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MONIKA OTTER

Merlin's Open Mind

Madness, Prophecy, and Poetry in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini*

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ABSTRACT: This essay considers the observatory in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini*, with its seventy doors and seventy windows, as a structuring emblem of the title character's state of mind and, by extension, the poem's poetics and epistemology.

KEYWORDS: Merlin; prophecy; madness; mental illness; Tristan; shelter; observatory; allegory

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My point of departure in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini* (*c.* 1150), is the startling image of Merlin's refuge in the woods, built to his specifications.[1] Chief among the compound's buildings is to be a circular house, a kind of observatory with seventy doors and windows:[2]

> Ante domos alias unam compone remotam
> cui sex dena decem dabis hostia totque fenestras,

1 In describing this arcade-like circular structure, might Geoffrey have been thinking among other things of Stonehenge, another building associated with Merlin in his *History of the Kings of Britain*? It is there referred to as 'the giant's dance', not a building, but the visual analogies are striking (Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, ed. by Michael D. Reeve, trans. by Neil Wright (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2007), pp. 172–75). It would not have much bearing on the present discussion, except for the tantalizing suggestion that as early as the twelfth century, someone perhaps considered that Stonehenge could have had an astronomical purpose. On Stonehenge and Merlin, see Irène Fabry-Tehranchy, 'Écrire l'histoire de Stonehenge: Narration historique et romanesque (XIIe–XVe siècles)', in *L'Écriture de l'histoire au Moyen Âge: Contraintes génériques, contraintes documentaires*, ed. by Etienne Anheim and others (Paris: Garnier, 2015), pp. 131–47.

2 Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Life of Merlin/Vita Merlini*, ed. and trans. by Basil Clark (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1973). I am using Clarke's edition as well as his facing-page prose translation (henceforth cited by line number in the text).

> per quas ignivomum videam cum Venere Phebum
> inspiciamque polo labentia sydera noctu,
> que me de populo regni ventura docebunt,
> totque notatores que dicam scribere docti
> assint et studeant carmen mandare tabellis. (555–61)
>
> (Before the other buildings build me a remote one to which you will give seventy doors and as many windows, through which I may see fire-breathing Phoebus with Venus, and watch by night the stars wheeling in the firmament; and they will teach me about the future of the nation. Let there be as many secretaries trained to record what I say, and work to commit my song to writing tablets.)

The basic plot of the *Vita* is quickly told: after surviving a disastrous battle that killed many of his friends, Merlin loses his reason and escapes from the court to live in the woods. After several unsuccessful attempts by his loved ones to lure or force him back indoors, he suggests the woodland compound as a compromise: a comfortable dwelling and observatory, catered and staffed with secretaries. There he is joined by the prophet 'Telgesinus' (Taliesin), by 'quidam vesanus' (another madman) named Maëldin, also a battle-survivor, and finally, after her husband dies, by his sister Ganieda, who to his great relief takes over his prophetic gift. They spend their time researching and conversing, and almost incidentally Merlin is cured of his mental disturbance at some point. The open-sided house is thus somewhere between a compromise and a paradox, almost a riddle: a house that is not a house, a building that is both enclosed and not, indoors and outdoors, safe and open, companionable and solitary.[3]

It is also, quite overtly, a metonymy of Merlin's mind, as well as a metapoetic allegory of writing. In the passage quoted above, Merlin proposes to use his retreat to continue his prophetic activity. But the nature of his enquiries and knowledge production evolves as the poem progresses, becoming more circumscript and less speculative; at the

3 One of the best articles on the *Vita* to date, Christine Chism's '"Ain't gonna study war no more": Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britannie* and *Vita Merlini*', *Chaucer Review*, 48 (2014), pp. 457–79 <https://doi.org/10.5325/chaucerrev.48.4.0458>, also reads the *Vita Merlini* as a retreat, as Geoffrey's relinquishing the masculinist, militaristic imperialism of the *Historia*. Her anti-colonial, ecocritical reading and my poetological or epistemological take can coexist and complement each other, although mine is admittedly more pessimistic.

