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The Celtic Wild Man Tradition and Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini*: Madness or *Contemptus Mundi*?

NEIL THOMAS

The Merlin material in the *Vita Merlini*, seen in the tradition of the Celtic saints' lives, shows how the image of Merlin, originally that of a psychological casualty of the Battle of Arfderydd, is modified to take on the more positive profile of a Celtic holy man. (NT)

That Merlin was already perceived to be a problematic figure in twelfth century Wales is shown by the testimony of Gerald of Wales. Gerald, the chronicler whose quasi-encyclopaedic *Itinerarium Cambriae* and *Descriptio Cambriae* afford us so much valuable information about the principality in the reign of Henry II, put forward the following distinction in order to clarify what he clearly regarded as the rather confused traditions concerning Merlin which were circulating in the twelfth century:

There were two Merlins. The one 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 Caledonian 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.¹

In Gerald's terms, Geoffrey of Monmouth used 'both' Merlins at different times in the course of his literary career. In his *History of the Kings of Britain* (1138)² Geoffrey culled from the *Historia Brittonum*³ (once ascribed to Nennius) the story of the boy prophet, Ambrosius, and whilst he changed this name to Merlinus, he kept largely to the same story and range of political prophecy as that contained in the Nennian tradition. Merlin's role in the *Historia* is essentially to give the *enfances* of Arthur a supernatural underpinning, as when the magician metamorphoses Uther Pendragon into the figure of Gorlois, Duke of Cornwall, so that he may sleep with the Cornish

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duke's wife and beget Arthur. Meanwhile, Merlin's famous eschatological prophecy that the end of the 'Boar' (vaticinary code for Arthur himself) would be shrouded in mystery (an apparent reference to the myth of Avalon and the 'once and future' king's return), firmly linked the figures of Arthur and Merlin and established Merlin's status as a magical aide to Arthur. In the *Vita Merlini*,⁴ on the other hand, which was composed probably some dozen years later than the *Historia*, the 'second' Merlin steps forth and, despite Geoffrey's attempt to reconcile the two traditions by claiming that Merlin had lived on into a new era, it is evident that a new figure with a fresh, more emotionally complex biography is here making his *début*. In the *Vita*, Merlinus flees to the woods after witnessing the horrors of battle and the tragic demise of three brothers who were well known to him.⁵ His sister Ganieda, married to the Cumbrian king, Rodarchus, sends out a minstrel to inveigle him back to court with sweet music. The minstrel sings a plangent refrain detailing the woes suffered not only by Ganieda but by the prophet's wife, Guendolena, and succeeds in his mission of making Merlin return; but the latter soon finds himself repelled by the company at court and, after an intercalated vaticinary excursus in which he puts his prophetic powers in evidence, he returns to the Caledonian forest to live out his days.

It is undoubtedly the image of the powerful magician found in the *Historia* rather than the traumatized soldier of the *Vita* which found the most ready response with posterity. In the course of Merlin's later, literary evolution the stage in the woods was typically omitted by narrators more interested in ready tales of the marvellous than in psychological exploration of character. We may but speculate that Geoffrey might have returned in the *Vita* to the figure of Merlin—whom he had used instrumentally in the *Historia* as a device to help define the figure of *Arthur*—in order to develop the biography of a more subtle character in whom, possibly upon learning fresh traditions, he may have conceived a new interest. How he came upon the traditions upon which the *Vita* is based cannot be certain, but similarities with the Merlin story in medieval Welsh (the Myrddin Fragments)⁶ Scottish (the Lailoken Fragments),⁷ and Irish sources (the saga of Suibhne)⁸ make it probable that the sources were Celtic—the common opinion is that the Merlin of the *Vita* is a composite figure inspired by Celtic traditions involving 'wild men of the woods.'

I wish below to re-examine Geoffrey's relationship to the Celtic analogues in order to address the subject of what *independent* contribution Geoffrey might have made to the common tradition; for often Geoffrey's *Vita* has been viewed by an older tradition of positivist scholarship simply as a reflex

of a wider tradition with little individual character or merit of its own. My own reading of the *Vita*, on the other hand, will indicate that the contention of Parry, for instance, followed tacitly by some modern scholars, that it is only by reference to this wider tradition that 'we can explain a number of things that Geoffrey does not make clear because he slurs over them'⁹ fails to address the subject of what independent contribution Geoffrey might have wished to make to what was patently a rather fluid tradition rather than a fixed, 'canonical' literary corpus. In particular, I wish to consider the possibility that Geoffrey's acquaintance with the indigenous traditions of Cambrian saints' lives may have moved him to 'baptize' the ancient figure of the wild man with images of sanctity as that term might have been defined in the foundational centuries of the Celtic Church. First, what were the traditions with which Geoffrey might have become familiar and how might they have inspired him towards a work which is similar to the analogues in broad narrative structure yet rather different to them in its moral structure?

