

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[107]"si homo, vel bestia [spuma canis rabidi] tetigerit, aut dementia repletur, aut in rabiem vertitur" (Isidorus Hispalensis, *Etymologiae*, Lib IV, Cap vi, 15).

[108]"ex voluptate libidinis, in rabiem versa" (Isidorus Hispalensis, *Etymologiae*, Lib XII, Cap iv, 11).

1250) referring to or attributed to a person called Myrddin, who has the same name as the

prophet in Taliesin's poem *Armes Prydein* (The Prophecy of Prydein).[109] These poems predate

the writing of the *Llyfr Du* substantially but their exact dates of composition are unknown. All

three poems make allusions to the battle named in the *Annales*. In *Ymddiddan Myrddin a*

Thaliesin (The Dialogue of Myrddin and Taliesin), Myrddin and Taliesin discuss seeing people

fall in the "battle of Arfderydd,"[110] including the "seven sons of Elifer,"[111] which almost exactly

reflects the wording in the entry in the *Annales*. In this poem Myrddin does not mention going

mad. However, in *Yr Afallennau* (The Appletrees), Myrddin bewails his fate as an outcast, hated

by his sister for killing her children "in the battle of Arfderydd."[112] He says, "Now I suffer want

with madness and madmen./ Now I sleep not, I tremble for my lord,/ My sovereign Gwenddolau,

and my fellow-countrymen./ After enduring sickness and grief in the Forest of Celyddon/ May I

be received into bliss by the Lord of Hosts."[113] His mention of Gwenddolau and his own madness

match the entry in the *Annales*, and his madness in the forest of Celyddon, or Calidon,[114]

establishes a connection between madness and the woods.

As a madman living in the woods, Myrddin suffers. In the third poem, *Yr Oianau* (The

Greetings), Myrddin says, "For ten and forty years I have suffered pain,/ . . . Snow up to my hips

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[109]Taliesin, "Armes Prydein," in *Llyfr Taliesin*, ed. Evans, l. 17.
[110]"gueith arywderit" (*Llyfr Du Caerfyrddin,* I*)*.
[111]"Seith meib eliffer" (*Llyfr Du Caerfyrddin,* I*)*.
[112]"igueith arywderit" (*Llyfr Du Caerfyrddin,* XVII.)
[113]"Nv nev nam guy. guall. gan wylleith a guyllon./ Nv nev nachyscafe ergrinaf. wynragon./ Vy argluit guendolev ambrorryv brodorion./ Guydi porthi heint a hoed am cylch coed keliton./ Buyf guas guinwydic. gan guledic gorchortion" (*Llyfr Du Caerfyrddin,* XVII; transl. Jarman in *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages*, Loomis, 21).
[114]Scotland.

among the forest wolves,/ Icicles in my hair, spent is my splendour."[115] It seems strange that

Myrddin, being in pain, remains in the forest, but he does so either because he does not want to

face his sister's anger, or because he is forced to live in the woods by his own madness. His only

company is the wolves living in the forest with him, a notable point because Merlin's madness

becomes associated with his status as a wild man, living among animals.

In these poems, Myrddin is not angry, nor does he seem particularly insane. The only

indication that he is mad is his admission of madness in *Yr Afallennau.* His behavior is not

erratic; he seems to be grieving and suffering, natural results of watching his lord die in battle

and of living in the forest. These poems paint a picture of a prophet excluded from society who

experiences intense suffering and no hope of relief except through death, and although he

declares himself to be mad, his madness is not particularly noticeable.

Lailoken, sometimes called *Vita Merlini Silvestris* (Life of Merlin of the Woods) similarly

depicts a man who goes mad in battle and is forced to live among animals. The story is not

dateable, but it revolves around an interaction between a madman named Lailoken and a

sixth-century Brittonic saint from Strathclyde[116] named Kentigern, and the *Vita Kentigerni* ("Life

of St Kentigern") was written in the late twelfth century, which would suggest that these works

were written at around the same time or at least that the legend of Lailoken was known as long as

stories about Kentigern. Lailoken is described as a "madman, naked and hairy and devoid of all

worldly possessions" who "crossed [Kentigern's] path like a raging beast. He was called

Lailoken. Certain people say that he was Merlin who was regarded by the Britons as unique in

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[115]"Deg mlinet a deu ygein yd portheise poen/ . . . Eiri hid impen clun. gan cun callet./ Pibonvy
imblev. blin wy rysset" (*Llyfr Du Caerfyrddin,* XVIII; transl. Jarman in *Arthurian Literature in
the Middle Ages*, Loomis, 22).
[116]Scotland.

his powers of prophecy."[117] Kentigern asks who this madman is and why he is wandering around in the woods, and Lailoken says that he killed many people in a battle and then "I heard a voice like the sound of thunder, speaking to me from heaven: 'Lailoken, Lailoken, because you alone are guilty of the blood of all those that have been killed, you alone will pay the penalty for the sins of all. For you will be handed over to the angels of Satan and you will consort with wild beasts until the day of your death.'"[118] Lailoken's experience of going mad in battle and being forced to live in the woods is almost a direct parallel to the experience of the Welsh Myrddin, although in Lailoken's case the madness is a punishment from God, not a response to seeing his sovereign and countrymen getting killed, and whereas Myrddin is not specifically forced to live with animals, Lailoken's punishment details "consort[ing] with wild beasts." Although the cause of the madness is different, the result is the same: a life as a madman in the woods, away from other people and the type of comforts to which they have access. Notably, Lailoken is associated with the name "Merlin" and his reputation as a prophet, which solidifies the connection between Lailoken and Myrddin.

The main difference between Lailoken and Myrddin is in the way they are perceived by others. Myrddin converses easily with Taliesin and worries about his sister's anger but never shows us that he experiences it; Lailoken, however, is immediately introduced as a madman and therefore an outsider to Saint Kentigern and his clergymen, an outcast who can only be saved

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[117]"quidam demens nudus et hirsutus et ab omni bono destitutus. quasi quidam toruum furiale transitum faceret secus eum qui Lailoken vocabatur. quem quidam dicunt fuisse Merlynum. qui erat Britonibus quasi propheta singularis" (*Vita Merlini Silvestris,* in *Lailoken (or Merlin Silvester)*, H. Ward, 514–5).

[118]"audiui quasi fragorem maximum. vocem de celo mihi dicentem. Lailochen. Lailochen. quia tu solus omnium istorum interfectorum reus es sanguinis, tu solus cunctorum scelera punies. Angelis enim Sathane traditus usque in diem mortis tue conversacionem habebis inter bestias silverstres" (*Vita Merlini Silvestris,* in *Lailoken (or Merlin Silvester)*, H. Ward, 515).

through Kentigern's help. Myrddin's suffering is poetic, but Lailoken's is barely mentioned, because his madness is the main part of his identity and overshadows everything else that he does, including prophesying. This difference is most likely due to the respective audiences for these works: Myrddin comes from pagan Welsh poetry and Lailoken's story is a product of Brittonic Christianity, fit into Kentigern's narrative and written only for those who could read Latin, mainly clerics.

Geoffrey's *Vita Merlini* borrows heavily enough from both the poems in the *Llyfr* and from *Lailoken* that it can be assumed that he knew the legends of Myrddin and Lailoken. The *Vita Merlini* is difficult to categorize because although Geoffrey names his main character Merlin, he does not appear to be the same Merlin as in the *Historia*. A few parts of the *Vita Merlini* imply that the two Merlins are the same: this text tells the story of the "madness (*rabiem*) of the bard of prophecy,"[119] and Merlin references his own prophecies to Vortigern[120] and discusses events from the *Historia*, like Arthur's fall at Camlan and his recovery on the Isle of Avalon.[121] However, the Merlin of the *Vita Merlini* is a king,[122] which severs any connection to the Merlin of the *Historia*. Geoffrey never clarifies the separation, which is odd because he dedicated both the *Historia* and *Vita Merlini* to Robert, the Earl of Gloucester, and Robert would be familiar with the Merlin of the *Historia*. Curiously, Geoffrey is the only person to assign any version of Merlin the title of king. It is possible that Geoffrey interpreted Myrddin's wearing of a

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[119]"Fatidici vadis rabiem" (Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Vita Merlini*, transl. Basil Clarke, 52 l. 1).
[120]Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Vita Merlini*, transl. Basil Clarke, 88, l. 681–3.
[121]Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Vita Merlini*, transl. Basil Clarke, 102, l. 929–40.
[122]Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Vita Merlini*, transl. Basil Clarke, 52 l. 20–22.

"gold torque"[123] in *Yr Afallennau* to mean that he had some high status, but if Myrddin was fighting under Gwenddolau, it is unlikely that he had a status as high as king or warlord.

Geoffrey opens the *Vita Merlini* with a battle between "Peredur, prince of the North Welsh, was campaigning against Gwenddolau, who ruled the kingdom of Scotland."[124] These details directly parallel the *Annales* and the poems about Myrddin that also name Gwenddolau. Geoffrey's Merlin fights in this battle and watches many of his friends die, and becomes traumatized. Merlin "mourned for his heroes"[125] and then developed a "strange madness"[126] which led him to steal away into the woods. This madness is described with the word *furias,* as if Merlin experiences divine rage as a result of his grief after the battle.

Merlin's life in the woods is painted in a much more positive light than either Myrddin's or Lailoken's:

> He crept away and fled to the woods, unwilling that any should see
> his going. Into the forest he went, glad to lie hidden beneath the
> ash trees. He watched the wild creatures grazing on the pasture of
> the glades. Sometimes he would follow them, sometimes pass
> them in his course. He made use of the roots of plants and of
> grasses, of fruit from trees and of the blackberries in the thicket.
> He became a Man of the Woods, as if dedicated to the woods. So
> for a whole summer he stayed hidden in the woods, discovered by
> none, forgetful of himself and of his own, lurking like a wild thing.
> [127]

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[123]"eur wygorthorch" (*Llyfr Du Caerfyrddin,* XVII).

[124]"Dux Venedotorum Peredurus bella gerebat/ contra Guennoloum Scocie qui regna regebat" (Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Vita Merlini*, transl. Basil Clarke, 52, l. 26–27).

[125]"deplangitque viros" (Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Vita Merlini*, transl. Basil Clarke, 54, l. 65).

[126]"novas furias" (Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Vita Merlini*, transl. Basil Clarke, 56, l. 72).

[127]"furtimque recedit/ et fugit ad silvas nec vult fugiendo videri,/ ingrediturque nemus gaudetque latere sub ornis/ miraturque feras pascentes gramina saltus./ Nunc has insequitur, nunc cursu preterit illas./ Utitur herbarum radicibus, utitur herbis,/ Utitur arboreo fructu morisque rubeti./ Fit silvester homo quasi silvis deditus esset./ Inde per estatem totam nullique repertus/ oblitusque sui cognatorumque suorum/ delituit silvis obductus more ferino" (Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Vita Merlini*, transl. Basil Clarke, 56, l. 73–83).

Like Myrddin and Lailoken, Merlin's madness causes him to abandon the company of other

people and live in the woods like a wild animal. The difference between Merlin and his Brittonic

sources is that he enjoys living in the forest and copies the habits of animals. He turns into a

"Man of the Woods"; the forest becomes his home. He is "forgetful of himself and of his own,"

which seems to carry a negative connotation, implying that he should be with his family and

friends if he were in his right mind, but also reveals that he has such a preference over his life in

the woods that he has no recollection of his former home. He does not bewail the loss of it.

