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Translating Merlin: Wace's rendition of Merlin in his translation of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae*

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Merlin, the prophet and magician of medieval history and legend, is presented as a complex figure in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae*. This Latin chronicle, written in the 1130s, introduces Merlin as a remarkable, and highly unusual figure, who is brought to the court of King Vortigern as a boy whose special qualities are meant to save the king from a ruin of his own making. Further on in the narrative, following the revelation of his powers, he provides invaluable advice first to king Aurelius and then to his brother and successor, Uther Pendragon. Merlin is portrayed as a kingmaker with unexplained but effective knowledge, whose abilities serve the court, but are not under the control of the kings. Some of his actions are of questionable morality, particularly those involving his support for Uther's adulterous relationship with Igera and the consequent betrayal of Uther's liegeman Gorlois. These are no simple issues, they relate directly to the weaving of a complex text, where shades of grey accompanied by an almost playful level of uncertainty nudge the reader towards multiple layers of consideration and understanding. Hence, it is important to observe how these forms of ambiguity were dealt with when the narrative was first translated into the vernacular by Wace in the 1150s. Wace's version made the newly-discovered British history accessible to new audiences, whose sensibilities were not the same as those of the highly-educated clerics who were the first readers of the *Historia*. This paper will explore the manner in which Merlin's unusual traits, as portrayed in the *Historia*, were 'translated' into the French vernacular and into the medium of verse. It will

further seek to establish the extent to which the depiction of Merlin was modified to suit a new audience.

Merlin's exceptional abilities are highlighted right from the start, when he first appears in the *Historia*. In a trope which was to characterise his later appearances, he is discovered at the end of a long search, and it is not unexpected that he is in possession of a variety of remarkable qualities. These include both his extraordinary knowledge of the supernatural and strong character traits that, at least at first, include bravery and honesty. Merlin arrives at a key stage in the narrative when the usurper, King Vortigern, is facing a crisis in his attempt to maintain power. The child Merlin, with his mother, is brought before Vortigern to provide a solution to the king's most pressing threats.¹ The king's magicians have falsely claimed that the sacrifice of Merlin's life-blood will save the king from his multiple enemies. Merlin is able to unmask these magicians as ineffective liars, but instead of saving the king from his impending downfall, he confirms it through prophecy. Thus, from this very early episode, where Merlin is presented as a wondrous child, he is set apart by his remarkable qualities. The origin of these is left untold; however, there are hints.

Unlike other magicians in the *Historia*, whose abilities are explained by their learning and ingenuity,² Merlin appears to be in possession of his unusual knowledge even as a child. The *Historia's* explanation for this, expressed by Merlin's mother, is that he was fathered by an invisible entity who used to lie with her while she was alone in her cell in a nunnery. Remarkably, the *Historia* does not expand much on the nature of this so-called *spiritus*. When called upon, one of Vortigern's advisers, a scholar named Maugantius, makes use of a late-classical text, the *De deo socratis* of Apuleius (c124-c170 CE) to ascertain the possible truth of the claim. Drawing upon this pagan philosophical treatise, which discusses the existence and nature of *daemones* as intermediaries between men and the gods, Maugantius concludes that the spirit visiting Merlin's mother could only be an incubus demon [*incubus daemon*]. This reference to the second-century Roman philosopher would have been picked up by educated, twelfth-century readers, who would also have been aware of the attack on the work issued by Augustine in his *De civitate dei*.³

From this very first episode then, Merlin's portrayal is characterised by ambiguity. On the one hand, as an authority, Maugantius stands as learned but flawed, for what type of Christian would knowingly place the learning of a pagan philosopher above that of a Father of the Church? On the other hand, it would have been very difficult for a learned, medieval audience to take a wholly positive stance on a character who was the potential offspring of a demonic entity. By having a character refer to Apuleius as an authority, Geoffrey is framing the episode within a setting of classical learning. This is not unusual for the *Historia*, where Geoffrey developed a set of virtuous standards deploying classical imagery which he applied to the Britons living before the birth of Christ.⁴ Thus, the reference to Apuleius is correct but also raises some questions. In the case of Merlin's purported demonic ancestry, the situation is even more complex, for we know this was a particularly difficult issue for medieval readers.

At the end of the twelfth century, one of the *Historia's* harshest critics, the Augustinian canon William of Newburgh, was outraged by what he understood to be the 'demonic' origin of this so-called prophet Merlinus, of whom Bede knew nothing. William's systematic critique of Geoffrey's work appears in the preface to his *Historia Rerum Anglicarum*, c. 1196, which he wrote at the request of Abbot Ernald of Rievaulx.⁵ In it, he calls the *Historia* 'fabulosa' and a laughable fiction [*ridicula figmenta*].⁶ William builds his attack upon three main points, the first of which is Geoffrey's pretence of using Latin to present fables and lies as truth.⁷ The second is Geoffrey's overturning of the hierarchy of historical authorities such as Bede or Gildas, which leads William to accuse Geoffrey of wanton, shameless and repeated lying throughout this book which he names a 'history'.⁸ The third is the presentation of the characters of Arthur and Merlin. Of this, William says that Geoffrey is now also known as Arthur, because of his retailing of the fictions told by the British about Arthur under the guise of history, and his false presentation of Merlin as a true prophet.⁹ William accuses Geoffrey of foolish vainglory [*imprudenti vanitate*] because he dares to place the might of the Britons far above that of the Macedonians and the Romans.¹⁰ He says even somebody with dim mental vision [*lippienti mentis*] can clearly

see that Geoffrey lies about Arthur, who could not stand above Julius Caesar or Alexander, and could not have conquered all the kingdoms Geoffrey claims, since the known world does not contain so many.¹¹ Merlin's prophecies are evident lies [*perspicua fallacia*];¹² moreover, the divinations of the son of an incubus could be nothing more than deceptions.¹³