It is evident that the figure of the Wild Man has arisen spontaneously in a number of cultures of a far greater antiquity than that of the Celtic lands of the post-Roman period, as can be observed in traditions ranging from Enkidu in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* to the Biblical figure of Nebuchadnezzar. The Wild Man can clearly claim the status of a 'mythic universal,' able, as it were, to reinvent himself polygenetically.¹⁰ (In Old Irish for instance the traumatized soldier who fled to the woods was apparently such a familiar phenomenon that he was lexicalized as *gelt*.)¹¹ There is, it is generally agreed, 'no direct link between the tales preserved in Celtic sources and those found in eastern or Asiatic countries,'¹² but what of the possible interrelations between the Welsh, Scottish, and Irish traditions and of Geoffrey's place within that larger context? Between the Welsh Myrddin fragments and the Scottish Lailoken fragments there looks to be a basic similarity in historical/legendary background in that the Wild Man motif has here become attached to a particular historical battle in Dark Age Cumbria. A small corpus of Old Welsh lyrics written down some time after the Norman Conquest describes Myrddin as a military combatant of the sixth century in Northern Britain, that is, as a hero of the Old North (*Y Gogledd*). These verses are not always easy to interpret on account of their linguistic obscurities and lacuna-ridden state, but the basic scenario has Myrddin lamenting the death of his former lord, Gwenddolau, 'first of the kings of the north,' who was slain by Rhydderch Hael ('The Generous'). The latter has been identified with a king of Dumbarton in Brythonic Scotland towards the end of the sixth

century. Gwenddolau is not so easily identifiable historically, although the Welsh Annals have the following entry for the year 573:

The battle of Arfderydd (bellum Armterid) between the sons of Eliffer and Gwenddolau son of Ceidio; in which battle Gwenddolau fell; Merlin went mad.¹³

Ever since the time of Skene and Glennie,¹⁴ Arfderydd has been identified with the Cumbrian town of Arthuret near Longtown, some eight to nine miles north of Carlisle and not far from the present-day Scottish border, from which place it would have been possible for the grief-stricken Merlin to take refuge in the Caledonian Forest (Coed Celyddon) in the southern lowlands of Scotland. Similarly in the Scottish Lailoken tradition, the latter describes the location of the battle at which he had lost his wits as taking place upon the plain lying between Lidel and Carwannok ('in campo qui est inter Lidel et Carwannok'),¹⁵ that is, present-day Arthuret.

It is a pity that the geographical site of what was clearly a memorable and highly significant battle can be described with so much more precision than the historical facts pertaining to it, but as Sir John Lloyd noted, 'in the course of ages, so thick a legendary haze has gathered around the history of this famous encounter that one may not venture to say more of it than that it was a triumph won by Rhydderch over Gweddoleu ap Ceidio.'¹⁶ It is almost inevitable that such a battle would have spawned a once extensive saga of which we now possess only fragments of later, heavily fictionalized redactions. As with other poems of the heroic genre, it is likely that a slim historical nucleus underlay the Lailoken/Merlin story which thereafter became embellished with a number of accretions. Such a process can be imagined as having taken place with the Irish analogue, *Buile Suibhne* (Sweeney's Frenzy) which narrates the aftermath of the later Battle of Magh Rath (673) and the ill fortunes of Mad Sweeney, legendary king of DalnAraide who lost his reason in the course of that combat. As with the Arthuret battle, few historical facts are known about this combat.¹⁷ According to the rather moralized traditions now extant, however, we are told that Suibhne before the battle had assaulted a saint of the Church, Ronan, who had been pleading the cause of peace, and also killed one of his clerics; so that when he is seized by terror and madness in the course of battle, his derangement is described as being the result of a curse which St. Ronan had imposed upon him:

Thereafter, when both battle-hosts had met, the vast army on both sides roared in the manner of a herd of stags so that they raised on high three mighty shouts. Now, when Suibhne heard these great cries together with their sounds

and reverberations in the clouds of Heaven and in the vault of the firmament, he looked up, whereupon turbulence(?), and darkness and fury, and giddiness and frenzy, and flight, unsteadiness, restlessness and unquiet filled him, likewise disgust with every place in which he used to be and desire for every place which he had not reached. His fingers were palsied, his feet trembled, his heart beat quick, his senses were overcome, his sight was distorted, his weapons fell naked from his hands, so that through Ronan's curse he went, like any bird of the air, in madness and imbecility.¹⁸