end, when Merlin relinquishes his prophecy, the poet announces that he, too, will now fall silent. It has often been noted that the Merlin of Geoffrey's earlier *Historia Regum Britannie* is a natural stand-in for the historian-author: the seer who ranges freely across time, backward and forward; the sardonic adviser, impresario, and king-maker, at times coldly detached and at times overly involved in the events of the chronicle. Since the Merlin of the *Vita*, discontinuous though he may seem, is specifically said to be returned from the *Historia*, relating prophet and author would seem to be not only legitimate but invited. Hence, in some oddly abstract way, the *Vita* is also an autobiographical statement, with all the cautions this term requires here. That is, 'autobiography' should not be taken in the sense of furnishing biographical data about a writer of whom little is known, but in the sense that the text acknowledges, or actually creates, an 'I' that can be thought of as entering into a relationship with the character Merlin, to mirror him, identify with him, or distance him; and, since Merlin's story in the *Vita* is explicitly one of mental health and illness, an 'I' that can itself be thought of, in cautious and qualified ways, as having a mind and mental health. Celtologists will rightly point out that the 'madness' motif in the Celtic tradition cannot easily be equated with our ideas of mental illness. The Celtic prophet has shamanistic features, and his 'fury' is not always, or not exclusively, pathologized. But Merlin, his prophetic powers notwithstanding, is explicitly said to suffer in the *Vita*, to be ill and in need of a cure.[4] One should be cautious in extending this line of thought, this diagnosis, directly to the narrating voice or the author of the poem, in the sense of the Romantic notion of the hypersensitive poet who teeters on the brink of insanity. But the narrator clearly means to claim some of Merlin's shamanistic insight for himself, and to empathize with, perhaps even partake in his suffering. The project of the *Vita* could then be described as negotiating a way of knowing and a way of writing that is open but not too open, that admits the outside

4 For the complex connotations of 'wildness' or 'madness' in this cultural context, see Feargal Ó Béarra, 'Buile Shuibhne: Vox Insaniae from Medieval Ireland', in *Mental Health, Spirituality, and Religion in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age*, ed. by Albrecht Classen (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), pp. 242–89; Jean-Michel Picard, 'Merlin, Suibhne et Lailoken: A propos d'un livre récent', *Revue belge de philologie et histoire* 80 (2002), pp. 1495–1503 (pp. 1500–02) <https://doi.org/10.3406/rbph.2002.4684>.

world and permits communication with it in ways that nonetheless do not leave the speaker overly exposed and vulnerable.

The 'house that is barely a house'[5] invites us to consider the mind as a building and the building as a mind.[6] It is about what comes in and what goes out: sensory data, knowledge, thought, writing, prophecy. Both directions are at issue. The prophetic mind, it seems, is both lucid and translucent, perspicacious but also alarmingly open to the outside and vulnerable to it. As a depiction of mental illness, the poem, despite some quite fantastical elements, still makes intuitive sense to us. One is continually tempted to relate it to our clinical and colloquial psychiatric terminology: is Merlin (or is his literary creator) 'bipolar', or 'on the spectrum'? Taken literally, questions of this sort are of course futile: one cannot diagnose an absent person, much less a fictional character, even less a fictional character created in a cultural setting so remote from ours. But the urge to ask these questions marks an important quality of the poem. We are confronted with a mind that is hidden and impenetrable, and at the same time open to enquiry and speculation.

Although it is hard to pinpoint written texts that can be securely dated earlier than the *Vita*, it seems uncontroversial that Geoffrey did not invent the story of Merlin the Wild Man; he was working from Celtic sources and traditions ('Merlin' being a Latinization of the Welsh 'Myrddin'). There are other texts, in the Black Book of Carmarthen and the Red Book of Hergest, that share his characters and similar motifs: 'Ymddiddan Myrddin a Thaliesin', in which the Welsh prophets lament the battle of Ardderyd (presumably identical with the unnamed battle of the *Vita Merlini*); a lament by Merlin alone, 'Afallenau' (Apple Trees); 'Cyvoesi Myrddin a Gwenddydd ei Chwaer', a dialogue between Merlin and his sister. There are parallels

5 Chism, 'Ain't gonna study', p. 466.

6 There is a venerable and varied tradition of seeing the mind as a container and/or an architectural structure. See e.g. the well-known work on memory palaces and theatres by Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), and Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); as well as Christiania Whitehead, 'Making a Cloister of the Soul in Medieval Religious Treatises', *Medium Aevum*, 67 (1998), pp. 1–29 <https://doi.org/10.2307/43629957>, and Britt Mize, 'The Representation of the Mind as an Enclosure in Old English Poetry', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 35 (2006), pp. 57–90 <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0263675106000044>.

in the Irish tradition (Suibhne Geilt) and in the Scottish-Cambrian region (Lailoken, who appears as a minor character in a twelfth-century saint's life by Jocelyn of Furness).[7] From all these narratives, it can be assumed that the strong dichotomy of court and forest, civilized and wild spaces, pre-exists Geoffrey; and that the figure of the 'wild' (*gwyllt/geilt*) warrior suffering from what we would call PTSD was a recognizable phenomenon in the Celtic world.[8] Geoffrey seems to have been instrumental in funnelling this motif from the Celtic to the courtly French and French-adjacent spheres, probably also anchored and reinforced by the biblical Nebuchadnezzar:[9] a person in crisis 'running wild' for a while before either returning to his old society or finding a place on its margins as a sage and visionary. In Chrétien's