Additionally, Merlin's madness is not a punishment here, but rather the result of grief and loss.

Because the source of the madness is not a punishment, Merlin will not have to seek redemption.

And when Merlin experiences suffering, it is from physical discomfort, not from the lack of

human interaction. He prefers the company of animals until winter comes and he is cold and

starved, at which point he compares himself to a wolf and says, "Wolf, dear companion, you

used to wander along the byways of the forest and through the glades with me: you scarcely get

across the field. Harsh hunger has weakened both you and me."[128] Geoffrey also introduces the

idea of a cure for Merlin's madness that does not come from God, as it would for Lailoken:

Merlin is found and subdued by the sound of music, at which point he "thought of his madness

with astonishment and loathing. His normal state of mind returned."[129]

Geoffrey's overall portrayal of Merlin as a madman with a cure for madness and a return

to sanity is contradicted by his use of the word *furias* to denote Merlin's madness, which, based

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[128]"Tu lupe care comes, nemorum qui devia mecum/ et saltus peragrare soles vix preteris arva,/ et te dura fames et me languere coegit" (Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Vita Merlini*, transl. Basil Clarke, 58, l. 102–104).
[129]"Merlinus furiasque suas miratur et odit./ Pristina mens rediit" (Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Vita Merlini*, transl. Basil Clarke, 62, l. 208–9).

on the uses of *furias* by Isidore of Seville and Gildas, implies that Merlin experienced a fit of anger rather than spiraling into insanity. This theory is supported by the fact that music as a cure for Merlin's madness only works once, and for a very short time, because immediately when Merlin returns to the court of his sister's husband, Rodarch, he goes mad again:

> [W]hen Merlin saw such crowds of people there, he could not bear them. He went mad; and once more his derangement filled him with a desire to go off to the forest, and he longed to slip away. At that, Rodarch ordered him to be held under guard and music to be played on the guitar to calm his madness . . . The king promised, besides, that he would make him many gifts . . . But the prophet rejected the presents with these words: "Let these things go to lords hard-pressed by poverty, such as are not content with modest living but covet everything . . . Take back such goods, King Rodarch. My nut-rich forest of Calidon shall have me: I desire it above all else."[130]

Being around other people makes Merlin experience his *furor*. The music does not subdue his madness this time, so Rodarch is forced to put him under guard, as if Merlin were a wild animal. At the same time, and somewhat in contrast, Merlin's language in this passage is reminiscent of that of hermits, when he remarks that others who "covet everything" need Rodarch's gifts and he has no need for them because he can live on very little in the woods. On the one hand, Geoffrey describes Merlin being restrained for wild behavior, and on the other, he makes Merlin a sort of holy, ascetic figure.

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[130]"At postquam tantas hominum Merlinus adesse/ inspexit turmas, nec eas perferre valeret./ Cepit enim furias iterumque furore repletus/ ad nemus ire cupit furtimque recedere querit./ Tunc precepit eum posito custode teneri/ Rodarchus citharaque suos mulcere furores,/ . . . Hinc promittit ei se plurima dona daturum,/ . . . Talia respondens spernebat munera vates./ 'Ista duces habeant sua quos confundit egestas/ nec sunt contenti modico set maxima captant./ . . . Tu talia tecum/ rex Rodarche feras. Mea me Calidonis habebit/ silva ferax nucibus quam cunctis prefero rebus" (Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Vita Merlini*, transl. Basil Clarke, 64, l. 221–45).

This asceticism becomes more prominent later in the *Vita Merlini*. Merlin's final cure comes in the form of water: "As the liquid passed through the internal passages of stomach and bowels and settled the humours of his system, he suddenly recovered his mental balance and came to himself, losing all trace of madness (*rabiem*)."[131] Interestingly, after this cure he still has a desire to live in the woods, suggesting that his longing for the forest is not strictly related to any kind of madness. In fact, this longing now appears to be purely the desire for the woods that a holy man would have, not a madman or even a combination of the two. Merlin says, "Nothing can please me so, nothing can tear me from my Calidon, ever dear to me, I feel. Here I will be while I live, happy with fruit and herbs: and I will purify my flesh with pious fasting, to enable me to enjoy endless everlasting life."[132] Purification, fasting, and everlasting life are all concepts associated with saintly life. At the end of the *Vita Merlini*, Merlin has developed a commune in his woods, where he lives with Taliesin, a former madman named Maeldin, and his sister Ganieda.[133] Ganieda shares Merlin's prophetic power because she is living in the woods with him; "She, too, was from time to time exalted in spirit to sing often of the future of the kingdom."[134] Notably, she is exalted (*alta spiritus*), not mad or angry; and at this point Merlin is no longer described as having any *furor* or *rabiem.*

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[131]"utque per internos alvi stomachique meatus/ humor iit laticis subsedavitque vaporem/ corporis interni, confestim mente recepta/ sese cognovit, rabiem quoque perdidit omnem" (Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Vita Merlini*, transl. Basil Clarke, 114, l. 1147–1150).

[132]"Res michi nulla placet que me divellere possit/ ex Calidone mea me judice semper amena./ Hic era dum vivam pomis contentus et herbis,/ et mundabo meam pia per jejunia carnem/ ut valeam fungi vita sine fine perhenni" (Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Vita Merlini*, transl. Basil Clarke, 120–2, l. 1287–91).

[133]Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Vita Merlini*, transl. Basil Clarke, 132, l. 1452–68.

[134]"Hanc etiam quandoque suus rapiebat ad alta/ spiritus ut caneret de regno sepe futura" (Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Vita Merlini*, transl. Basil Clarke, 130–2, l. 1469–70).

On the subject of the figure of Merlin as a hermit figure, Neil Thomas argues in *The Celtic Wild Man Tradition and Geoffrey of Monmouth's Vita Merlini: Madness or Contemptus Mundi?* that Geoffrey intended to write his *Vita Merlini* like a Cambrian saint's life. He suggests that "Geoffrey's acquaintance with . . . Cambrian saints' lives may have moved him to 'baptize' the ancient figure of the wild man."[135] Thomas notes that Geoffrey's Merlin does not do something wrong before he goes mad, so that his madness is caused by "not guilt . . . but rather simple grief."[136] He points out similarities between Merlin and various Cambrian saints: "Merlin's desertion of his wife for the contemplative life can be paralleled in the lives of Illtud and Gwynllyw, who both put by their wives in the ascetic zeal."[137] Merlin's interaction with the wolf and later with stags "is matched by St Tydecho's domestication of a wolf, by the help afforded to Teilo and Madoc by stags."[138] Merlin being chained up by Rodarch and his preference for the woods over his own kingdom or over any court "can be compared with the biographies of Samson and Illtud who must be dragged back from their retreats in order to resume their responsibilities in the communities or with that of St. Cadoc, who also refuses his uncle's demand that he set aside his religion in order to take his rightful role as king."[139]

This analysis is helpful in understanding why Geoffrey made Merlin's character in the *Vita Merlini* both a wild man with fits of *furor* and an ascetic, hermit-like figure. The presumed

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[135]Neil Thomas, *The Celtic Wild Man Tradition and Geoffrey of Monmouth's Vita Merlini: Madness or Contemptus Mundi?*, 29.

[136]Neil Thomas, *The Celtic Wild Man Tradition and Geoffrey of Monmouth's Vita Merlini: Madness or Contemptus Mundi?*, 32.

[137]Neil Thomas, *The Celtic Wild Man Tradition and Geoffrey of Monmouth's Vita Merlini: Madness or Contemptus Mundi?*, 36.

[138]Neil Thomas, *The Celtic Wild Man Tradition and Geoffrey of Monmouth's Vita Merlini: Madness or Contemptus Mundi?*, 36.

[139]Neil Thomas, *The Celtic Wild Man Tradition and Geoffrey of Monmouth's Vita Merlini: Madness or Contemptus Mundi?*, 36–37.

origins of this story both deal with wild men who are mad, but Geoffrey was writing in Latin and therefore for only people who could read Latin, specifically the Angevin nobility but also clerics, and may have needed to make the character of Merlin the wild man more palatable by modeling the *Vita Merlini* on saints' lives. Merlin is never depicted as a saint, but the title of Geoffrey's text, *Vita Merlini*, echoes the titles of saints' lives such as *Vita Kentigerni* and *Vita Columbae*. Although *Lailoken* was written in Latin for a similar clerical audience, the construction of that text revolved around the difference between Lailoken and St. Kentigern, showing how Kentigern could save Lailoken; in the *Vita Merlini*, there is no saint trying to cure Merlin, only his family, which changes the emphasis of the story from moralistic to personal. Geoffrey creates a nuance between Merlin's wildness and a sort of superiority which Merlin has over his family, because his wildness and desire for the woods leads him to live a purer life than they do, and therefore makes it possible for the story of the madman in the woods to exist alongside a positive Christian narrative.

Some parts of the *Vita Merlini* do not seem to fit with the saint's-life model. There is one fairly brutal passage in particular, featuring Merlin riding a stag and attacking a man with the stag's antlers. Interestingly, Merlin's madness is not mentioned anywhere in this passage, although it seems to contain his most wild, erratic behavior. When Merlin leaves Rodarch's court and returns to the woods, he says that his wife, Gwendoloena, can remarry, since he wants to be "undestroyed by love,"[140] language that is further reminiscent of ascetics. Then, on the day of her second wedding, intending to bring her gifts, he "organized a herd of stags into a single line . . .

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[140]"sine labe" (Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Vita Merlini*, transl. Basil Clarke, 70, l. 374).

[and] seated himself on a stag [and rode to the wedding]."[141] Gwendoloena is "astonished to see a man riding a stag and it obeying him, astonished that so many animals of the wild could be brought together and that he alone was driving them before him."[142] When Merlin sees her new husband, he suddenly "wrenched off the horns of the stag he rode . . . and threw them at the bridegroom . . . knocking him lifeless."[143]

There are three things to note in this passage: the illustration of Merlin's mastery of beasts, the lack of the words *furor* and *rabiem* but their implicit presence, and the possibility of fitting this into the saintly narrative that Geoffrey has built throughout the rest of the *Vita Merlini*. Merlin is depicted here as the only person who could ride a stag and furthermore command all of the wild animals accompanying him, as though Merlin has become the king of the woods and all of the animals are his subjects. The stag's antlers are his weapons; he does not need a sword to kill someone, another example of the woods providing everything that he wants. Merlin's interaction with these animals shows that he himself is somewhat animalistic, leading to the implication of *rabiem* in his attack on the bridegroom. However, because Geoffrey does not indicate anywhere in this passage that Merlin's madness brought on his murderous intentions, Merlin's behavior cannot be the result of madness; and if his madness did not lead him to kill his wife's new husband, then his behavior is connected to his saint-adjacent side. Therefore, as well as having the implication of *rabiem* in this passage, it is also possible to have the implication of

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[141]"cervorumque greges agmen collegit in unum/ . . . cervoque resedit" (Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Vita Merlini*, transl. Basil Clarke, 74, l. 452–3).

[142]"gestarique virum cervo miratur et illum/ sic parere viro, tantum quoque posse ferarum/ uniri numerum" (Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Vita Merlini*, transl. Basil Clarke, 76, l. 460–2).

