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THE TRIPLE DEATH IN THE *VITA MERLINI*

IN the *Vita Merlini*, attributed to Geoffrey of Monmouth, is a passage (ll. 305–346, 391–415) which tells how Merlin's sister Ganieda, wishing to show that her brother possessed no supernatural powers, asked him to tell her what sort of death one of the boys present was to die. Merlin said that he would die by falling from a high rock. She sent the boy away, telling him to put on different clothes, and when he returned again asked Merlin to predict the manner of his death. This time Merlin said that the boy would meet with a violent death in a tree, evidently intending his hearers to understand this to mean that he would be hanged. A third time Ganieda had the boy brought in, this time disguised as a girl, and this time Merlin predicted that he (or she) would die in the river. In spite of the incredulity of all, the prophecy came true, for years later while the boy was hunting he fell from a rock, his foot caught in a tree, and his head was submerged in the stream.

Sicque ruit, mersusque fuit, lignoque pependit,
Et fecit vatem per terna pericula verum.

Some time ago, when editing the *Vita Merlini*, I suggested that this story had a Celtic source, adducing as evidence the very similar stories told of Lailoken in what seems to be a fragment of a lost life of Saint Kentigern, and of Twm Ieuan ap Rhys in Welsh popular tradition as recorded by Iolo Morgannwg.¹ Both stories were late and could not, in their present form, have been used by Geoffrey, but neither seemed to be derived from the *Vita Merlini* and I cited them as evidence that some such story was current among the Celts and that from them Geoffrey might have obtained it as he did other material in his poem. In so doing however I failed to take account of the fact that there is an even closer parallel to be found in continental Latin literature previous to Geoffrey and there is no indication that this latter rests upon any Celtic foundation.

Hiltebert, Bishop of LeMans, whose work was not unknown in England in Geoffrey's time, has two poems on the subject of the birth and death of a certain abnormal individual.² Both bear striking resemblances to Geoffrey's work, the longer being perhaps slightly the nearer. In each we have the prophecy of three deaths for one man. One of them, the drowning, is the same as in the *Vita Merlini* and the two Celtic stories; the second, the death in the tree, is the same in all except the Kentigern fragment, which

¹ *Iolo Manuscripts* (2d ed., Liverpool, 1888), pp. 202 and 616.

² For a discussion of the authorship of these poems see *Histoire littéraire de la France*, XI (2d ed.), 397–399; the parallel with the *Vita Merlini* is pointed out on p. 756. The poems themselves are printed in *Patr. Lat.* CLXXI, 1445–1446.

has Lailoken beaten to death; the third is, according to Hildebert, by the sword, in the Kentigern fragment by impalement on a sharp stake and in the *Vita Merlini* by a fall, while the Welsh tale which combines the fall and the tree in a single death makes the third death come from the bite of a serpent. But Hildebert's poems contain another triple prediction also: that the expected child would be a boy, that it would be a girl, and that it would be neither, and this also proves true. There is nothing like this in either of the Celtic tales, but it may well have suggested Geoffrey's device of having the boy come in once disguised as a girl. Moreover it is perhaps not fanciful to see in Geoffrey's language in this passage something of Hildebert's epigrammatic style. Everything seems to point to his work rather than either of the other stories as Geoffrey's source.

The whole matter may well serve as a caution to those who are searching for Celtic antecedents for characters and incidents of mediaeval romance. Two good Celtic parallels to an incident might well be considered enough to establish for it a Celtic provenance — certainly many identifications have been made on much more slender evidence than this — but in this case the whole argument is overthrown by the fact that chance has preserved for us one fact that will not fit in with any such theory. In other cases the work which would give the clue may be lost but it is not safe to assume, as is so often done, that no such work existed.

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THE MEDIAEVAL ORGAN AND A CASSIODORUS GLOSSARY AMONG THE SPURIOUS WORKS OF BEDE

IN the present note it is proposed to offer some comments on Mrs H. R. Bittermann's essay entitled 'The Organ in the Middle Ages' recently published in this journal (*SPECULUM*, IV (1929), 390–410), and also to discuss the work of the pseudo-Bede to which she refers on several occasions.

If Mrs Bittermann's observations on Greek and Roman organs are far from complete, the fact may to some extent be excused on the ground that she is mainly concerned with the instrument in the Middle Ages. Yet one would have welcomed some allusion to Tittel's important article, which not only deals very fully with the Graeco-Roman period but contains some valuable mediaeval references as well.¹

In her account of early mediaeval organs she refers to the works of Aurelian of Réomé and the pseudo-Bede (n. 3 on p. 394); she also gives a translation of the latter passage (p. 396). But these references have no independent value. The earlier portion of Aurelian's *Musica Disciplina* is

¹ Pauly-Wissowa, *Realenzyklopädie des klassischen Altertums*, IX (1916), s. v. 'Hydraulis.'