7 Of the extensive literature investigating the connections between these sources, see for instance A. O. H. Jarman, 'Early Stages in the Development of the Myrddin Legend', in *Astudiathau ar yr hengerdd/Studies in Old Welsh Poetry*, ed. by Rachel Bromwich and R. B. Jones (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1978), pp. 326–49; A. O. H Jarman, 'The Merlin Legend and the Welsh Tradition of Prophecy', and Paul Zumthor, 'Merlin: Prophet and Magician', trans. by Victoria Guerin, in *Merlin: A Casebook*, ed. by Peter H. Goodrich and Raymond H. Thompson (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 103–28 and 129–59; Picard, 'Merlin, Suibhne et Lailoken'. On Taliesin, see Michael Aichmayr, 'Taliesin: Literarische Überlieferung der Taliesin-Figur', in *Verführer, Schurken, Magier*, ed. by Ulrich Müller and Werner Wunderlich (St Gall: UVK, 2001), pp. 903–14. The classic edition of the Welsh poems, in *The Four Ancient Books of Wales*, ed. and trans. by William F. Skene (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1968), is now conveniently available online at <https://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/celt/fab/index.htm> [accessed 30 July 2020]. An edition of the texts concerning Lailoken is in H. L. D. Ward, 'Lailoken (or Merlin Silvester)', *Romania*, 22 (1893), pp. 504–26 <https://doi.org/10.3406/roma.1893.5789>. Translations of the Lailoken material as well as an excerpt from 'Afallenau' are also in an appendix to Clarke's edition of the *Vita Merlini* (pp. 226–35). None of the texts mentioned can be seen as Geoffrey's 'sources' in any uncomplicated way; the manuscripts postdate Geoffrey's work and seem quite aware of it, and while they may share common oral sources, there do appear to be influences in both directions. Even at the time, there was some confusion and considerable discussion on the relationship between the various prophet characters, whether there was one Merlin or several, or whether Lailoken (possibly a misunderstanding of a Welsh word for 'twin brother', by which Gwenddydd/Ganieda addresses him in 'Cyvoesi') is identical with Merlin. See Neil Thomas, 'The Celtic Wild Man Tradition and Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini*: Madness or Contemptus Mundi?', *Arthuriana*, 10 (2000), pp. 27–28 <https://doi.org/10.1353/art.2000.0017>; Ward, 'Lailoken', p. 512.

8 Thomas, 'Celtic Wild Man'; Ó Béarra, 'Buile Shuibhne'; Kenneth Jackson, 'The Motif of the Threefold Death in the Story of Suibhne Geilt', in *Féil-Sgríbhinn Eóin Mhic Néill/Essays and Studies Presented to Professor Eoin MacNeill*, ed. by John Ryan (1940; repr. Kill Lane: Four Courts Press, 1995), pp. 535–50 (p. 544).

9 Penelope Doob, *Nebuchadnezzar's Children: Conventions of Madness in Medieval Literature* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974).

Yvain and similar romances, the motif is shorn of its martial component, the battle trauma, and reinterpreted as a lover's madness. The house/not-house also has analogues in French and related traditions, particularly in the matter of Tristan: the crystalline lovers' grotto in Gottfried von Straßburg, where the crystal is very explicitly read as a metaphor for thought, reading, and interpretation; and the glass palace fantasized by a raving Tristan in the Oxford *Folie Tristan*.[10]

In all these traditional and courtly analogues, it is clear that the wilderness episodes and their enigmatic buildings represent an alternative model of relating to one's society. In the well-known case of Chrétien's *Yvain*, and other narratives influenced by it, the hero's madness is a kind of reset button for a faulty socialization. Yvain retreats for a time into an animal, 'bare-life' state, whence he can slowly rebuild towards social embeddedness as he gradually reacquires the hallmarks of civilized life: hunting, cooked food, barter, human interaction, language.[11] Other texts, including the *Tristan* romances and the *Vita Merlini*, are not so optimistic about reintegration. In the *Tristan* texts, the rift with the court is permanent and deadly. The *Vita Merlini* gives up on reintegration and attempts a workable compromise instead. It is heavily predicated on a stark opposition of indoors and outdoors, civilized and wild. The half-open, half-enclosed house is an obvious compromise, even introduced as a concession won through negotiation. What Merlin, at least in his post-traumatic state, cannot bear is confinement or close quarters. He experiences his stints at court as imprisonment and negotiates for his 'freedom'. Nor can he bear the breaching of his personal boundaries, his excessive openness to the solicitousness of his loved ones. That is the problem the open-sided house is designed to address. People can join him there on his own terms, even and especially

10 Gottfried von Straßburg, *Tristan*, ed. and trans. [into modern German] by Rüdiger Krohn, 3rd edn, 3 vols (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1984), II, pp. 408–41 (lines 16,679–17,274); in English as *Tristan*, trans. by Arthur Hatto (London: Penguin, 1967), pp. 261–69. 'La Folie Tristan (Oxford)', ed. and trans. by Samuel N. Rosenberg, in *Early French Tristan Poems*, ed. by Norris J. Lacy, 2 vols (Cambridge: Brewer, 1998), I, pp. 258–310 (lines 301–10). Discussed together in Jean-Charles Payen, 'Le palais de verre dans la Folie d'Oxford', *Tristania*, 5 (1981), pp. 17–28 (in English as 'The Glass Palace in the *Folie d'Oxford*: From Metaphorical to Literal Madness', trans. by Joan Tasker Grimbert, in *Tristan and Isolde: A Casebook*, ed. by Joan Tasker Grimbert (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 111–23).