[143]"extemplo divulsit cornua cervo/ quo gestabatur vibrataque jecit in illum,/ et caput illius penitus contrivit eumque/ reddidit exanimem vitamque fugavit in auras" (Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Vita Merlini*, transl. Basil Clarke, 76, 467–70).

furor as divine fury, meaning that Merlin acts out of a sort of divine rage and desire for vengeance.

Rabid anger against the bridegroom seems irrational, but if viewed as justified indignation, it becomes an assertion of power. Therefore, this passage implies that Merlin's murderous behavior, which seems to demean him as an animal, really shows him to be displaying his domination over both animals and people. While this display is not particularly ascetic, it is reminiscent of the power and fury of God. This perspective entirely changes the character of Merlin in the *Vita Merlini*: the fact that Merlin continues to live in the woods after the disappearance of his madness shows that Geoffrey severed the connection between madness and the woods which was earlier established in the stories of Myrddin and Lailoken, opening up the possibility of Merlin's life in the woods being holy and better than life at court; and by using the words *rabiem* and *furor*, Geoffrey recreated the concept of madness associated with Merlin so that, instead of it being a mental state that required a specific cure or redemption, it became a series of fits of both animalistic and divine fury.

Anger and the Woods in French Romance

There are no subsequent stories based on the *Vita Merlini,* and in French Arthurian romance, Merlin's madness disappears. This is most likely because Robert de Boron did not have access to a translated version of the *Vita Merlini*, whereas he did with the *Historia*. It is also possible that any continuation of stories about Merlin the wild man in connection with the Merlin of the *Historia* was interrupted because Gerald of Wales interpreted the discrepancies between Geoffrey's two texts about Merlin by saying that there were two distinctly separate Merlins.

Gerald describes them in the following way in the *Itinerarium Cambriae* (Journey through

Wales):

> There were two Merlins. The one was called Ambrosius, who thus
> had two names, prophesied when Vortigern was King. He was the
> son of an incubus and he was discovered in Carmarthen, which
> means Merlin's town, for it takes its name from the fact that he was
> found there. The second Merlin came from Scotland. He is called
> Celidonius, because he prophesied in the Calidonian Forest. He is
> also called Silvester, because once when he was fighting he looked
> up into the air and saw a terrible monster. He went mad as a result
> and fled to the forest where he passed the remainder of his life as a
> wild man of the woods. This second Merlin lived in the time of
> Arthur. He is said to have made more prophecies than his
> namesake.[144]

Gerald's Merlin Celidonius does not exactly match up with Geoffrey's Merlin from the *Vita*

Merlini, or Lailoken or Myrddin; there was no terrible monster in the air in any of these stories.

However, Merlin Celidonius generally seems to be the same character as the Merlin in the *Vita*

Merlini because of his other name, Silvestris, and his going mad while fighting and subsequent

life in the Calidonian forest. Gerald's connection of the "second Merlin" with Arthur seems to be

his attempt to make sense of various phrases in Geoffrey's *Historia* and *Vita Merlini* that connect

Merlin and Arthur without showing that they ever met. This separation of the two Merlins may

have led to a lack of continuation of literature on the madman Merlin, but Robert de Boron must

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[144]"Erant enim Merlini duo; iste qui et Ambrosius dictus est, quia binomius fuerat, et sub rege
Vortigerno prophetizavit, ab incubo genitus, et apud Kaermerdyn inventus; unde et ab ipso
ibidem invento denominata est Kaermerdyn, id est, urbs Merlini; alter vero de Albania oriundus,
qui et Celidonius dictus est, a Celidonia silva in qua prophetizavit, et Silvester, quia cum inter
acies bellieas constitutus monstrum horribile nimis in aera suspiciendo prospiceret, dementire
coepit, et ad silvam transfugiendo silvestrem usque ad obitum vitam perduxit. Hic autem
Merlinus tempore Arthuri fuit, et longe plenius et apertius quam alter prophetasse perhibetur"
(Giraldus Cambrensis, *Itinerarium Cambriae*, Lib II, Cap viii, 133; transl. Dimock).

have had some knowledge of Merlin's status as a wild man, because he uses wild man themes in *Merlin* that are not found anywhere in the *Historia* or Wace's translation. Because Robert de Boron modeled his *Merlin* mainly on the *Historia*, the mad king figure of Merlin disappeared in French material, and there is no battle at Arfderydd where Merlin goes mad and runs off into the woods. There are, however, four specific elements in Robert de Boron's text, and later in the Vulgate Cycle, which come directly from the Brittonic wild man figure of Merlin.

The first is Merlin's longing for the woods. In Robert de Boron's *Merlin*, Merlin sends a cleric named Blaise to live in the woods in Northumberland, where he will write down stories of Merlin and Arthur and the knights. Blaise lives like a hermit and is referred to as a holy man, reflective of Merlin's time in the woods in the *Vita Merlini*. Merlin tells Blaise to go to Northumberland just before he himself goes to prophesy to Vortigern:

> [Y]ou will go by yourself and ask the way to a land called Northumberland; and this land is full of many great forests and is very foreign to the people of the same country, for there are certain areas where no one has yet been. And you will live there and I will go to you[.][145]

Northumberland is like the Caledonian forest: woods that are not populated by people, a strange, private forest, where Merlin can go when he is not at court and where he will meet Blaise. In the Vulgate Cycle's *Estoire de Merlin*, Merlin reveals why he has to go into the woods frequently: "I want you to know that my habit is such that I want to keep going back to the woods because of the nature of the one from whom I was conceived because he has no desire to have any company

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[145]"iras par toi et demenderas une terre qui a non Norhombellande; et cele terre si est plene de molt granz forez et si est molt estrange a genz dou païs meimes, que il i a de tels parties ou nus n'a encor esté. Et la converseras et je irai a toi[.]" (Robert de Boron, *Merlin,* ed. Micha, 99, l. 13–21).

that could be from God, but I do not go for his company but for the company of Blaise the holy man."[146] Merlin's desire for the woods is attributed to the demonic side of him, not madness overcoming him, but he still has a longing to leave court and live in the forest, which was not a characteristic of the demon prophet Merlin of the *Historia*.

The second element drawn from the Brittonic wild man tradition into the Merlin of French Arthurian romance is the "home sauvaige," the *savage man*. In *Wild Men in the Middle Ages,* Bernheimer makes the argument that the French word "sauvage" derives from the Latin word "silva" for forest, meaning that the wild man's title reflects "not only his inner character, but also the nature of his habitat" (Bernheimer, 20). The French Merlin's manifestation of the *home sauvaige* is in the disguises that Merlin adopts, first appearing when Merlin knows that Pendragon, Robert de Boron's replacement name for Aurelius Ambrosius (Uther's brother), is searching for him. Merlin goes to the village where Pendragon's messengers are staying, disguised as "a woodcutter, a great axe at his neck and huge shoes on his feet and dressed in a short tunic completely torn and his hair sticking up all over the place and a long beard, and he looked very much like a wild man."[147] A woodcutter is not exactly a wild man, because a woodcutter participates in an economic society, but Merlin's appearance as a woodcutter resembles that of a wild man. The implication of the disguise of woodcutter is that if Merlin

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[146]"ie voeil que tu saces que ma coustume est tele que iou repaire volentiers en bois par la nature de celui de qui ie fui engendres car il na cure de nule compaignie auoir qui de par dieu soit mais ie ni vois mie por la compaignie de lui mais por la compaignie de blaise le saint homme" (*Estoire de Merlin*, ed. Sommer, 97, l. 22–26).

[147]"uns boscherons, une grant coingniee a son col et uns granz solers chauciez et ot une corte cote vestue toute despeciee et les chevols molt hericiez et molt granz et la barbe molt grande, et bien sembla home sauvaige" (Robert de Boron, *Merlin,* ed. Micha, 125, l. 1–8).

appeared as a wild man, he would be seen as outside society, but being a woodcutter makes him blend in in the village.

The third wild man element is the appearance of Merlin explicitly as a wild man and moreover as king of the woods. When Pendragon figures out that Merlin is in Northumberland and goes there to find him, his men find in the woods "a great many beasts and a very ugly and very hideous man who was guarding these beasts."[148] They don't recognize him but they want to take him to Pendragon because he claims to have information for their king, but he says, "Then I will be guarding my beasts badly, and I have no need for him. But if he comes to me, I will certainly tell him who he is searching for."[149] This man is Merlin, recognizable to the reader because of two characteristics: he has the appearance of an ugly man guarding beasts, and he is defying a king. Significantly, because he is in the woods, Merlin has the status, or at least the power, to demand that the king come to him, rather than obeying Pendragon's orders; this suggests that the forest is Merlin's kingdom and other kings follow his rules there. When Pendragon comes to him, the man guarding the beasts says that he knows he is looking for Merlin, but "you cannot find him before he wants you to find him."[150]

Merlin's wild man disguise is not his real appearance, and he uses his numerous appearances to mess with Pendragon. After Pendragon leaves the forest of Northumberland, Merlin goes to visit him as "a worthy man . . . carrying himself very well and well dressed and

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[148]"une grant planté de bestes et un home molt lait et molt hidos qui ces bestes gardoit" (Robert de Boron, *Merlin,* ed. Micha, 128, l. 6–8).

[149]"Donc garderai je mauveisement mes bestes, ne je n'ai nul besoing de lui. Mais se il venoit a moi, je li diroie bien celui qu'il vait querant" (Robert de Boron, *Merlin,* ed. Micha, 129, l. 17–20).

[150]"vos nou povez einsis trouver devant que il voille que vos le truissoiz" (Robert de Boron, *Merlin,* ed. Micha, 129, l. 28–29).

well-shod"[151] and tells him that the man he met in the woods guarding the beasts was Merlin.

Pendragon then waits for Merlin to come to him, so the well-dressed man visits him again and

reveals himself to be the guardian of beasts from the woods. Pendragon is astonished, and his

men protest that "it cannot be, if we saw him, that we would not recognize him."[152] Merlin says,

"You cannot recognize a man if you only know his appearance, and I will show you this. . . .

these people who think they can recognize me know nothing of my character."[153] Then Merlin

changes himself into a wild man and Pendragon's men are able to recognize him. Pendragon

berates them for not realizing that this was Merlin sooner, and they say, "we never saw him do

such things, but we believe that he can do and say that which no other who now lives can do or

say."[154] Merlin's ability to transform his appearance gives him the upper hand; he can use his

wild man side as a disguise and no one will recognize him, and he gets away with refusing to do

what the king demands because he is his own ruler and his woods are his kingdom, placing him

on an equal level with the king although he has no rank at court. His audacity with kings would

not be allowed from anyone else at court, but because in the woods Merlin is able to assert

himself by tricking everyone when he changes his appearance, it works the same way at court.

His resulting status is such that "Merlin was a lord over Pendragon and Uther."[155]

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[151]"un prodome . . . molt bien atornez et bien vestuz et bien chauciez" (Robert de Boron, *Merlin,* ed. Micha, 130, l. 41–3).

[152]"ce ne puet estre, se nos le veons, que nos nou conoissons bien" (Robert de Boron, *Merlin,* ed. Micha, 132, l. 19–20).

[153]"Ne conoist pas bien home qui ne conoist que la samblance, et si le vos mosterrai. . . . ceste gent qui me cuident conoistre ne sevent riens de mon afaire" (Robert de Boron, *Merlin,* ed. Micha, 133, l. 26–32).