The same applies to his later abortive attempt to come back into society from the wilderness, for at that point Ronan, fearing that Sweeney might continue to persecute Holy Church on his return, unleashes upon him a terrible vision of headless bodies and trunkless heads which pursue him with a frightful clamour until he escapes from it into the clouds. We may possibly see ecclesiastical influence at work here, but in any case it is easy to agree with O'Keefe's suggestion that the original story attributed the madness to the horrors which he witnessed in the battle of Magh Rath, and that the introduction of St. Ronan and St. Moling (who gives absolution to the king just before his death) may be a later interpolation.¹⁹ A similar narrative pattern can be discerned in the Lailoken fragments, where in an interview with St. Kentigern held in his forest retreat, Lailoken confesses his sense of responsibility for the death of all those who fell in battle:

The madman at once checked his course and answered (to Kentigern), I am a Christian, though unworthy of so great a name. I suffer much in this lonely place, and for my sins I am unworthy to meet the punishment for my sins among men. For I was the cause of the slaughter of all the dead who fell in the battle—so well known to all citizens of this land—which took place in the plain lying between Lidel and Carwannok. In that fight the sky began to split above me, and I heard a tremendous din, a voice from the sky saying to me, 'Lailochen, Lailochen, because you alone are responsible for the blood of all these dead men, you alone will bear the punishment for the misdeeds of all. For you will be given over to the angels of Satan, and until the day of your death you will have communion with the creatures of the wood.' But when I directed my gaze towards the voice I heard, I saw a brightness too great for human senses to endure. I saw, too, numberless martial battalions in the heaven like flashing lightning, holding in their hands fiery lances and glittering spears which they shook most fiercely at me. So I was torn out of my own self and an evil spirit seized me and assigned me to the wild things of the woods, as you see.²⁰

The sequel then tells of how Kentigern confers a last-minute benediction upon Lailoken/Merlin before he meets his death at the hands of some shepherds of Prince Meldred. (This assassination depends on the semi-

independent story, *Lailoken and Meldred*, in which Meldred holds Lailoken prisoner in his castle where Lailoken, seeing a leaf in the hair of Meldred's wife, reveals to Meldred that his wife had committed adultery in an arbor, for which revelation she plots his murder as a revenge.)

The Welsh material too makes Myrddin responsible for the death of innocent persons, in this case that of the children of Gwendydd (in circumstances which are not made entirely clear) which he confesses in the *Afallenau* (Addresses to the Apple Tree):

Now Gwendydd loves me not and does not greet me
 —I am hated by Gwasawg, the supporter of Rhydderch—
 I have killed her son and daughter.
 Death has taken everyone, why does it not call me?
 For after Gwenddolau no lord honours me,
 Mirth delights me not, no woman visits me;
 And in the battle of Arfderydd my torque was of gold
 Though today I am not treasured by one of the colour of swans

 O Jesus! Would that my death had come
 Before I became guilty of the death of the son of Gwendydd.²¹

From all the versions cited above, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini* will be seen to differ in one crucial respect—to the point of presenting a reconceptualization of the basic data of the legend—namely, that Geoffrey's version does not trammel Merlin with guilt for any wrong-doing. He is not obliged to witness the infernal accusatory visions suffered by Lailoken and Sweeney and also alluded to by Gerald of Wales in his description of the 'Caledonian' Merlin. Indeed, if Gerald with his mention of the terrible sky monster had here the current Welsh tradition, then Geoffrey must have tacitly excised it as being opposed to his conception of the *rex iustus et pacificus* who is described as a benign lawgiver to his Demetian people (l. 22). It is not guilt which harasses Merlinus but rather simple grief for the demise of the three brothers, an event which he mourns for three whole days (l. 70). There can be no suggestion of retributive suffering or of a penitential dimension to his sojourn in the woods. Nor is there any sense in which he is a military exile because in Geoffrey's version he is on the winning side as the follower rather than as the opponent of Rodarchus (Rhydderch). Nor need he fear any hostility from his sister since—quite unlike the hostile scenario of the Welsh Myrddin/Gwendydd relationship—there is no question of his having been responsible for the death of her offspring. On the contrary, it is Rodarchus and Ganieda who, well-disposed towards Merlin, flatter, cajole

and bribe him back to court (ll. 225–37). There is also nothing of the loathing for the inhospitable forest which we encounter in the Welsh tradition.²² For after Merlin has taken steps to create shelter for himself to deal with the cold of winter this 'votary of the woods'²³ designs to make the forest his permanent abode, even to the extent of viewing it in proto-Romantic terms as a sanctuary from, as it were, 'all the ways of men so vain and melancholy.' That particular sentiment is demonstrated in the following passage where he declines the scepter of kingship in favour of being able to live out his days in peace:

(.....) Rursus regnare recuso.
 Me Calidonis opes viridi sub fronde manentem
 delectant pocius quam quas fert India gemme,
 quam quod habere Tagus per littora dicitur aurum,
 quam segetes Sicule, quam dulcis Methidis uve,
 aut celse turres, aut cincte menibus urbes
 aut fraglascentes Tirio medicamine vestes.
 Res michi nulla placet que me divellere possit
 ex Calidone mea me iudice semper amena.
 (ll. 1280–88)

(I will not reign again. While I remain under the green leaves of Calidon, its riches shall be my delight—a greater delight than the gems that India produces, or all the gold men say is found along the banks of the Tagus, or the corn of Sicily, or the grapes of pleasant Methis—more pleasing than high towers or wall-girt cities or clothes redolent of Tyrian scents. Nothing can please me so, nothing can tear me from Calidon, ever dear to me, I feel.)