11 This is a much-discussed episode. See, for instance, Anne Hunsaker Hawkins, 'Yvain's Madness', *Philological Quarterly*, 71 (1992), pp. 377–97.

his sister Ganieda (Latinized from Welsh 'Gwenddydd'), whose loving attentions he had been fleeing above all. The house does not cut him off from the wild outdoors he loves so much, and sensibly restructures his relationship with it. Where Gottfried's lovers' cave represents a radical, paradisiacal separation from society and is therefore unsustainable, Merlin's model is at least a comfortable, if emotionally subdued, long-term solution.

But the forest house, being an astronomical observatory, is also a machine for thinking and knowing, and finding a level thereof that will be sustainable, or even curative. During the period of his madness, Merlin's mind is both too open and too closed, and the semi-enclosed space is designed (by him) to correct this state of affairs. In the first place, the open-sided house filters, orders, and structures what comes to Merlin's attention, and regulates the temporal rhythms of his engagement with the world. In his madness, he was obsessed with the rapid cycle of the seasons, primarily for quite practical reasons, for seasonal changes helped or hindered his chances of survival in the wild, but also in an emotional way. His lengthy elegy on the beauties of the seasons is among the most lyrical passages in the poem, but the affect is mournful and aggrieved, as if the seasons were doing him a personal injustice:

> O qui cuncta regis, quid est cur contigit ut non
> tempora sint eadem numeris distincta quaternis?
> Nunc ver jure suo flores frondesque ministrat,
> dat fruges estas autumpnus micia poma.
> Consequitur glacialis yemps et cetera queque
> devorat et vastat pluviasque nivesque reportat.
> Singula queque suis arcet leditque procellis
> nec permittit humum varios producere flores
> aut quercus glandes aut malos punica mala.
> O utinam non esset hiems aut cana pruina!
> Ver foret aut estas, cuculusque canendo rediret
> et Philomela pio que tristia pectora cantu
> mitigat et turtur conservans federa casta
> frondibus inque novis concordi voce volucres
> cantarent alie que me modulando foverent,
> dum nova flore novo tellus spiraret odorem
> gramine sub viridi levi quoque murmure fontes
> diffluerent juxtaque daret sub fronde columba
> sompniferos gemitus irritaretque soporem. (146–64)

> (O ruler of all, how happens it that all the seasons are not the same, distinguished only by their four numbers? As things are, the spring is bound by its own laws to provide the leaves and flowers; summer gives us the crops and autumn the ripe fruit. Then follows icy winter, which devours and lays waste all the others and brings again the rain and snow. It suppresses everything and causes damage with its storms. It will not let the earth produce its multi-coloured flowers, nor the oaks their acorns, nor the apple trees their russet apples. Would there were no winter, no white frost! Would it were spring or summer — and the cuckoo back in song, and the nightingale, who softens sadness with her tender air, and the turtle dove keeping her chaste devotion. Would that the other birds too, were singing their harmonies in the fresh foliage, while the earth refreshed, with flowers fresh, breathed out its scent from under the green turf, and springs ran babbling all around, and the pigeon among the leaves nearby kept up its drowsy cooing and brought sleep.)

The observatory seems to reset his mind to larger patterns, larger cycles, the motions of the planets and the sky, 'fire-breathing Phoebus with Venus and [...] the stars wheeling in the firmament', and this seems in some way to be beneficial to both his prophecy and his equanimity (563–64).

Second, the open-sided house appears to regulate, metaphorically, the degree to which his mind is opened to the outside, both actively and passively, in what he can see and in how transparent he is to others. Both things are of urgent concern in the first half of the poem; most of the tug of war between him and those who want what is best for him centres on these questions. Merlin goes to extraordinary lengths to thwart others' insight into him, his intentions, and his motivations. A central motif in the early part of the poem is the 'prophetic laugh' — not unique to this text but uncommonly central to it.[12] An uncom-