[154]"nos ne li veimes mes tel chose faire, mais nos creom qu'il puet faire et dire ce que nus autres qui or soit vif ne puet faire ne dire" (Robert de Boron, *Merlin,* ed. Micha, 135, l. 61–64).

[155]"fu Merlins touz sires de Pandragon et Uitier" (Robert de Boron, *Merlin,* ed. Micha, 164, l. 16–17).

The fourth element of Merlin the wild man in French legend is one specific passage from the *Vita Merlini* and *Lailoken* that shows up unexpectedly in Robert de Boron's *Merlin.* As mentioned, Robert de Boron would not have read the *Vita Merlini*, nor would he have read *Lailoken,* but this particular story is so specific that he could not have invented it himself, and therefore it likely came to him via oral transmission between Wales and Brittany. The story details a prophecy of three different deaths for one person that always all turn out to be true. In *Lailoken,* Lailoken reveals his death to Saint Kentigern, at three different times and detailing three seemingly separate deaths: "crushed by stones and cudgels," "pierced by a sharp wooden stake," and "drowning."[156] Kentigern thinks he is lying, but Lailoken later dies all three ways:

> [H]e was stoned and beaten to death by certain shepherds of king
> Meldred and while he was in the throes of death he fell down the
> steep side of the river Tweed . . . on to a sharp stake which had
> been driven into the ground as part of a fish-trap and he was
> impaled right through the middle of his body. His head fell forward
> into the water and so, just as he had prophesied, he gave his soul
> up to the Lord.[157]

In the *Vita Merlini*, Merlin tells King Rodarch that Ganieda was unfaithful to him, and Merlin's sister wants to prove that Merlin is lying about his prophetic ability, so she stages an opportunity to show Rodarch that Merlin is a false prophet. She picks out a random boy in the court and asks Merlin to predict the boy's death. She presents him to Merlin three times, in different disguises including dressing him as a girl, and Merlin says that he will die, "falling

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[156]"lapidibus obrutus et fustibus . . . perforabitur veru ligneo acuto . . . in undis absorptus" (*Vita Merlini Silvestris,* in *Lailoken (or Merlin Silvester)*, H. Ward, 517–518; transl. MacQueen).
[157]"a quibusdam regis Meldredi pastoribus usque ad mortem lapidatus ac fustigatus. casum faceret in mortis articulo. ultra oram Trauedis fluminis preruptam. prope opidum Dunmeller. super sudem acutissimam. que in aliqua piscaria erat inserta. et transfixus per medium corpus. inclinato capite in stangno spiritum sicut prophetauerat. domino transmisit" (*Vita Merlini Silvestris,* in *Lailoken (or Merlin Silvester)*, H. Ward, 521; transl. MacQueen).

from a high rock," then experience "a violent death in a tree," and lastly "she will die in a river."[158] Rodarch thinks that Merlin is insane and lying and forgives his wife. Then the prophecy is fulfilled: the boy, now a young man, is chasing a stag and is riding over a mountain when his horse slips off the edge and he "plunged down the steep cliff slope into the river . . . in such a way that one foot caught in a tree and the rest of his body was submerged in the flowing stream. So then, he fell—he was drowned—he hung from a tree; and by his triple death he proved the prophet a true one."[159]

In Robert de Boron's *Merlin*, the story is slightly altered. Merlin has pledged himself to Pendragon, and a baron at Pendragon's court, who doesn't trust Merlin and is jealous of his standing in court with the king, tries to trick Merlin so that Pendragon will see that Merlin is a false prophet. The baron comes to Merlin in three different guises and asks him each time what his death will be. The first time, Merlin tells him, "Know this well, that the day that you will die, you will fall off a horse and break your neck."[160] The second time, Merlin says, "The day that you will die, you will be found hanging."[161] This is clever, because Merlin does not say that the baron will die because of being hanged, but indicates that he will be found hanging. Before Merlin reveals the third death, he says to Pendragon and Uther in frustration, "When I know you better, I think you are madder. Do you believe that I don't know well what death this madman

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[158]"de celsa rupe ruendo" . . . "forti . . . in arbore morti" . . . "morietur in ampne" (Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Vita Merlini*, transl. Basil Clarke, 68, l. 311, 321, 338).

[159]"celsa de rupe virumque/ forte per abruptum montis cecidisse sub amnem,/ ut tamen hereret pes eius in arbore quadam/ et submersa forent sub flumine cetera membra. Sicque ruit mersusque fuit lignoque pependit, et fecit vatem per terna pericula verum" (Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Vita Merlini*, transl. Basil Clarke, 72, l. 410–5).

[160]« ce sachiez bien que le jor que vos morroiz vos charroiz d'un cheval et vos briseroiz le col » (Robert de Boron, *Merlin,* ed. Micha, 156, l. 33–35).

[161]« Le jor que tu morras seras trouvez pendant » (Robert de Boron, *Merlin,* ed. Micha, 158, l. 64–66).

who is testing me will die?"[162] Then he reveals the baron's death in all three parts: "He will break

his neck, hang, and drown."[163] Of course, Merlin's prophecy is fulfilled and the baron dies all

three ways:

> A day came, a long time after, that the nobleman who would die
> like this was riding with a great crowd of people and came to a
> stream. Over this stream there was a wooden bridge and at the end
> of the bridge there was a beautiful village. And he rode onto the
> bridge and his palfrey stumbled and fell to its knees. And the man
> who had was riding was thrown forward and fell on his neck in
> such a way that it was broken, and his body twisted over in such a
> way that one of the old poles that had been on the bridge caught on
> his robe so that his backside stayed hanging in the air and his
> shoulders and his head were submerged in the water.[164]

After the baron dies, Merlin tells Uther, "I will no longer talk before people in court except so

obscurely that they will not know what I am saying before it happens."[165] Then he leaves

Pendragon's court, and Uther relays what Merlin said to his brother and Pendragon realizes that

Merlin is angry at him for going along with the charade.

The appearance of the triple death in *Merlin* provides not only a direct link to the stories

about Merlin the wild man but also clarification on the replacement of madness in French

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[162]« Quant je plus vos acointe, et je vos truis plus fols. Cuidez vos que je ne saiche bien de quel mort cil fox qui m'essaie doit morir? » (Robert de Boron, *Merlin,* ed. Micha, 159, l. 27–30).
[163]"il se brisera le col et pendra et neiera" (Robert de Boron, *Merlin,* ed. Micha, 160, l. 47–48).
[164]".I. jor avint, lonc tans aprés, que cil prodom qui einsis devoit morir chevauchoit a grant planté de genz et vint a une riviere. Seur cele riviere si avoit .I. pont de fust et au chief de ce pont si avoit une bonne vile. Et cil chevaucha par mi le pont et ses palefroiz açoupa et cheï a genolz. Et cil qui sus estoit se lança avant et chaï sur son col en tel maniere qu'il le brisa, et le cors torna outre en tel maniere que un des veus pels qui avoit esté dou pont feri par mi sa robe si que les reins remestrent en haut pendant et les espaules et la teste furent toutes en l'iaue" (Robert de Boron, *Merlin,* ed. Micha, 161, l. 1–11).
[165][« . . .] ne je ne parlerai plus devant le peuple ne en cort se si oscurement non que il ne savront ja que je dirai devant que il le verront. » (Robert de Boron, *Merlin,* ed. Micha, 163, l. 37–39).

material: anger. Merlin's anger at not being trusted by Pendragon connects solidly with

Geoffrey's use of the words *furor* and *rabiem,* which, as shown, both include an element of rage.

The difference is that without madness, Merlin is not forced to be in the woods like Myrddin and

Lailoken and to a certain extent Geoffrey's Merlin; instead, he chooses when to go to the woods,

either because of his demonic side calling to him, or, more often depicted, because of frustration

in court. Merlin's anger in French Arthurian legend is also never particularly wild, aside from the

fact that it leads him to leave court for the woods; the anger demonstrated in the triple death

passage is the result of an insult from members of court, and therefore fully justified, and Merlin

does not attack anyone when he is in a fit of rage but instead expresses his hurt and frustration

from Pendragon and Uther's lack of trust in him by leaving. This is particularly effective

because, unlike in the *Vita Merlini* when Rodarch forced Merlin to stay at court by putting him in

chains, Pendragon and Uther are unable to prevent Merlin from leaving, further showing how

much increased control Merlin has at court.

The loss of Merlin's madness in French Arthurian material shows a shift between

Brittonic, Anglo-Norman, and French cultural values. In the *Vita Merlini*, Geoffrey includes a

passage where Merlin wanders through Rodarch's palace saying "O the madness of the Britons!

Their universal affluence leads them to excess."[166] Geoffrey's choice of the word *rabiem* to

represent the madness he associates with Britons is telling, because it describes them as if they

are animals or are behaving like animals, a representation that is not surprising given the

historical perception of the Britons as barbaric.[167] When Geoffrey describes Merlin's madness

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[166]"O rabiem Britonum, quos copia diviciarum/ usque superveniens ultra quam debeat effert!"
(Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Vita Merlini*, transl. Basil Clarke, 82, l. 580–81).
[167]See Introduction.

using both *rabiem* and *furor*, he associates Merlin on the one hand with the animalistic behavior of Britons and on the other with the divine fury of God, bridging the gap between these two perceived extremes and managing to mold Merlin into a character that fits both. The result of these two sides converging is that the French Merlin is able to take on elements of divine anger, combined with the appearance of the wild man and the trope of living in the woods, without the additional negative connotation of Brittonic madness. Therefore, instead of Merlin's life in the woods being that of an outcast because others perceive that there is something wrong with him, namely madness, the woods become representative of Merlin's status gain entirely because he is an outsider, not part of the court and therefore not under the king's rule, and the wild man qualities all gain a positive connotation, giving Merlin authority and even placing him in control over the court.

Chapter III: Subservience and Intimacy

Merlin and Arthur

Merlin's transition from the madman to the righteously angry man brought about a shift in the portrayal of his character, changing him from someone viewed as an outsider to someone whose power is intensified simply because he is an outsider. It also led to Merlin being portrayed as having personal control over his own narrative, and authority over all members of the court. An additional angle on this new control, which was not explored through the development of Merlin the wild man, is the appearance in medieval French romance of an intimate relationship between Merlin and King Arthur, never seen in Brittonic or Latin material. In order to understand this sudden development, it is important to look at two things, mainly the specific trajectory of Merlin's increasingly intimate relationship with various kings from Latin texts to French romance, but also importantly the twelfth-century Anglo-Norman definition of love, because this will provide a framework through which to view Merlin and Arthur's relationship.

Aelred of Rievaulx (1110–1167), an English Cistercian monk, equates the medieval concepts of love and friendship in his book *De spirituali amicitia* (On spiritual friendship), associating friendship closely, if not exactly, with love. He writes, "In my opinion, from *amor* comes *amicus* and from *amicus amicita*. That is, from the word for *love* comes that for *friend*, and from *friend, friendship*. Now love is an attachment of the rational soul. Through love, the soul seeks and yearns with longing to enjoy an object . . . [and] also enjoys the object with interior sweetness and embraces and cherishes it once it is acquired."[168] Not only does Aelred

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[168]"Ab amore, ut mihi videtur, amicus dicitur, ab amico amicitia. Est autem amor quidam animae rationalis affectus per quem ipsa aliquid cum desiderio quaerit et appetit ad fruendum; per quem

provide a linguistic connection between the Latin words for friendship and love, but he also

defines love using the same words with which he later defines spiritual friendship: "Where such

friendship exists, *wishing and not wishing the same things,* a wish that is the more pleasant as it

is more sincere and the sweeter as it is more holy, lovers can wish for nothing that is unbecoming

and fail to wish for nothing that is becoming."[169] He calls two people in this type of friendship

lovers, and emphasizes that in the cases of both pure love and spiritual friendship, the key

elements are sweetness, tied to holiness, and appreciation without underlying expectations.