In the *Vita*, then, Merlin has no need to scuttle away in order to hang his head in shame. He is an émigré rather than a fugitive, having incurred the enmity neither of Holy Church nor of the victor at Arthuret. Indeed if he is 'mad' at all it is only in the special sense of being overwhelmed by the pity of all the slaughter—this at any rate seems to be at the core of his 'furor.'²⁴ It is for instance significant that, from his post-bellum perspective, the minstrel's playing on his memories of his wife and sister in his song (which is of course successful in drawing him back to court) is described as a sentimental lapse on his part ('Pristina mens rediit,' l. 209), for the mind-set which would permit him to be satisfied at Court is precisely that which he has been moved to reject on principle. It is also noteworthy that when Merlin drinks at the newly discovered spring towards the end of the work and recovers his wits, this does not move him one whit from his 'furor' to take up his permanent abode in his arboreal observatory.

In a wider sense of course, as Penelope Doob notes, it is the world that often decides to label uncomfortable truths 'mad' whereas 'the poem shows forcefully that even insanity is apparently preferable to the apparent rationality of sinners at court.'²⁵ But Merlin is never, in Doob's terminology, an 'unholy wild man' who has to 'progress' to be a 'holy wild man.' This mode of labelling might work for his Celtic confrères, Lailoken and Sweeney, since their biographies are subject latterly to a last-minute 'saintly resolution' (Basil Clarke) in the form of the viaticum administered to each by St. Kentigern and St. Moling respectively. But Geoffrey's Merlin was, in Doob's terminology, a holy wild man from the start, that is, a man driven not by guilt or fear but by a disgust at the homicidal effects of battle—*contemptus mundi*. This is a motivation which, *pace* J.J. Parry and critics who have followed his line,²⁶ makes perfect sense in twentieth-century terms (as we have had cause to witness with those notorious psychological casualties from the Vietnam War who, feeling themselves to have been 'beyond therapy,' also chose to take to the backwoods). But it is also a motivation which, more significantly, is perfectly conformable with the temper of Celtic spirituality. This is a source, I suggest, that Geoffrey might have drawn on for his second incarnation of the Merlin figure.

In many respects Merlin, with his eremitical urge and his love of nature, takes on aspects of the 'saints' of the Celtic Church, figures who were not formally canonised but who may be 'defined historically as ascetic clerics, monks, anchorites, missionaries or leaders in establishing Christian foundations in the fifth through the seventh centuries,'²⁷ this being the commonly accepted meaning of *sant* (<*sanctus*) in the early Middle Ages. Geoffrey's patterning of the literary biography of his 'second' Merlin conforms in many ways with the biographical patterns for Celtic saints' lives analyzed by Elissa Henken, who in fact points out that the miraculous nature of Merlin's birth as established by Geoffrey in the *Historia*, where Merlin is a 'fatherless' child (i.e. one begotten by a non-human incubus) brings him into apposition with the 'various peculiarities of birth and conception' pertaining to other Celtic saints.²⁸ In the particular case of Merlin, his extraordinary birth has the appearance of being an attempt to confer on him a sanctified status by a loose analogy with the Virgin Birth or, as Henken puts it, 'the clerics who composed the *vitae* could not, for theological reasons, copy this ([that is] the Virgin Birth) but they could emulate it.'²⁹

It is also significant that Merlin's spiritual confidant is Thelgesinus (Taliesin), known widely in Welsh tradition (whatever his historical origins might have been)³⁰ as a poet, prophet and keeper of wisdom who had, we

are told, returned from a visit to Brittany conferring with Gildas, the historian who receives the sobriquet 'The Wise' both in Geoffrey (l. 688) and in Caradoc of Llancarfan's *Vita Gildae*.³¹ It was of course Gildas (c. 495–570) who, representing 'a tradition of Romano-British Christianity which regarded even the victory of the Britons at the battle of Badon as grievously marred by the usurpation of civil government by military leaders,'³² had inveighed so mightily against what he perceived to be the corrupt society of his day in his *De excidio et conquestu Britanniae*, a tract which is thought to have given considerable impetus to the monastic movement. In a similar ascetic vein the Merlin of the *Vita* embraces the self-denying ordinance of putting by a crown and the opportunity to rule over 'warlike subjects' (l. 230–31), firmly rejecting the material inducements to do so offered to him by Rodarchus:

Talia respondens spernebat munera vates.
 'Ista duces habeant sua quos confundit egestas
 nec sunt contenti modico set maxima captant.
 Hiis nemus et patulas Calidonis prefero quercus
 et montes celsos subtus virentia prata.
 Illa michi non ista placent. Tu talia tecum
 rex Rodarche feras. Mea me Calidonis habebit
 silva ferax nucibus quam cunctis prefero rebus.
 (ll. 238–45)

(But the prophet rejected the presents in these words: 'Let these things go to lords hard-pressed by poverty, such as are not content with modest living but covet everything. But I put above these things the woodland and the spreading oaks of Calidon, the high hills, the green meadows at their foot—those are for me, not these things. Take back such things, King Rodarch. My nut-rich forest of Calidon shall have me; I desire it above all else.')

Meanwhile the Merlin of the vaticinatory passages, in his denunciations of his fellow men for their dissensions and persecutions of the clergy, bears a clear similarity to the tone of Gildas in his fulminations against religious backsliding:

O rabiem Britonum, quos copia diviciarum
 usque superveniens ultra quam debeat effert!
 Nolunt pace frui, stimulis agitantur Herinis.
 Civiles acies cognataque prelia miscent.
 Ecclesias Domini paciuntur habere ruinam
 pontificesque sacros ad regna remota repellunt.
 Cornubiensis apri conturbant queque nepotes.
 Insidias sibimet ponentes ense nephando,
 interimunt sese, nec regno jure potiri

expectare volunt regni diademate rapto.
(ll. 580–89)

(O the madness of the Britons! Their universal affluence leads them to excess. They are not satisfied with peace. A Fury goads them on. They engage in civil war and family feuds. They allow the churches of the Lord to go to ruin, and drive the holy bishops out into distant lands. The nephews of the Cornish Boar disrupt everything. They lay ambushes for each other and put one another to death with their evil swords: they cannot wait to succeed lawfully, but seize the crown.)

Merlin's links with Gildas via Taliesin, moreover suggest a strong sense of apostolic succession for which the saints' traditions are noted—Gildas himself had the Breton-born St. Illtud as his mentor, the latter being described in the Breton *Lay of Samson* as 'a most wise magician, having knowledge of the future.'³³ (He prophesies for instance the manner of his own death and that of his disciples, such a 'patterned' trait of foresight being of course shared by Merlin himself.)

There are numerous other suggestive parallels between Merlin's biography as narrated by Geoffrey and those contained in the *vitae*. For instance, when Merlin, Taliesin and the second madman Maeldinus form a group pledged 'to despise the things of the world' (ll. 1457–58), and are joined by Merlin's sister who also espouses the coenobitic life after the death of Rodarchus, they are essentially forming a monastic cell.³⁴ This is somewhat reminiscent of the tradition that two of Gildas's brothers together with their sister Peteova, retreated to a remote area where they set up three separate oratories. Even 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 their ascetic zeal (notwithstanding the considerable distress to their spouses caused by their actions). Meanwhile, Merlin's close relationship with wild animals (the wolf and the stags) is matched by St. Tydecho's domestication of a wolf, by the help afforded to Teilo and Madoc by stags and ultimately, it has been suggested, may rest on (anterior) 'Celtic tradition with its antlered gods of the Cernunnos type.'³⁵ Finally, the Celtic saint often has a very ambiguous relationship with secular power. He often himself comes of royal lineage, like the Merlin of the *Vita*, but as a sanctified figure concerned with the next world, he must shun secular power and the trappings of this world. Merlin's tussles with Rodarchus as to whether he should pull his weight in secular society 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 community or with that of St. Cadoc, who also refuses

his uncle's demand that he set aside his religion in order to take on his rightful role as king.

It appears from the above that Geoffrey of Monmouth in his *Vita Merlini* must have had to adapt recalcitrant material (which, to judge from the analogues, portrayed Merlin as a sinner in some sense or other) so as to be able to write a *vita* in the technical sense of a saint's life, a genre which clearly required a protagonist of towering spiritual distinction: not a babbling social outcast and sinner or *homo fatuus* but rather a *homo sanctus*. This innovation clearly goes far beyond the 'saintly resolution' of the Lailoken and Suibhne traditions and it is probable that Geoffrey sought to lift his composition above the folkloric base of the Wild Man tradition so as to transform his inherited material into what emerges as a new story, this literary transformation prompting a revised estimate of Geoffrey's relationship to his probable source material.