12 See J. A. Burrow, *Gestures and Looks in Medieval Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 80–81 <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511483240>; Lewis Thorpe, 'Merlin's Sardonic Laughter', in *Studies in Medieval Literature and Languages in Memory of Frederick Whitehead*, ed. by W. Rothwell and others (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1973), pp. 323–39; Philippe Ménard, *Le rire et le sourire dans le roman courtois en France au Moyen Âge (1150–1250)* (Geneva: Droz, 1969), pp. 436–38. A pre-1100 analogue in an English (not Celtic) source is in the *Vita Aedwardi Regis*, ed. and trans. by Frank Barlow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 104–05. See Monika Otter, '1066: The Moment of Transition in Two Narratives of the

municative Merlin laughs suddenly, and when pressed to disclose the source of his merriment, drives a hard bargain to obtain concessions before agreeing to explain. All these episodes have to do with some sort of excessive openness, some missing boundary that would normally limit and perhaps protect the ordinary mind. Merlin's sudden insights are not funny in and of themselves, but I am reminded of Freud's contention that laughter stems from the sudden and unexpected conjunction of two things that are not ordinarily seen together. Merlin's mind skips temporal limits. He can see into the past: he knows of the extramarital fling his sister had just moments before (and she would rather he did not disclose that). He can see into the future: he knows the customer in the shoe shop will not live to wear the boots he is ordering. He can see through physical, spatial barriers: the beggar is sitting on top of a buried treasure without knowing it, and if only he had thought to dig a little he would have been set for life. Merlin can see through disguises and perceive personal identity, even across apparent gender lines: the boy who is brought before him in three different disguises, one of them female, in order to test his prophetic powers, does not throw him off at all. He can see the simultaneous truth of what appear to be mutually exclusive occurrences, as in the motif of the threefold death: he predicts the disguised boy will die of hanging *and* drowning *and* stabbing, and while that apparent impossibility is taken to discredit Merlin's prophetic gift, he later turns out to have been correct (246–346).[13] But this preternatural perspicacity is apparently only painful to him; it is not surprising that over the course of the poem he works to shed it and is eventually relieved at losing his prophetic gift.

Norman Conquest', *Speculum*, 74 (1999), pp. 565–86 (pp. 583–85) <http://doi.org/10.2307/2886761>.

13 Both the Lailoken and the Suibhne stories contain the same motif. See Jackson, 'Motive of the Threefold Death'. Predating Geoffrey, Hildebert of Lavardin (d. 1133) uses the same story in a riddling epigram, 'De Hermaphrodito', in which the impossibility of the three deaths is paralleled by the impossibility of being 'man, woman, and neither' all at once; this shows the wide availability of the motif beyond the immediate context of the Celtic prophet narratives (Hildebertus Cenomannensis Episcopus, *Carmina Minora*, ed. by A. B. Scott, 2nd edn (Munich: Sauer, 2001), epigram 23, pp. 15–16). Cf. Monika Otter, 'Neither/Neuter: Hildebert's Hermaphrodite and the Medieval Latin Epigram', *Studi medievali*, 3rd ser., 48 (2007), pp. 789–807. Perhaps the madly complicated constellation of conditions necessary to kill Lleu in the Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi is also related: Anne Lea, 'Lleu Wyllt: An Early British Prototype of the Legend of the Wild Man?', *Journal of Indo-European Studies*, 25 (1997), pp. 35–47 (pp. 37–39).

If we see Merlin's observatory as a thinking machine, as a means of and metaphor for regulating the attention, insight, and thought process of the prophet's mind, as well as its transparency to the outside, the glass houses of the Tristan texts can serve as a useful comparison. In both the Oxford *Folie* and Gottfried's *Tristan*, the glass has to do, unsurprisingly, with the crystal's proverbial clarity, with truth and transparency. In the *Folie*, the glass house is mentioned only in passing, as one of many outlandish pronouncements by Tristan as he feigns, or maybe not entirely feigns, madness. But the glass house seems to point to the perverse truth-telling his madman disguise has made possible: as a crazed beggar, he can stand right before the king and publicly disclose the entire story of his adulterous relationship with the queen. It is perfectly true, but will not be believed; the truth is completely disclosed yet remains completely hidden. The madman disguise radically resets the conditions of his communicative act and sets the entire discourse on a different plane. It makes the speaker's account both true and untrue, or, rather, brackets it off from any such consideration, shielding it from being taken as a literal account of events. Tristan, by adopting a fictional persona, has successfully fictionalized his account — even though it happens to be literally true.

Gottfried von Straßburg riffs on the crystal house more extensively than any other Tristan poet. (We do not know what Thomas, his source, had in this missing part of his poem, but probably nothing so elaborate.)[14] Gottfried's lovers' cave is carefully and teasingly set off as a not-quite-real event on the plot level, not really located in the story's chronotope: I have known this cave since I was ten years old, says the poet, although I have never been to Cornwall.[15] But the cave is, explicitly and overtly, a thinking machine. The abundant crystal, only one of the cave's miraculous qualities, enables an extravagant allegorization, where every physical detail is immediately and gloriously transparent

14 The Old Norse *Tristrams Saga*, a prose rendition of Thomas's romance and generally a good guide to its plot if not its poetry, has only a brief description of a cave in a *locus amoenus* (*The Saga of Tristram and Ísönd*, trans. by Paul Schach (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1973), p. 101). It also seems fair to assume that Gottfried incorporates into the lovers' cave features of Thomas's 'hall of statues' episode, which, in turn, is not preserved in Gottfried's unfinished retelling.