Aelred defines friendship as occupying three categories, *carnal, worldly,* and *spiritual*,[170]

and expands on them as follows: "The carnal is created by a conspiracy in vice, the worldly is

enkindled by hope of gain, and the spiritual is cemented among the righteous by a likeness of

lifestyles and interests."[171] In other words, carnal friendship occurs as a result of lust, worldly

friendship is a tool that people use selfishly in order to get personal benefits from each other, and

spiritual love is a deep appreciation for another person, based on similar interests, without any

expected profit. These three separate types of friendship match exactly with the way love is

viewed through the lens of Christianity, wherein carnal relationships and expectations of

personal gain are frowned upon but a pure form of love is exalted. According to Aelred, spiritual

friendship would be the purest form of love. In fact, Aelred argues that while the concepts of

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et fruitur eo cum quadam interiori suavitate, amplectitur et conservat adeptum" (Aelred of Rievaulx, *De spirituali amicitia*, Lib I; transl. Braceland).

[169]"Ubi talis est amicitia, ibi profecto est idem velle et idem nolle, tanto utique dulcius, quanto sincerius; tanto suavius, quanto sacratius; ubi sic amantes nihil possunt velle quod dedeceat, nihil quod expediat, nolle" (Aelred of Rievaulx, *De spirituali amicitia*, Lib. I; transl. Braceland).

[170]"carnalis, . . . mundialis, . . . spiritualis" (Aelred of Rievaulx, *De spirituali amicitia*, Lib I; transl. Braceland).

[171]"Et carnalem quidem creat vitiorum consensus; mundialem spes quaestus accendit; spiritalem inter bonos vitae, morum studiorumque similitudo conglutinat" (Aelred of Rievaulx, *De spirituali amicitia*, Lib I; transl. Braceland).

love and friendship overlap, friendship has a more specific nuance than love, because love is part of charity, which applies to both friends and enemies, but "we call friends only those to whom we have no qualm about entrusting our heart and all its contents."[172]

Aelred's depiction of spiritual friendship as the purest and highest form of love can provide insight into the development of Merlin's relationship with King Arthur. This development starts before any interactions between Merlin and Arthur are even depicted. In fact, it starts with the role of the magician-advisor at court, and how that role changes between Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia* and Robert de Boron's *Merlin* and then in the French Vulgate Cycle. Magicians at the court in Geoffrey's *Historia* exist solely as advisors to the king and are only considered useful because of the help and advice which they can provide through their magical abilities. Vortigern's magicians only show up in the *Historia* when Vortigern needs them to explain why his tower keeps falling down, and then they never reappear.[173] Cadwallon, one of the British kings in the *Historia*, plots to "find some way or other of killing King Edwin's magician, to prevent him from warning the King of Cadwallo's coming"[174] because he knows that if he can get rid of Edwin's source of information about the future, he can beat Edwin. Edwin's magician appears in no other context; he is treated more like a weapon than a human being, and never has a voice of his own because everything he does is for Edwin. This exclusivity is also somewhat the case for Merlin, who appears in the *Historia* only when Vortigern, Aurelius Ambrosius, or Utherpendragon needs him. In each case, they summon him

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[172]"Amicos autem illos solos dicimus, quibus cor nostrum, et quidquid in illo est, committere non formidamus" (Aelred of Rievaulx, *De spirituali amicitia*, Lib I; transl. Braceland).
[173]Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Britanniae,* Lib VI, vi. 17.
[174]"magumque Edwini regis aliquo modo perimeret, ne solita arte adventum Cadwallonis indicaret" (Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Brittanniae*, Lib XI, xii. 7).

and he responds to their commands. After Merlin arrives at Vortigern's court and reveals that

Vortigern's tower keeps falling because of the dragons underneath it, Vortigern has the pool

drained; then when the dragons emerge and begin fighting, Vortigern "order[s] Merlin to explain

what this battle of the dragons meant"[175] to which Merlin responds with a series of prophecies

about Britain.[176] When Aurelius wants to build Stonehenge, he decides to "order [Merlin] to

come and use his ability."[177] While trying to figure out how to bypass Ygerna's husband so that

he can sleep with her, Uther "ordered Merlin to be sent for."[178]

In the *Roman de Brut*, Wace's translation of Geoffrey's *Historia*, Wace words these

commands very differently. Instead of ordering Merlin, Vortigern "begged Merlin to tell him

what the dragons and their angry battle meant."[179] Aurelius still sends for Merlin, and Merlin still

comes at his command, but instead of ordering Merlin to do anything, Aurelius "begged and

prayed him to teach and inform him of the time to come."[180] When Uther wants to sleep with

Ygerne, he "summoned Merlin to come to him . . . [and] begged and prayed him to advise him."

[181] Begging instead of ordering changes the entire relationship between Merlin and each king:

instead of being in servitude, Merlin is treated as if he could refuse to give in to the kings'

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[175]"praecepit rex Ambrosio Merlino, — sic enim cognomen erat ei — dicere, quid proelium draconum portenderet" (Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Brittanniae*, Lib VII, vii. 3).
[176]Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Brittanniae*, Lib VII.
[177]"Iube . . . [Merlinum] venire ut ingenio suo innitaris." (Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Brittanniae*, Lib VIII, viii. 10).
[178]"Merlinum ad se venire iussit" (Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Brittanniae*, Lib VIII, viii. 19).
[179]"Merlin preia qu'il li desist/ Que li dragun senefioent/ Ki par tel ire s'assembloent" (Wace, *Roman de Brut*, transl. Weiss, 190, l. 7532–4).
[180]"Mult le preia, mult le requist/ Qu'il l'enseinast, qu'il li deïst/ Del tens ki esteit a venir" (Wace, *Roman de Brut*, transl. Weiss, 202, l. 8021–3).
[181]"Fist mander e venir Merlin./ . . . Preié l'ad e merci crié/ Que conseil le dunt" (Wace, *Roman de Brut*, transl. Weiss, 218, l. 8682, 8684–5).

demands. This means that Wace chose to depict Merlin as a more powerful figure at the court than Geoffrey did. However, in Wace's text, Merlin still does everything that these kings ask him to do, so he does not use this different level of power.

In Robert de Boron's *Merlin*, Merlin's power and status escalate to the point where Merlin does not respond to any king's commands. Although Vortigern still has Merlin somewhat forcibly brought to him, he speaks to Merlin as if they are equals. When Merlin has revealed that the two dragons fighting signifies Vortigern's death, Vortigern tells Merlin, "I see well and know that you are the wisest man in the world, and I beg you and require you to counsel me against these things and that you tell me, if it pleases you and if you know it, what death you believe I will die."[182] Vortigern's response contains a mix of commands, praise, and hopeful prayers, as if Merlin is simultaneously Vortigern's servant and a figure close to the status of God. Later, when Pendragon, Robert de Boron's version of Aurelius Ambrosius, tries to find Merlin, Merlin refuses to go to meet him, saying that "I have no need for him. But if he comes to me, I will certainly tell him who he is searching for."[183] When Pendragon comes to him, Merlin presents himself in the disguise of a wild man in the woods and teases, "You cannot find [Merlin] before he wants you to find him."[184] Merlin is able to defy Pendragon completely, with no repercussions. When Merlin later offers his help to Pendragon, he does so freely and because he wants to, not because Pendragon commands him.[185]

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[182]"Je voi bien et sai que tu es le plus sage home dou monde et je te pri et te requier que tu me conseilles contre ces choses et que tu me dies, s'il te plaist et tu le sais, de quel mort tu cuides que je muire" (Robert de Boron, *Merlin*, ed. Micha, 120, l. 42–46).

[183]"je n'ai nul besoing de lui. Mais se il venoit a moi, je li diroie bien celui qu'il vait querant" (Robert de Boron, *Merlin,* ed. Micha, 129, l. 17–20).

[184]"vos nou povez einsis trouver devant que il voille que vos le truissoiz" (Robert de Boron, *Merlin,* ed. Micha, 129, l. 28–29).

[185]Robert de Boron, *Merlin*, ed. Micha, 134, l. 51–52.

The most extreme difference in Merlin's status at court between the *Historia* and *Merlin*

can be seen with Uther, when he wants to sleep with Ygraine. A baron named Ulfin advises

Uther to send for Merlin, but Uther says, "I know well that Merlin knows of my distress, and I

am afraid that I made him angry when the seat at the table was tested,[186] because it has been a

very long time that he has not come to a place where I was."[187] Uther does not even dare to send

for Merlin, and is afraid that Merlin will never return to him. At this point in Robert de Boron's

text, Merlin is not required to answer to any king and has such power at court that he can make

even the king afraid to speak to him.

This transition, from the Merlin who only appears in order to respond to commands to the

Merlin who answers to no one, reveals a different way of viewing Merlin's character in Robert

de Boron's text. Because Merlin is autonomous, he is not a tool like Edwin's magician and he is

not limited to his interactions with each king but instead has his own agenda. This agenda is not

just about asserting power, although that plays a substantial role in how readers see this

transition. However, the more intriguing aspect of Merlin's new assertive status is the way

dialogue is written, and the circumstances under which it occurs, between Merlin and each king,

turning from the dynamic of lord and liegemen to a relationship built on mutual respect,

friendship, and explicitly love, most notable in the sudden appearance of such a relationship

between Merlin and Arthur.

There had only been hints of interaction between Arthur and Merlin before Robert de

Boron's *Merlin*. The *Trioedd Ynys Prydein* ("Triads of the Island of Britain," pre-1200s), an

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[186]The test he is referring to is the *triple death,* discussed in Chapter II.

[187]« Il n'est riens nule que en pouïst faire que je ne feisse, mais je sai bien que Merlins set ma destresce, si crien que je l'aie corrocié de ce que li leus de la table fu essaiez, quar il a molt grant piece que il ne vint en leu ou je fusse » (Robert de Boron, *Merlin*, ed. Micha, 217, l. 24–27).

undateable collection of Welsh poems that are each in three parts, states that "Three Skilful

Bards were at Arthur's court: Myrddin son of Morfryn, Myrddin Emrys, and Taliesin."[188] This

triad implies that Merlin lived at Arthur's court, but does not detail any association between the

two. At the end of the *Historia* Geoffrey writes that "God did not wish the Britons to rule in

Britain any more, until the moment should come which Merlin had prophesied to Arthur"[189]

which implies that Merlin spoke to Arthur, although Geoffrey never shows them actually

meeting and the *Historia* does not mention any other interactions between them. Merlin

references the "Boar of Cornwall" in his prophecies to Vortigern, widely interpreted to mean

Arthur because "the end of the Boar will be shrouded in mystery" like the vagueness surrounding

Arthur's death and possible return to health in Avalon, and "[t]he Boar shall be extolled in the

mouths of its peoples, and its deeds will be as meat and drink to those who tell tales."[190] In the

Roman de Brut, Wace omits Arthur in his translation of Geoffrey's sentence about Merlin

prophesying to Arthur and just says, "The English were to have Britain; the British would never

recover it until the time when Merlin's prophecy was fulfilled"[191] and earlier he seems to connect

Merlin with Arthur when he says, "Merlin said of Arthur, rightly, that his death would be

doubtful,"[192] but neither of these passages refer in any way to an actual meeting. In Geoffrey's

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[188]"Tri Bardd Kaw oedd yn LLys Arthur:/ Myrddyn vab Morvryn,/ Myrddyn Embrys,/ A Thaliessin" (*Trioedd Ynys Prydein,* ed. Rachel Bromwich, 169, Triad 87).