Kenneth Jackson once sounded a note of caution about bringing the Irish Suibhne Geilt story into too close an apposition with the Myrddin/Lailoken tradition, stating 'I remain quite unconvinced that the legend of the Wild Man in Ireland has been proved to be borrowed from the Lailoken-Myrddin story.'³⁶ The much-later date of the Battle of Magh Rath and its location across the Irish Channel lend weight to this caution, but the case with the the northern Lailoken and south-western British Myrddin traditions must be different simply because relocalization of traditions from the Old North to Wales was a common feature of early British tradition when there existed that geographical continuum of Brythonic peoples which stretched from present-day Scotland down through Cumbria and Wales to Cornwall. Admittedly such a transfer would have been more difficult after 655 when Wales and other southern areas became separated from allies in the Old North after Penda, King of Mercia and his Brythonic allies were routed by Oswy, king of Northumbria. But whatever the politico-geographical problems that might have stood in the way of a smooth southerly relocalisation of the Lailoken story, it is now generally accepted that 'the historical and geographical setting of the Welsh legends of Arfderydd and Myrddin was exclusively northern and it must be assumed that these tales migrated southwards together with much other early material at some time between the sixth-century and the Middle Ages.'³⁷ This contention seems to be corroborated by Gerald of Wales's brief but lurid evocation of the monstrous sky vision witnessed by Merlinus Celidonius, which bears a striking similarity to the vision described in the Lailoken/Kentigern story. Gerald clearly saw the menacing vision as being a defining feature of the 'second' strand of the

Merlin legend since he describes it not in terms simply of personal recollection but of a commonly accredited and known-about prerequisite of the Merlin story. If then we credit Geoffrey with even a roughly equivalent acquaintance with twelfth-century *matériel roulant* as Gerald, then it seems probable that his omission of such a salient narrative feature was deliberate. If such is the case, then any simple genetic analysis of his work must remain insufficient. Such an approach is undoubtedly adequate *in general terms* as an explanation for the southern *floruit* of an originally northern tradition, but Geoffrey's literary ambitions appear to have gone beyond the merely artisanal attempt to put a popular tradition into Latin hexameters—the latter appearing to be the sometimes undisclosed assumption which has underlain some previous approaches to his work. Rather does it appear that he was attempting to imbue the old material with a new ethical structure for which he may have found the basis in the Cambrian *vita* tradition.

Celtic hagiography, it has recently been remarked, often presents 'an ecclesiastical inversion of heroic tradition'³⁸ and the Merlin story as told by Geoffrey of Monmouth appears to offer something rare in the annals of heroic literature in the form of a critical reflection on the human toll exacted by the warrior code and a sharply critical response to it taking the shape of religious quietism and, especially in the closing stages of the poem, a peculiarly Celtic form of spirituality giving large scope to the tutelage of natural forces.³⁹ If we pass in review the various exemplars of the heroic genre in world literature from the *Iliad* to the Old English *Battle of Maldon* or Old High German *Lay of Hildebrand*, then it is clear that the tragic homicides occurring in those epics is in each case accepted as being dictated by Fate (Gk. *moira*, OE *Wyrd*, OHG *wêwurt*). Hildebrand must kill his own son, Hadubrand, simply because, after the long exile of the father, son and father have by chance found themselves on opposing sides in battle. It is possible that a similar situation may have occurred with the Welsh Myrddin and the children of Gwendydd, who may have found themselves on opposing sides at the Battle of Arfderydd. In the idiosyncratic way in which Geoffrey describes his protagonist's experience of battle, however, Merlin is able to learn from bloody experiences and so place himself beyond the range of such a future tragic possibility cropping up in his own life. He does this essentially by roundly execrating the 'malignant fate' which has rapt away his companions at arms (ll. 40–56), by choosing 'madness' rather than murder (that is, the chance offered him by Rodarchus to again 'rule over war-like subjects'—with all the casualties which that office would inevitably entail) and, latterly, by espousing the eirenic regime of a 'saint,' thus resolving a classic moral

dilemma of heroic poetry. That is, the pressures of war lead him to reassess and 'deconstruct' that heroic fatalism which has historically been the profoundest article of belief for warrior societies but which now reveals itself to the disabused seer as a disingenuous rationalisation for the ineluctable slaughter of numberless future generations.

The *Vita Merlini* can then be read as a creative and indeed constructive response to Geoffrey's probable source material in its heavily flagged suggestion that the horrors of war can be opposed only by the most radical form of social dissent possible. Geoffrey's Merlin is, as it were, 'rescued' from the ancient traditions which portrayed the fugitive as a sinner and social outcast. He is not anathematized by Holy Church like Suibhne and has no need for saintly absolution of his sins like Lailoken. Rather he re-emerges, in Geoffrey's treatment as a saint and natural sage whose spiritual eminence acts as a magnet to another legendary saint of the early Celtic Church. Geoffrey's new version of an old literary theme teaches that it is not 'mad' but rather natural to suffer a traumatic reaction to battle, and that this truth, if acted on constructively and honestly, can eventually lead the sufferer to a way of life which is considerably less destructive of himself and of others than that led by his princely peers. It is a pity that Geoffrey's *Vita* did not achieve the same literary success as the *Historia* and that a theme of such power was not made more of by writers after Geoffrey who might have placed the Galfridian contribution on the map of posterity more securely than is presently the case.