15 *Tristan*, lines 17,136–38.

onto its higher meaning.[16] There is plenty of irony in the account, of course: the absolute truthfulness of the paradisiacal lovers' cave is not only destined to be ruptured soon, but has been compromised from the start by the messiness of an adulterous relationship and the lying it necessitates. Yet the text seems earnest and sincere in its aspirational claim to crystalline clarity, its wistful desire for unobstructed passage from the literal to the allegorical senses.

That the *Vita Merlini* appears to do the exact opposite — it moves towards refusing any and all allegory — is in one way only an apparent contrast. Allegory appears to open up a text; an insistence on literal meaning appears to close it down. But in both cases, the aim is simplicity, univocity, and immediacy of meaning. Gottfried, in his ironic Neo-Platonic exuberance, locates this immediacy in the exceptional space of the lovers' cave, that elusive (non-)place and (non-)time of total transparency. But, like most Utopias, it is not actually achievable or sustainable in real life, and that is where Gottfried's deep social and epistemological pessimism is most visible.[17] Geoffrey's Merlin, by contrast, resolutely comes down on the side of the *sensus literalis*, nothing else. It is Taliesin who facilitates this solution. He sets a calm, scientific tone for the woodland observatory. Things are what they appear to be. Taliesin is given to lists and catalogues: weather phenomena; kinds of fish, their dangers, and their health benefits; islands (732–940). When asked about the healing spring that suddenly springs up in front of the forest house and has the power to cure Merlin's madness, he eschews the miraculous and instead gives a comprehensive listing of curative waters the world over:

> Sunt etenim fontes fluviique lacusque per orbem
> qui virtute sua multis et sepe mendentur.
> Albula namque rapax Rome fluit amne salubri,
> quem sanare ferunt certo medicamine vulnus.
> Manat in Italia fons alter qui Ciceronis
> dicitur. Hic oculos ex omni vulnere curat.

16 See, among many others, Volker Mertens, 'Bildersaal — Minnegrotte — Liebestrank: Zu Symbol, Allegorie und Mythos im Tristanroman', *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur*, 117 (1995), pp. 40–64 <https://doi-org/10.1515/bgsl.1995.1995.117.40>.

17 See Tomas Tomasek, *Die Utopie im 'Tristan' Gotfrids von Straßburg* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1985) <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111350103>.

> Ethiopes etiam stagnum perhibentur habere
> quo velut ex oleo facies perfusa nitescit.
> Affrica fert fontem qui vulgo Zema vocatur.
> Potus dat voces subita virtute canoras. (1182–91)
>
> (There are springs, rivers and lakes all over the world which constantly provide relief for many through their special properties. The health-giving waters of the fast-flowing *Tiber* run through Rome: men say they are a sure treatment to heal a wound. Another Italian source is called *Cicero's Spring*. This heals all kinds of damage to the eye. The *Ethiopians* are also believed to have a pool which glistens like oil when poured over the face. Africa has a spring usually known as *Zema*: drinking from it gives the voice an immediate sweetness of tone.)

He lists, he names; he categorizes; he declines to interpret beyond the most immediate literal meaning and practical application. His universe is ordered, mapped, counted. One imagines him droning on, boringly but reassuringly, and the music of his rational discourse soothes the troubled minds of his associates.

Merlin now takes his cue from Taliesin's rationalism: he rebuffs a request for prophecies, citing his advancing age (1264–69) and saying that he has learned to be content with the small miracles of nature, such as an acorn growing into an oak:

> Hic illam crevisse sua jam sponte videbam
> singula prospiciens, tunc et verebar in istis
> saltibus atque locum memori cum mente notavi. (1276–78)
>
> (Here I have seen that acorn grow unaided, observing every detail. I felt a deep respect for its standing there in the clearing, and I marked the spot in my memory.)

When asked about a strange formation of cranes flying overhead, Merlin responds not with prophecy but with natural history, explaining the birds' behaviour in almost comically prosaic terms and then launching into a Taliesin-like list of birds and avian behaviours (1311–83). It is worth remembering that birds flying in formation were a *locus classicus* for prognostication, one of the standard tools of Roman augury, but Merlin pointedly passes up the opportunity:

> Mox Merlinus eis, 'Volucres, ut cetera plura,
> natura propria ditavit conditor orbis.
> Sic didici multis silvis habitando diebus.
> Est igitur natura gruum dum celsa pererrant,
> si plures assint, ut earum sepe volatu
> aut hanc aut aliam videamus inesse figuram.
> Una modo clamando monet servare volando,
> turbatus solitis ne discreperet ordo figuris.
> cui dum raucescit subit altera deficienti.' (1298–1306)
>
> (After a moment Merlin said to them, 'The Creator of the universe assigned to birds, as to many other things, their own special nature: this I have learnt during the many days of my life in the woods. So, then, the nature of cranes is such that if large numbers are present during their flight, they dispose themselves, as we often see, in one or another arrangement. The call of one among them serves to warn them to keep the order of the flight and not to let the formation break up and disrupt the traditional figure. When that bird grows hoarse and gives up, another one takes its place.')