[189]"Praeviderat enim Deus Britones in Britannia, quae tunc Anglis tradita erat, amplius non regnare, donec tempus illud veniret, quod Merlinus prophetaverat" (Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Brittanniae*, Lib XI, xii. 17; transl. Thorpe).

[190]"Aper Cornubiae"; "exitus eius dubius erit"; "In ore populorum celebrabitur et actus eius cibus erit narrantibus" (Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Brittanniae*, Lib VII, vii. 3; transl. Thorpe).

[191]"Engleis Bretaine aver deveient;/ Ja Bretun n'i recuvereient/ Jesqu'al tens que la prophecy/ Que Merlin dist seit acumplie" (Wace, *Roman de Brut,* transl. Weiss, 370, l. 14791–4).

[192]"Merlin dist d'Arthur, si ot dreit,/ Que sa mort dutuse serreit" (Wace, *Roman de Brut*, transl. Weiss, 334, l. 13285–6).

Vita Merlini, the closest of any texts before Robert de Boron's *Merlin* to exploring interaction between Merlin and Arthur, Taliesin says while talking to Merlin, "The *Island of Apples* [Avalon] . . . It was there we took Arthur after the battle of Camlan,"[193] implying that Merlin and Taliesin carried a dying Arthur to Avalon, which would mean that Merlin and Arthur definitely met. However, nothing more is said in the *Vita Merlini* about any possible meeting. Overall, these texts contain hints of interaction between Arthur and Merlin, but no more than hints.

In Robert de Boron's *Merlin*, Merlin and Arthur still never meet, but Merlin completely influences the direction of Arthur's life. He plays a role in Arthur's conception, just like he did in Geoffrey's *Historia*, but whereas in the *Historia* Uther seizes Tintagel and marries Ygerna and "they had a son and a daughter . . . called Arthur and . . . Anna,"[194] in *Merlin* Merlin takes the baby boy from Ygraine to be fostered to assuage his own bad deeds. Merlin believes that because he played a role in deceiving Ygraine when he disguised Uther so that Uther could sleep with her, and therefore she does not know who made her pregnant, he needs to atone for this. He tells Uther, "I am not acquitted for my sin that I have towards the lady and towards the child that she has inside herself, and she does not know by whom."[195] Merlin cannot reveal the father of Ygraine's baby without showing how Uther had tricked Ygraine, so in order to protect Uther, and to protect Ygraine so that she does not experience any shame or judgment from other courtiers for being pregnant without knowing who her baby's father is, he has Arthur secretly fostered by one of Uther's liegemen.

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[193]"Insula pomorum . . ./ Illuc post bellum Camblani vulnere lesum/ duximus Arcturum nos conducente" (Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Vita Merlini*, ed. Clarke, 100–2, l. 908–30).

[194]"progenueruntque filium et filiam. Fuit autem nomen filii Arthurus, nomen vero filiae Anna" (Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Brittanniae*, Lib VIII, viii. 21).

[195]« je ne me sui mie aquitez dou pechié que j'ai de la dame et de l'engendreure que ele a dedanz soi, et si ne set de cui. » (Robert de Boron, *Merlin*, ed. Micha, 247, l. 17–9).

The fostering, aside from removing Merlin's sin, has two major effects. Firstly, it sets the tone for Arthur's character: Robert de Boron defines Arthur by his humility, which is engendered by Arthur's upbringing away from the castle, as if he were one of the people and not the king's son. Secondly, it creates a situation in which Merlin is responsible for Arthur, and based on which Arthur will later rely on Merlin. This responsibility starts with Merlin bringing about Arthur's placement on the throne. When Uther dies, apparently without an heir, Merlin tells the counsel of barons, "God . . . will choose for us such a king by whom the people can be governed according to his pleasure and his will . . . And I promise you, . . . that you will see a sign of the choice of Jesus Christ."[196] Then on Christmas Day, people come out of the church after mass and see the method by which the new king will be chosen:

> They saw in front of the main door of the church, in the middle of
> the square, a stone with four square corners, and they could not tell
> what kind of stone it was, and they said that it was marble. And on
> this stone, in the middle, there was an iron anvil more than half a
> foot high and in the center of this anvil there was a sword stuck
> down into the stone.[197]

This passage is the first ever appearance of the sword in the stone. It is not certain where Robert de Boron got the idea for a sword in a stone. This sword is notably not Excalibur, known today as the sword given to Arthur by the Lady of the Lake, and seen in Geoffrey's *Historia* as

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[196] « Dieu . . . nos elisse tel roi qui le pueple puisse gouverner a son plaisir et a sa volenté faire . . . Et je vos creant, . . . que vos verroiz senefiance de l'election Jhesu Crist » (Robert de Boron, *Merlin,* ed. Micha, 263–4, l. 31–52).

[197] "virent devant la maistre porte de l'eglise, en mi la place, un perron tot quarré en quatre quarrés et ne sorent onques conoistre de quel pierre il estoit, si distrent qu'il estoit de marbre. Et seur cest perron en mi leu aveit une enclume de fer largement de demi pié de haut et par mi celle enclume avoit une espee ferue jusque au perron" (Robert de Boron, *Merlin,* ed. Micha, 268, l. 2–8).

Arthur's "peerless sword, called Caliburn, which was forged in the Isle of Avalon"[198] and in the

Mabinogion (pre-1100), a collection of Brittonic legends in Middle Welsh in which Arthur refers

to "Caledvwlch, my sword."[199] There had been no prior reference to a sword in a stone in any

Arthurian legends, or even in other Brittonic stories; the closest pre-existing similarity to the

sword in the stone found in any northern European legend is the Norse sword Gram, which

Sigmund pulls out of a tree trunk in the *Volsunga Saga* (pre-1000),[200] but it is impossible to prove

that Gram influenced Robert de Boron. However, the similarity suggests that these two swords,

Gram and the sword in the stone, play somewhat parallel roles; both Sigmund and Arthur are the

only ones who can pull their respective swords out of the tree and the stone, and this makes them

particularly worthy. The connection of worthiness with swords can also be seen in the

characteristics of the Brittonic sword Dyrnwyn, "White-Hilt," which was one of the Thirteen

Treasures of the Island of Britain, various renowned objects in medieval Welsh legend: "if a

well-born man drew it himself, it burst into flame from its hilt to its tip."[201]

Based on these similarities, and on the probable existence of other parallel contemporary

stories in Britain, the sword in the stone seems to signify worthiness and exclusivity: only the

person who could draw the sword out of the stone could become king, and only one person could

do it, namely Arthur. It creates the perfect test for selecting the new king, because it appears to

come with proof of strength, from drawing the sword out, and it shows that the new king has the

favor of God, because it is assumed that God put the stone with the sword in the church

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[198]"Caliburno, gladio optimo, in insula Avalonis fabricato" (Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Brittanniae*, Lib IX, ix. 4).
[199]"chaletu☐lch uyg cledyf" (Jesus MS 111, *Llyfr Coch Hergest*, 201v, 814, l. 28–9).
[200]*The Saga of the Volsungs*, transl. Byock.
[201]"os tynnai ddyn mwyn ef i hun, ef a ennynai yn y fflam o'i groes hyd i flaen" (*Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, ed. Bromwich, Appendix III, 455–6).

courtyard. However, readers know that Merlin put the sword there, because he told the council

that a challenge would manifest itself, but as seen in Chapter I, God and Merlin have a somewhat

interchangeable status, so Merlin is able to give Arthur the favor of God by creating this

challenge. In doing so, Merlin legitimizes Arthur as king and also sets him up to be a particularly

notable king because of the method through which he will ascend the throne.

Merlin bringing about Arthur's kingship appears to be a continuation of Merlin's need to

atone for the sin he committed when he participated in the deception of Ygrain. Therefore,

Merlin creates the sword in the stone because he believes that he owes Arthur something. But

Merlin's behavior displays an added element: the atonement to God, and making sure that Arthur

will have God's favor, reflects how Merlin's mother atoned for sleeping with an incubus demon

so that Merlin would have God's favor. This places Merlin in a more intimately caring role,

supportive of Arthur, which strengthens his connection with the young king. This close

connection properly manifests in the Vulgate Cycle, specifically in the second volume, titled

Estoire de Merlin, written after Robert de Boron's *Merlin* by an unknown author in the first half

of the thirteenth century. The *Estoire de Merlin* is the first text that will show Merlin and Arthur

speaking to each other.

Their first interaction, and the first appearance of intimacy between them, occurs because

although Arthur draws the sword out of the stone, the barons do not see him as a legitimate ruler

and refuse to accept him as their king. Merlin steps in and reveals to the barons that Arthur is in

fact the son of Uther and Ygraine, and later pledges himself to Arthur: "Merlin assured him of

his love and said that he would help him so well that he would have his good will for the rest of

his life."[202] At this point in Arthur's life, his real parents have died and he has just discovered that his foster parents are not actually his parents, and he is thrown into a new life at the court and faced with an uprising from the barons. When Merlin comes to his aid, appearing to him for the first time and as the only person with knowledge about his parents, Arthur naturally gravitates toward him and views him as both an advisor and a tutor. The role of tutor creates a substantial amount of freedom for Merlin that no one else at court would have. Merlin frequently chastises Arthur, in a way that no one else would challenge a king, and Arthur always listens to him. On one occasion Merlin appears to Arthur disguised as a wild man, offers him some birds, and lectures him for not distributing his wealth better.

> [Merlin appeared as a] huge peasant . . . He had huge cowhide
> shoes and was dressed in a tunic and coat of burlap and a cape that
> was girded with a knotted sheepskin belt. And he was big and tall
> and dark and hairy, and he seemed cruel and wicked. And he said,
> "I do not at all respect a king who loves his treasure too much and
> is deplorable. And a curse upon a deplorable king who does not
> make a poor man rich when he can easily do it! I'll give you the
> birds," he said, "since I have nothing more worthy that you see.
> And you don't have the heart to give up a third of your wealth,
> which will rot in the ground before you can dig it up and which
> does nothing for your honor or your glory, as you know."[203]

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[202]"merlins lasseure de samor & dist quil laidera si bien que boin grei len saura a tous iors mais" (Sommer, Heinrich Oskar, *The Vulgate Version of the Arthurian Romances,* v.2, 97, l. 33–34).
[203]"j . grant vilain . . . il ot chaucies vns grans solers de vache & ot uestu cote & surcot de burel & caperon si fu chains dune coroie neuee de mouton . & sestoit gros & lons & noirs & hirechies si samble bien cruel & felon . si dist iou ne prise mie roy qui trop aime son tresor & qui est regretiers . Et mal dehait ait rois regretiers qui nose faire dun poure homme riche quant bien le puet faire . Iou vous doins fait il les oisiaus & si nai iou plus vaillant que vous uees . & vous naues pas cuer de douner la tierce partie de vostre auoir qui en terre pourira anchois que vous laies trait ne che nest mie vostre hounor ne vostre preu che sachies" (Sommer, Heinrich Oskar, *The Vulgate Version of the Arthurian Romances,* v.2, 122, l. 20–38).