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NOTES

- 1 Gerald of Wales, *The Journey through Wales / The Description of Wales* trans. Lewis Thorpe (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1978) pp. 192–93 (*Journey*).
- 2 On the date of *the Historia Regum Britanniae*, see the introduction to the edition by Neil Wright, *The Historia Regum Britannie of Geoffrey of Monmouth. I Bern, Burgerbibliothek, MS 568* (Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 1985) esp. pp. ix–xx.
- 3 Nennius, *British History and the Welsh Annals*, ed. and trans. John Morris (London, Phillimore, 1980).

- 4 The Latin text and English translations cited are from Basil Clarke, *Life of Merlin/Vita Merlini* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1973). I have also consulted the older edition of John Jay Parry, University of Illinois Studies in Language and Literature X, no. 3 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1925).
- 5 It is possible that the ambiguous phrase 'tresque ducis fratres' (l. 34) denoted Merlin's own brothers, or else that the three unnamed brothers were those of Prince Peredur (l. 26).
- 6 See the translations in A.O.H. Jarman, 'The Welsh Myrddin Poems,' in R.S. Loomis (ed.), *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1959), pp. 20–30.
- 7 See Basil Clarke, *Life of Merlin/Vita Merlini*, Appendix I: Lailoken A, Kentigern and Lailoken; Lailoken B, Meldred and Lailoken.
- 8 *Buile Suibhne/The Frenzy of Suibhne*, ed. and trans. J.G. O'Keefe (London: Nutt, 1913).
- 9 J.J. Parry, as in note 2, p. 15. Nikolai Tolstoy also writes in terms of Geoffrey having 'omitted an original aspect found in the Lailoken fragment' (*The Quest for Merlin* (London: Hamish Hamilton 1985) p. 80.) As will be demonstrated below, I do not think it relevant to try to assess Geoffrey against a putative narrative archetype.
- 10 R. Bernheimer, *Wild Men in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U.P., 1952); D. A. Wells, *The Wild Man from the Epic of Gilgamesh to Hartmann von Aue's Iwein* (Belfast: Queen's University Publications, 1975).
- 11 J.G. O'Keefe pointed to the following passage concerning Irish *mirabilia* in the Norse *Speculum Regale* (c. 1250): 'There is also one thing which will seem very wonderful about men who are called *gelt*. It happens that when two hosts meet and are arrayed in battle-array, and when the battle cry is raised loudly on both sides, that cowardly men run wild and lose their wits from the dread and fear which seize them. And then they run into a wood away from other men, and live there like wild beasts, and shun the meeting of men like wild beasts' (*Buile Suibhne/The Frenzy of Suibhne*, as in note 8, Introduction, pp. xxxiv, xxxv).
- 12 A.O.H. Jarman, 'The Merlin legend and the Welsh tradition of prophecy' in *The Arthur of the Welsh. The Arthurian legend in medieval Welsh literature* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1991), pp. 117–45, citation p. 117.
- 13 Nennius, *British History and Welsh Annals*, ed. and trans. John Morris (London, Phillimore, 1980) p. 45, Latin text p. 85.
- 14 William F. Skene, *The Four Ancient Books of Wales*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1868), vol. 1, pp. 65–67; John S. Stuart Glennie, *Arthurian Localities. Their Historical Origin, Chief Country and Fingalian Relations*, facsimile reprint of the 1869 edition (Felinfach: Llanerch Publishers 1994) pp. 68–70.
- 15 Basil Clarke, ed., *Life of Merlin/Vita Merlini*, Appendix I: Lailoken A, Kentigern and Lailoken; Lailoken B, Meldred and Lailoken (Lailoken A, p. 227). Cf. Skene: 'About nine miles north of Carlisle, on the western bank of the river Esk, are two small rising grounds or knolls, called the Knows of Arthuret, and still further north is a ravine, in which a stream called the Carwinelow falls into the Esk. On

the north side of that stream the ground rises till it reaches an elevation terminating abruptly in a cliff which overhangs the river Liddel, and on the summit of this cliff is a magnificent native stronghold, with enormous earthen ramparts, now called the moat of Liddel. Arthuret is the *Rodduwyd Adderyd*, or Pass of Ardderyd, forming the great western pass leading from the Roman Wall into Scotland. Carwinelow is Caer Wendolew, or the city of Gwenddolew, so called from the adjacent stronghold; and here in 573 was fought the great battle of Arderydd (*Four Ancient Books*, vol. 1, pp. 65–66).