Despite this reassuring practicality, in the end Geoffrey is no more optimistic about meaning and knowledge than Gottfried. Where Gottfried plunges us from heady possibilities into deadly catastrophe, Geoffrey settles his Merlin into a tolerable, somewhat grey holding pattern, where explanation coincides with the observable in almost tautological fashion. There, he contemplates his approaching death in a vague sort of monastic piety, in the select companionship of Taliesin, Ganieda, and the late-arrived and newly cured fellow-warrior Maëldin. 'Quod erit per singula mecum, | ex hoc nunc commune tibi dum vivit uterque' ('All I have I shall share with you from now on as long as each of us may live', he greets the newcomer; 1450–51). In his initial request for the woodland retreat, the passage quoted at the beginning of this essay, Merlin seems to envision that it will lead to prophetic song (*carmen*) and specifically political prophecy (the nation's future); and both he and Taliesin deliver political orations at the beginning of their seclusion. But as the poem progresses, he renounces prophecy too.

Towards the end, Geoffrey seems to strip away even the fiction of the Merlin story. As the prophetic gift passes to Ganieda, to her brother's delight, and she breaks into a prophetic rhapsody of the sort Merlin used to utter, there is a subtle, telling, and (I think)

hitherto uncommented anachronism, a breakdown of the fiction: 'Ite Neustrenses', the newly minted prophetess exclaims, which Clark justifiably translates as 'Normans — go' (1511).[18] This is a deliberate breach of chronology. Whenever the dramatic date of the narrative is imagined to be (presumably the sixth century CE), Normans or *Neustrenses* were not the occupiers, not the issue that would trouble Ganieda or Merlin. Indeed, there were no Normans: we are several centuries before Scandinavians settled in northern France and became known by that name. Geoffrey does not take the anachronism quite so far as to call the invaders 'Normans', substituting the older term 'Neustrians'. But he has subtly, almost imperceptibly, moved his readers from the prophetess's distant past to their own, present, mid-twelfth-century world. In Geoffrey's first, highly successful work, the *Historia Regum Britanniae*, such connections between the mythical past and present politics are always invited, indeed inevitable; but there, readers were left to draw any such parallels themselves, the translations remain complex and uncertain, and the author never showed his hand or openly acknowledged any contemporary relevance. Here, Geoffrey is perhaps acknowledging that we have read his myth history in modern terms all along, in the *Historia* as well as in the *Vita*, even if we may not have been fully aware of doing so. That his apparent (but surely deliberate) chronological lapse goes down so smoothly, almost unnoticed, bears witness to this semi-conscious readerly operation.[19] Granted, there is no simple key to equating the peoples and powers in the *Historia* with those of Geoffrey's time, and Geoffrey's politics are far from clear. (I myself have always thought that he cynically or pragmatically plays all sides.)[20] And yet perhaps we have always

18 Chism reads this detail within the fiction, as Ganieda's prophecy reaching far into what to her is future ('Ain't gonna study', p. 477). Paul Zumthor, *Merlin le prophète* (Lausanne: Payot, 1943), pp. 37–38, notes that Ganieda's prophecy largely concerns Geoffrey's contemporary world, without remarking much on the anachronism.

19 On the 'palimpsestic' reading that takes the events as simultaneously historical and contemporary, see Siân Echard, 'Palimpsests of Place and Time in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*', in *Teaching and Learning in Medieval Europe: Essays in Honour of Gernot R. Wieland*, ed. by Greti Dinkova-Bruun and Tristan Major (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017), pp. 43–59 <https://doi.org/10.1484/M.PJML-EB.5.113253>.

20 Monika Otter, *Inventiones: Fiction and Referentiality in Twelfth-Century Historical Writing* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), pp. 75–80. But before and since then, many scholars have seen a more definable political line in Geoffrey's

all known that Hengist's and Vortigern's 'Saxons' are the Normans of Geoffrey's time, and he no longer cares to disguise it. A bit earlier, he has, surprisingly, rejected the urgently awaited mythical return of King Arthur as a solution to his people's problems: surprisingly, because it was Geoffrey's *Historia* that so firmly tied Merlin to Arthurian myth history in the first place. When Taliesin recalls how Arthur was taken to Avalon to be cured, and suggests that now might be the time to send a ship and see if he is ready to return to help liberate the Britons and restore peace, Merlin demurs:

> 'Non,' Merlinus ait, 'non sic gens illa recedet
> ut semel in nostris ungues infixerit ortis.
> Regnum namque prius populusque jugabit et urbes
> viribus atque suis multis dominabitur annis.' (958–61)
>
> ('No,' Merlin replied. 'This is not the way the invader will leave, once he has fixed his talons in our land. Before that time comes, he will have conquered our kingdom and our people and our cities, and kept them under by force of arms for many years.')