Merlin can be disrespectful to Arthur and get away with it, partly because of his educational role

in Arthur's life. This passage from the Vulgate *Merlin* is reflective of a medieval literary genre

used for the education of rulers, called "Mirrors for princes" (*specula principum* in Latin).

Authors in this genre would write about how a prince should behave; for example, John of

Salisbury, a twelfth-century English writer, wrote *Policraticus* (c. 1159) for Henry II of England,

and regarding the humility of an excellent prince, he said that "The prince is . . . to fear the Lord

and he is to profess his servility to Him by an evident humility of mind and by the performance

of pious works."[204] Merlin educates Arthur like John educated Henry, reminding him to be fair

and honorable with wealth. Here Merlin has the role of tutor, but he is more than a tutor, because

this particular passage about the birds ends with Merlin revealing his true identity to Arthur, and

"Then King Arthur said to Merlin, 'Now I am certain that you love me, because you willingly

gave me your birds, and I will eat them for love of you.' And Merlin said that he would like that

very much."[205] This is an explicit expression of affection, similar to Merlin professing his

services to Arthur, but more intimate because they are saying that they love each other.

Therefore, Merlin's disrespect towards Arthur might also partly reflect his love for the king

through banter.

    In fact, the change in Arthur's age and status brings about a change in the role that Merlin

plays in his relationship with Arthur, and the intimacy between them becomes more obvious

throughout the Vulgate *Merlin*. At one point Merlin rebukes Arthur for fleeing in battle, and

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[204]"Timeat . . . princeps Dominum et se promta humilitate mentis et pia exhibitione operis
seruum profiteatur." (John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, Lib IV, Cap vii).
[205]"lors dist li rois artus a merlin or sai iou bien que vous mames car vous me dounastes
volentiers vos oisiaus & iou les mangerai por lamor de vous. & merlins dist que ce veut li bien"
(Sommer, Heinrich Oskar, *The Vulgate Version of the Arthurian Romances,* v.2, 124, l. 4–6).

"When King Arthur heard Merlin's words he was filled with shame . . . and for the other part he had very great fear that Merlin was angry with him."[206] Merlin tells Arthur that Guinevere will be disappointed in him,[207] but he does not respond to that; rather, he worries about what Merlin thinks of him. Arthur cares about Merlin's opinion more than anyone else's, even Guinevere's, and he especially worries about angering Merlin. Merlin's anger was seen in Chapter II as the sign that he would leave court; if Arthur makes Merlin angry, he might lose him.

Merlin and Arthur's dynamic does not just revolve around Merlin's tutoring of Arthur's behavior and character, but also around a very close bond between them. When Arthur is about to get married to Guinevere, he refuses to have the ceremony until Merlin is there: "'But I need the best friend that I have. Without him I will not get married.' . . . And he said that this [friend] was Merlin because through him he had received all the good things and honor that he had."[208] Arthur recognizes Merlin's role in his life, and knows that without Merlin he would not have control over his kingdom, or be respected so highly by his people. Arthur's need for Merlin would suggest that Merlin is a tool, as he was with the various kings he served in Geoffrey's *Historia,* but in fact Merlin is not a tool to Arthur in the way that Geoffrey's Vortigern, Aurelius, and Utherpendragon used him. Arthur becomes vulnerable around Merlin, rather than authoritarian; he recognizes that Merlin has provided everything in his kingdom, but he does not expect Merlin to do so. Instead, he forms a beautiful emotional attachment to Merlin, based on

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[206]"Quant li rois artus entendi la parole merlin si en broncha tous de honte . . . & dautre part ot il moult grant paor que merlins ne fust courecies a lui" (Sommer, Heinrich Oskar, *The Vulgate Version of the Arthurian Romances,* v.2, 271, l. 29–31).

[207]Sommer, Heinrich Oskar, *The Vulgate Version of the Arthurian Romances,* v.2, 271, l. 27–28.

[208]"Mais il me faut le millor ami ke iou ai . ne sans li nespouserai ie mie . . . & il dist que ce estoit merlins car par lui auoit recoure tout le bien & lonor kil auoit" (Sommer, Heinrich Oskar, *The Vulgate Version of the Arthurian Romances,* v.2, 299, 29–32).

appreciation and desire for Merlin's presence in his life. Anytime Merlin leaves court to return to the woods, Arthur always begs him to stay:

> When King Arthur heard that [Merlin] wanted to leave he became
> very angry because he loved him with a great love . . . when he
> saw that he could not detain him he begged him very sweetly to
> return at once. And Merlin told him that he would come as soon as
> he needed him. "Certainly," said King Arthur, "I need you every
> day because without your help I can do nothing. And for this
> reason I very much would like you never to leave my court or my
> company on any day."[209]

Arthur repeatedly shows his need to have Merlin with him at all times, and Merlin frequently leaves anyway, not unlike the typical Medieval framework of a knight and his lady, wherein the lady remains at court and the knight spends a substantial amount of time away from court. Although Arthur is married to Guinevere, he shows more reliance on Merlin than he does on his wife in the Vulgate Cycle. At this point Merlin's relationship with Arthur is far beyond that of an advisor or tutor; in fact, any age difference between them appears no longer to exist, possibly explicable by Merlin's shapeshifting ability, and possibly a literary tool of romance to enhance the development of their love for each other.

The most intense moment between them occurs when Merlin leaves Arthur for the last time, knowing that he will never return because he has foreseen that he will be trapped in a rock tomb. Arthur is shocked and they both experience distress:

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[209]"Qvant li rois artus entendi quil sen uoloit aler si en fu moult corecies car il lamoit de grant amor . . . quant il uit quil nel pot detenir si li pria moult doucement de tost reuenir . Et merlins li dist quil uendroit tout a tans a son besoing . Certes fait li rois artus tous iours ai iou de vous besoing car sans uostre aide ne puis iou riens . & por ce uoldroie ie bien que iamais ne partisies de ma cort ne de ma compaignie a nul ior" (Sommer, Heinrich Oskar, *The Vulgate Version of the Arthurian Romances,* v.2, 419, l. 28–34).

> The king said to him very sweetly, "My dear friend Merlin, you are going away, and I do not want to force you to stay, but I will be very ill at ease until the time that I see you again, for God hasten you on your return." "My lord," Merlin said, "This is the last time. And to God I commend you." When the king heard him say that this was the last time, he was very astonished. And Merlin without saying more, in tears.[210]

This passage is written in such a way that it emphasizes how Arthur does not fully comprehend what Merlin is telling him, seen in Arthur's reaction of surprise and Merlin's tears. The way that Merlin says goodbye is very brief, and he does not even explain why it is the last time that he will see Arthur. Later, when Arthur finally and properly realizes that Merlin is never coming back, he is devastated: "I believe I have lost Merlin and that he will never come back to me . . . I would rather have lost the kingdom of Logres than him."[211] He would prefer to have Merlin with him over his entire kingdom. This solidifies the point that although Arthur knows that Merlin basically created his kingdom and kingship for him, he does not require Merlin to continue doing those things, or even to have done them in the first place; and it suggests that he would rather not have the kingdom at all, as long as he could be with Merlin.

The relationship that Arthur and Merlin have at this point matches exactly with Aelred of Rievaulx's definition of spiritual friendship. It is not carnal, at least not in the sense of lust without appreciation; it is not worldly, because Arthur does not expect Merlin to give him

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[210]"Si li dist li rois moult doucement . biaus amis merlin vous en ires . ne iou ueul vous puis retenir sour uostre pois . mais moult serai a malaise iusques a tant que ie uous reuoie pour dieu hastes vous dont del reuenir . Sir fait merlins chest la daerraine fois . & a dieu vous commant . Quant li rois loy quil dist chest la daerraine fois . si en fu moult esbahis . et merlins sen parti sans plus dire tout en plourant" (Sommer, Heinrich Oskar, *The Vulgate Version of the Arthurian Romances,* v.2, 450 l. 40–451 l. 3).

[211]"iou quide auoir perdu merlin & que iamais a moi ne reuiegne . . . iou ameroie miex a auoir perdu la cite de logres que luj" (Sommer, Heinrich Oskar, *The Vulgate Version of the Arthurian Romances,* v.2, 453, l. 1–6).

anything and Merlin never needs Arthur to do something for him; it is genuinely spiritual. Arthur

fully trusts his heart to Merlin and cherishes him, and Merlin would do anything for Arthur

without being instructed or commanded.

There is no comparable relationship to the one Arthur and Merlin have in French

romance, but there are certain similarities to the most famous relationships in this genre,

Lancelot and Guinevere, and Tristan and Yseut. Both of these follow the pattern of the most

desirable but unavailable lady and the most worthy knight; Guinevere and Yseut are married to

the kings who employ Lancelot and Tristan, who are the best knights in their respective

kingdoms. Additionally, in both cases, giving identity plays a major role in the intimacy of the

couple. Chrétien de Troyes, writing the first text about Lancelot just before Robert de Boron was

writing *Merlin*, includes as a major plot point that fact that most people cannot recognize

Lancelot even after several meetings, and that he himself particularly does not really know who

he is or who his parents are, but Guinevere always recognizes him after their first encounter.

While others call him a strange knight (*chevalier estrange*) Guinevere says that "Lancelot of the

Lake is the name of the knight, I know it well."[212] By naming him as "Lancelot of the Lake" she

gives him an identity. A similar process of recognition can be found between Tristan and Yseut

in Marie de France's lai *Le Chèvrefeuille* ("Honeysuckle," late 12th century): Tristan, at this

point an outcast hiding in the forest from Yseut's husband, makes a sign for Yseut using a branch

from a honeysuckle and a hazel branch, and when she passes through the forest with her

entourage, she recognizes it although no one else can.[213] Yseut is the only person who can give

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[212]"Lancelot del Lac a a non/ Li chevaliers, mien esciant" (Chretien de Troyes, Le Chevalier de la Charette, 288, l. 3660–1).

[213]Marie de France, "Le Chèvrefeuille" in *Tristan et Yseut,* ed. Michel Zink, 310, l. 48–82.

Tristan an identity beyond that of an outcast, which she does by recognizing a hidden sign. These cases are similar to the way that Merlin gives Arthur an identity, by revealing his true parentage and by directing him as he grows into the legendary king that he later becomes, and Arthur's character is built on his worthiness and Merlin's on his constant leaving court, which it is possible to interpret as unavailability.

Additionally, in medieval romance, the most exalted form of love was courtly love, usually the impossibility of a relationship between a knight and a lady, because in that relationship there were no expectations, only suffering, and appreciation whenever the knight and lady interacted. This can be seen everywhere in legends of Tristan and Yseut and Lancelot and Guinevere. This is not unlike the interactions already examined between Arthur and Merlin, wherein Arthur begs Merlin not to leave court and Merlin leaves anyway, meaning that they will spend a substantial amount of time apart. Courtly love appears to be closer to Aelred of Rievaulx's definition of spiritual friendship than carnal friendship, because it is based on seeing excellence in each other and having no expectations.