- 16 John Edward Lloyd, *A History of Wales*, two volumes (London: Longmans, 1912) vol 1, pp. 166–67. Skene described Myrddin's lord Gwenddolau as being 'surrounded by bardic tradition with every type and symbol of a semi-pagan cult' and saw the occasion of the battle as being an encounter between 'advancing Christianity and the departing paganism,' but this inference from largely late, fictional material has not been accepted by most modern scholars. The same objection applies to Molly Miller, who depends heavily on the evidence of the Triads for her 'The Commanders at Arthuret' in *Transactions of the Cumberland and Westmoreland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society*, vol. 75 (Keswick, 1975) pp. 96–118.
- 17 See O'Keefe's Introduction to *Buile Suibhne* (as in note 8).
- 18 J.G. O'Keefe *Buile Suibhne*, p. 15 (Irish original p. 14).
- 19 J.G. O'Keefe *Buile Suibhne*, Introduction, p. xxxiv.
- 20 *Kentigern and Lailoken*, trans. Basil Clarke, ed., Appendix I (Lailoken A, p. 227).
- 21 A.O.H. Jarman, 'The Welsh Myrddin Poems,' in R. S. Loomis (ed.), *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1959), pp. 20–30, translated citation p. 21.
- 22 For the Welsh Myrddin the Caledonian forest is a place of harsh military exile rather than a natural retreat from which he may derive wisdom, as is shown in these verses from the *Hoianau* ('Greetings to the little pig'):
- Little does Rhydderch Hael know tonight in his feast
What sleeplessness I suffered last night;
Snow up to my hips among the forest wolves,
Icicles in my hair, spent is my splendour.
- (Cited from Jarman, as in previous note, p. 22)
- 23 Cf. l. 80: 'silvester homo quasi silvis deditus esset.'
- 24 Tolstoy for instance writes that 'the delicate balance between insanity and prophetic genius in Merlin's own character is particularly lively and convincing' (p. 43). In any case, the notion of madness in the work is hardly unambiguous, not least because the Latin term *furor* can have both the negative meaning of madness and also the positive connotation of 'commitment, principled enthusiasm,' for which semantic range the *Aeneid*, Book IV may be cited, where 'pius Aeneas' experiences a 'furor' to resume the path of duty (which inevitably brings about his desertion of Dido). Merlin has a similar (inevitable) conflict of obligations so that, when deterred by the throng of men at Court and described as 'iterumque furore repletus' (l. 223), this could well mean 'filled with new

- furor* (to return to the forest—rather than ‘with new fury’).
- 25 Penelope Doob, *Nebuchadnezzar's Children. Conventions of Madness in Middle English Literature* (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1974), p. 153. It may be recalled that the Battle of Arfderydd numbered among the ‘Three Futile Battles of the Island of Britain’ in the Triads. See *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, edited by Rachel Bromwich (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1978, Triad 84, pp. 206–10.
- 26 ‘The madness of Merlin, hardly intelligible here, is clear enough in the other versions where it comes as a punishment for his own misdeeds,’ Parry, p. 119, note 7 to text ll. 63ff.
- 27 Elissa R. Henken, *Traditions of the Welsh Saints* (Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 1987), p. 3.
- 28 Elissa R. Henken, *The Welsh Saints. A Study in Patterned Lives* (Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 1991), pp. 22–23.
- 29 Henken, as in previous note, p. 24.
- 30 See Rachel Bromwich, *Triodd Ynys Prydein*, p. 511 and Toby D. Griffen, *Names from the Dawn of British Legend* (Felinfach: Llanerch, 1994), pp. 22–44.
- 31 Hugh Williams, trans., *Two Lives of Gildas*, facsimile reprint of 1899 edition, Felinfach, Llanerch, 1990.
- 32 *The Oxford Companion to the Literature of Wales*, ed. Meic Stephens (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 1986), p. 214.
- 33 Henken *The Welsh Saints*, p. 18.
- 34 Ganiada’s words are: Felices igitur qui perstant corde piato / obsequiumque Deo faciunt mundumque relinquunt (ll. 720–21).
- 35 Henken, *The Welsh Saints*, p. 80.
- 36 ‘The sources for the Life of St. Kentigern,’ in *Studies in the Early British Church*, edd. Nora Chadwick, Kathleen Hughes, Christopher Brooke and Kenneth Jackson (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1958), pp. 273–356, citation p. 328, note 1.
- 37 Jarman, 1991, p. 123.
- 38 Jon B. Coe and Simon Young, *The Celtic Sources for the Arthurian Legend*, (Felinfach, Llanerch, 1995)p. 14
- 39 Oliver Davies, *Celtic Christianity in Early Medieval Wales. The Origins of the Welsh Spiritual Tradition*, Cardiff, University of Wales U.P. 1996, esp. pp. 7–27; Corinne Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance* (Cambridge, D.S. Brewer 1993) esp. pp. 116–19.