It will take a succession of warlike leaders, who, however, 'will not complete their task' (non perficient); many generations down the line, kings will succeed in uniting 'Scotos Cambros et Cornubienses | Armoricosque' (the Scots, the Welsh, the Cornish and the men of Brittany) and bring the Celtic lands back to autonomy. When Taliesin objects that this will be well past the lifetime of those present, Merlin confirms: indeed, it will not be possible for a long time (962–81). This is possibly Geoffrey's most overt statement of his otherwise hard-to-read politics: he may be cheering on the Celts, and maybe also the English as opposed to the French-speaking newcomers; but he warns that the *Neustrenses* are here to stay and will not go anywhere any time soon. It is a tired, resigned statement, almost a renunciation of political prophecy and poetical fiction.

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work, and several recent discussions have thrown further light on Geoffrey's possible politics. See for instance John Gillingham, 'The Context and Purposes of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*', *Anglo-Norman Studies*, 13 (1990), pp. 99–118; Michael A. Faletra, 'Narrating the Matter of Britain: Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Norman Colonization of Wales', *Chaucer Review*, 35 (2000), pp. 60–85 <https://doi.org/10.1353/cr.2000.0018>; Jennifer Farrell, 'History, Prophecy, and the Arthur of the Normans: The Question of Audience and Motivation in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*', *Anglo-Norman Studies*, 37 (2014), pp. 99–114.

The ending of the poem is sudden and dizzyingly quick; if you blink, you will miss it. Soon after Ganieda concludes her prophetic speech, Merlin gives her his blessing, and then instantly closes 'his mouth and his book': 'Spiritus osque meum compescuit atque libellum' (The spirit has silenced my mouth and my book; 1522). After this abrupt silencing, the poem's narrative voice returns to deliver a terse, five-line sign-off of its own, even naming itself:

> Duximus at metam carmen. Vos ergo, Britanni,
> laurea serta date Gaufrido de Monemuta.
> Est etenim vester, nam quondam prelia vestra
> vestrorumque ducum cecinit scripsitque libellum
> quem nunc Gesta vocant Britonum celebrata per orbem. (1525–29)
>
> (We have brought the song to an end. So, Britons, give a laurel wreath to Geoffrey of Monmouth. He is indeed your Geoffrey, for he once sang of your battles and those of your princes, and he wrote a book which is now known as the 'Deeds of the Britons' — and they are celebrated throughout the world.)

A proud advertisement of his magnum opus, to be sure, as well as an unambiguous salute to the Welsh and a declaration of belonging with them. But it is also, taken together with the opening lines, an 'Ille ego qui quondam' in reverse. Medieval and Renaissance readers were well acquainted with the (probably) spurious four-line tag that supposedly formed the original opening of the *Aeneid*, rapidly tracing what as early as late Antiquity had become a commonplace of literary criticism: that the great Virgil over his career progressed from pastoral to bucolic to epic, from small to great, from low to high, from oaten reeds to war trumpets, from a secluded rural idyll to a national and imperial stage.[21] Geoffrey, at the beginning and end of the *Vita*, traces the exact opposite course: from his 'quondam' epic ambition to the *musa iocosa*, from a celebration of *prelia* to the pastoral *calamus* of this poem (1–3). It is not an opening up, an unfolding of full poetic powers as the pseudo-Virgilian lines boast, but rather a retrenchment, a closing down, a going

21 See R. G. Austin, 'Ille Ego Qui Quondam', *Classical Quarterly*, n.s., 18 (1968), pp. 107–15 <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009838800029153>; Severin Koster, *Ille Ego Qui: Dichter zwischen Wort und Macht* (Erlangen: Universitätsbibliothek Erlangen-Nürnberg, 1988); Luca Mondin, 'Ipotesi sopra il falso proemio dell'*Eneide*', *Cento-Pagine*, 1 (2007), pp. 64–78.

back on earlier promises. The narrative voice here clearly feels very close to Merlin; in fact, with the fiction crumbling in Ganieda's final speech, one could almost say that Merlin's and Geoffrey's voices merge here. We cannot say what wounds or discouragements the narrator (much less the historical person Geoffrey of Monmouth) has suffered, but to the extent that he lets the Merlin character speak for him, this is clearly not so much a proud conclusion to a successful career and a joyful passing of the baton, as it is a sad, disillusioned abdication. The poem's vatic voice, too, has apparently found the open poetic mind — perspicacious and transparent, private yet uniquely vulnerable to the outside world — too much of a strain, and like Merlin, he is relieved to relinquish his prophecy as rapidly as possible. Book closed.

Monika Otter, 'Merlin's Open Mind: Madness, Prophecy, and Poetry in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini*', in *Openness in Medieval Europe*, ed. by Manuele Gragnolati and Almut Suerbaum, Cultural Inquiry, 23 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2022), pp. 127–43 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-23_07>

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