One issue with viewing Merlin and Arthur's relationship in a similar light to those of Tristan and Yseut, for example, is that Merlin is not exactly a human, and therefore has a slightly elevated status over Arthur which sets the two of them apart from other French romance lovers. Although Tristan and Yseut have an potentially similar imbalance in their relationship because Yseut is a queen and Tristan is a knight, the contrast in status between Merlin and Arthur is greater because Merlin can literally control Arthur's life. There have already been numerous examples of this, particularly in the way Merlin had Arthur fostered and then made king, but the best example is right before Arthur's death. Merlin has already been gone from Arthur's life for a

substantial amount of the legend, and Arthur is about to fight his final battle against Mordred. On

the plain where the battle will take place, he and an archbishop see words carved into a massive

stone:

> So the archbishop came there and looked at the letters which said:
> *On this plain there must be the mortal battle from which the*
> *kingdom of Logres will be orphaned of their good lord.* When the
> archbishop had read these letters, he said to the king: "My lord,
> have you heard what the letters mean? — I do not know at all, said
> the king. — My lord, said the archbishop, you are the lord of
> whom they speak. And if it happens that you meet Mordred, the
> kingdom will be orphaned, because you will die there or be
> mortally wounded, nothing else can come out of it. And so that you
> believe it better, I tell you that he who wrote it I never found to lie:
> this was Merlin, who was more certain of things that were to come
> than any man of his time."[214]

The fact that Merlin put this inscription on this stone reveals that he knew how Arthur would die,

through his prophetic visions, and gives the impression that Merlin is there on the battlefield with

Arthur, even after his disappearance. Intriguingly, this proves that it is not totally clear whether

either Merlin or Arthur dies, almost as if they have a bond in death; Merlin is present at Arthur's

final battle, and Arthur may or may not continue to live on the Isle of Avalon after he is mortally

wounded. This sort of bond is seen elsewhere in the Vulgate Cycle, between Lancelot and

Galahaut, a knight who deeply loves Lancelot and requests that they be buried together, so after

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[214]"Lors vint l'arcevesque la et regarde les lettres qui disoient: EN CESTE PLAIGNE SI DOIT ESTRE LA BATAILLE MORTEL DONT LI ROIAUMES DE LOGRES SERA ORFELINS DE SON BON SIGNOR. Quant li arcevesques ot leües les letres, si dist au roi: « Sire, avez vos entendu que cez letres vuelent dire? — Je nel sai mie bien, fet li rois. — Sire, fet li arcevesques, vos estes li sires dom eles parolent. Et s'il avient tant que vos assenblez a Mordret, li roiaumes sera orfelins, que vos i morroiz ou serez navré a mort, ne autrement n'en poez partir. Et por ce que vos le creez melz, vos di je que cil qui l'escrit ne trovai je onques mençongier: ce fu Mellins, qui plus fu certeins des choses qui estoient a venir que hom de son tens »" (*La Mort du roi Arthur*, ed. Michel Zink, 808 l. 4–810 l. 2).

Lancelot's death, his body is taken to Galahaut's tomb.[215] The difference is, again, that Lancelot and Galahaut are equal in status, being both knights, whereas Arthur is a king and Merlin is someone who is outside the control of a king, and really outside the control of anyone.

Trying to determine Merlin's identity based on his relationship with Arthur leads to the argument that if Merlin is supported by God, creates miracles the way God would and through the abilities God gave to him when he was born, and controls Arthur's life arc the way a god might, maybe he himself is a god. He and Arthur fit the model of god and epic hero that can be found throughout Greek mythology, such as Athena and Odysseus from Homer's *Odyssey*, or in Norse mythology, such as Odin and Sigurd from the *Volsunga Saga,* in which Odin is the king of the Norse gods and frequently shows up in disguise to Sigurd, a boy who will become the strongest hero in Norse epics. Merlin similarly builds Arthur up from a young boy into a heroic figure. The difference is that between Odysseus and Athena, and Sigurd and Odin, there is no weakness or vulnerability: each interaction is either a test of the hero's strength, or a display of affection from the god. Merlin and Arthur's relationship is entirely built on vulnerability.

When comparing Merlin to a god, it is easier to see a similarity between Merlin and the high medieval French perspective of God, mostly visible in Arthurian literature involving the Holy Grail, but also woven throughout the Vulgate Cycle. In someone's hour of need, if they were worthy enough, God would appear and help them. Merlin appears when Uther dies and the council is looking for a new king, and when the barons refuse to accept Arthur as their king, and he promises Arthur that he "would have his good will for the rest of his life" and that "he would

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[215]*La Mort du roi Arthur*, ed. Michel Zink, 902 l. 26–32.

come as soon as he needed him."[216] All of the kings in Robert de Boron's *Merlin*, and

subsequently in the Vulgate Cycle, speak to Merlin by *begging* and *praying*. The idea of Merlin

as a god also makes the strongest case of all for his and Arthur's relationship being one of

spiritual friendship; if someone loved God and prayed to him, God might grant their prayers but

was never expected to do so, and Arthur, Uther, Pendragon, and Vortigern never expect Merlin to

do as they ask.

Today's culture struggles to valorize vulnerable relationships between men, and seeing

such a relationship not only depicted in high medieval French literature, but even exalted, is

particularly telling. The idea that King Arthur, one of the most widely known legendary figures,

immortalized in stories throughout medieval Europe and the modern world, was shown in the

Vulgate Cycle with the characteristics of weakness and tenderness implies that these

characteristics were highly valued. The comparison between Merlin lecturing Arthur and the

literary genre *Mirrors for princes* has already hinted at exemplarity; Arthur's vulnerability would

therefore be an additional element of the ideal ruler. Additionally, the way Merlin and Arthur's

interactions were written suggests that their relationship is the best kind to have: one that

encompasses all needs and all roles without expectation. The intimacy between Merlin and

Arthur reflects a new focus on interior life. French Arthurian legends are not just about a hero's

fighting ability, which Geoffrey focused on when he wrote about Arthur in the *Historia*; now the

hero's character is equally important.

In fact the element of intimate interiority alongside exteriority in medieval French

romances is hardly found in previous Arthurian stories. Geoffrey's *Historia* has no personal

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[216]Sommer, Heinrich Oskar, *The Vulgate Version of the Arthurian Romances,* v.2, 97, l. 33–34;
419, l. 28–34.

interior monologues of any character, and in his *Vita Merlini*, Merlin would rather be away from court among animals than have a close relationship with any human, least of all his own wife. There is interiority in the poems about Myrddin in the *Llyfr Du*, in Myrddin's monologues, but that interiority is associated with singularity, not reliance on another person. Myrddin mourns for Gwenddolau and bewails his sister's hatred of him but does not express a need to return to her. Although the Merlin of the Vulgate Cycle still has a desire to go away into the woods, those moments away from court make the interactions with Arthur more dramatic and special because they allow Merlin and Arthur to miss each other.

Merlin's role at the court according to Geoffrey was that of the prophet who would be called upon only when needed, and then would disappear from the narrative. His role at the court in earlier Brittonic stories, specifically found in the *Llyfr Du* and the *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, is limited, in what writings are available, to a short description or a previous existence because his current existence is in the woods. Only with French material does Merlin become a major part of the court, through the increase in his power and status, reflected in the control that he has over others, and culminating in the way that he shapes Arthur's life. Moreover, French Arthurian material does not just build on previous sources; it creates an entirely new tone for Arthurian legend which elevates vulnerability and intimacy, seen specifically here with Arthur and Merlin, and which becomes one of the defining aspects of medieval French romance.

Conclusion

Merlin's transitions from a demon-inspired prophet to a God-inspired prophet, from a madman or ascetic of the woods to a Godlike figure with righteous anger, and from a subservient advisor to a tutor, friend, and lover all have the same directional structure: in each case, the former is a Latin invention based on Brittonic tradition, made to fit Anglo-Norman clerical and political values, and the latter is a French invention largely based on the Latin versions but practically their opposite. This opposition was likely not intended as a reversal of the Latin material, but instead the result of French writers finding the character of Merlin intriguing, specifically because he was such a "wild" character, and wanting to give him not only more status of his own, but also more influence throughout Arthurian romances. There is a preservation of Merlin's wildness in French romance, in contrast to the lessening or confining of it in Latin texts: the ease with which the authors of the Vulgate Cycle mention Merlin's necromantic abilities, the emphasis on the appeal of the woods because Blaise the holy man lives there, and the beauty in the interactions between Merlin and Arthur wherein Merlin can say whatever he wants to simply because he is outside of Arthur's control, all justify and even favor Merlin as a wild figure. Because all three of the shifts summarized above lead to Merlin being Arthur's equal, and through that to Merlin's shaping of Arthur's life and their resulting intimacy, any of Merlin's characteristics in French Arthurian romance become valued.

It is important to note one aspect of the shift between Brittonic and Latin material that is problematic: as was seen specifically in the works of both Geoffrey of Monmouth and Gerald of Wales, Anglo-Normans and Cambro-Normans exposed to the Brittonic legends about Merlin

needed to explain his abilities and characteristics so that they made sense in a Christian, Roman-influenced culture. The unfortunate result of this was the expression, seen throughout Geoffrey and Gerald's works, of anti-Welsh sentiment, through which Merlin either became viewed as a somewhat unsavory character or was placed in a subservient role. It is thanks to Geoffrey that we have Arthurian legends; however, in the same way as the numerous quotes vilifying the Britons and later "Wild Wales," Geoffrey's version of Arthurian legend was harmful to the perception of the Welsh by the Anglo- and Cambro-Normans because it perpetuated stereotypes of the Welsh that still linger in English culture to this day. The fact that Geoffrey also fabricated the entire beginning of his account of British history shows his own disrespect for their true history, whether or not it was known, and makes his *Historia* an exploitation of Brittonic legend and history because he selected only what he apparently wanted to include. Although Geoffrey's true intentions will never be known, although he himself was partly Welsh and therefore the subtext of his work is tempered, and although his writings were the product of the political atmosphere of the Normans in the twelfth century and therefore not entirely his own perspective, both the *Historia* and the *Vita Merlini* upheld and added to the historical pattern of the Latin-speaking world treating Britons and their Welsh descendants as wild, barbaric, and lesser.

This is not to say that varying versions of Arthurian legend are bad; Arthurian material has one of the richest varieties of versions of any literary cycle, and each change reflects some different period of history or different geographical location and culture, which tells us a lot about that particular culture's values. However, awareness of the way that Geoffrey manipulated Arthurian legend is essential in examining any Arthurian literature. Many dominant cultures

appropriate material from those they conquer or consider less civilized than their own, and then change that material to suit their own particular agendas. This loses some of the original meaning of the particular material, and perhaps more importantly, the changes can manipulate perception of the original culture. In the case of Arthurian legend, knowledge of the stories' origins and of the first major changes implemented can provide understanding of the true meaning of the legends and the importance of the cultures that gave rise to them.

It is arguable that French authors, particularly Robert de Boron, were beneficial to restoring some appreciation for the Britons through the changes that they made. None of the French romances revert to their Brittonic originals, but by upholding Merlin as such a powerful figure, they do justice to his character, subverting the effect that Geoffrey's writing had on Merlin's identity. It is doubtful that this subversion was intentional, but it can be seen in any medieval French text about Merlin and therefore is effective. Perhaps it is Robert de Boron, not Geoffrey of Monmouth, who deserves the laurel wreath from the Britons.

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