On Merlin's ancestry and false credentials William goes into some detail:

Et hunc quidem Merlinum patre incubo daemone ex femina natum fabulatur, cui propterea tanquam patristanti excellentissimam atque latissimam tribuit praescientiam futurorum, cum profecto et veris rationibus et sacris literis doceamur daemones a luce Dei seclusos future nequaquam contemplando praescire, sed quosdam futuros eventus ex signis sibi quam nobis notioribus conjiciendo magis quam cognoscendo colligere denique in suis quamvis subtilioribus conjecturis saepe falluntur et fallunt, cum tamen per divinationum praestigias apud imperitos, quam utique non habent, praescientiam sibi arrogant futurorum.

[His story is that this Merlin was born of a woman and sired by a demonic incubus; accordingly he ascribes to him a most outstanding and extensive foreknowledge of the future, on the grounds that he took after his father. In fact we are instructed by both true reasoning and the sacred writings that demons are shut out from God's light, and are wholly unable to have prior knowledge of the future by mentally observing it, though they apprehend certain future events by guesswork rather than knowledge, through signs better known to them than to us. In short, they are often deceived and deceive by their guesses, though these are quite sophisticated, but by means of trickery in their predictions they lay claim amongst naïve people to a foreknowledge of the future which they do not at all possess.]¹⁴

William rejects the credibility of Merlin on various grounds. As with Arthur, the lack of precedent in earlier historical authorities poses

a serious problem for him. Furthermore, the idea that Merlin's powers derived from a demon is nonsensical to him; and here he is potentially going back to Augustine's discussion on the qualities and properties of demons, their inability to see truly into the future despite their keener senses, and the suitability of the air as a prison for them.¹⁵ He further elaborates on twelfth-century ideas of magical operations, which rely on consorting with demons through a relationship involving deception and trickery.¹⁶ William comes to the conclusion that Geoffrey, whom he repeatedly describes as a story-teller [*fabulator*], and his fables, are to be rejected [*respuatur*], as should be his character of Merlin; not doing so could imperil the status of proper history.¹⁷ By the end of the twelfth century William's concern was pressing, as the *Historia* was still gaining in popularity and immediate strong action was necessary. William's call to readers was that they should spurn without hesitation [*incunctanter*] Geoffrey's work.¹⁸

William's attack upon Geoffrey and his construction of Merlin points to a complex and problematic issue for medieval readers, involving the credibility of the *Historia* as history. For William, Merlin was at best an ambiguous character, credited with incredible power, and with no basis in established History. Less negative responses, which nonetheless highlighted problematic issues in the *Historia*, were also expressed in non-historical narratives. These built upon the *Historia* to offer even more wondrous narratives, filling in what had been left unexplained by Geoffrey. An important example would be the thirteenth-century romance *Merlin*, attributed to Robert de Boron, which works to explain how Merlin can act constructively and beneficially in spite of his alleged demonic ancestry. De Boron does this by elaborating upon the background to Merlin's story, devising a plot hatched by demons against God as payback for Christ's Harrowing of Hell.¹⁹ Identifying God's prophets as one of His main weapons against them, the demons in Robert's narrative plan to create a prophet of their own, by tricking a rich merchant's daughter into lying with one of them. Her piety, goodness of soul and prompt repentance thwart the demons' plot and lead to both her soul and that of Merlin being saved. This idea is continuously highlighted in the narrative.²⁰ Thus Robert accepts that Merlin would have gained his knowledge of the past from the demons. Significantly, however,

Merlin's knowledge of the future is derived only from God, thus rendering it both respectable and true:

'... Je voil que tu saiches et croies que je sui filz d'un ennemi qui engingna m amere, et cele meniere d'ennemi qui me conçut a non enquibedes et sont et repairent en l'air. Et Diex a soufert que ai lor sen et lor memoire des choses qui sont faites et dites et alees, et por ce sai ge l'ovre ta mere. Et Nostre Sire ... por la bonté ma mere ..., m'a doné tant de sa vertu que je sai le choses qui sont a avenir: et ce pues par ce prouver que je te dirai.'

[... I would have you know that I am the son of a devil who deceived my mother. He was one of a kind of demon called Hequibedes, who inhabit the air. And God permitted that he bequeathed to me the power and intelligence to know everything that has been said and done: that's how I know all about the life your mother has led. And Our Lord ... for my mother's sake ... has granted me the knowledge of things to come, as you'll see by what I'm about to tell you.].²¹

Robert avoids the debate that had engaged William so keenly, while at the same time trying hard to establish in no uncertain terms Merlin's goodness and virtue.

Geoffrey's narrative, however, thrives on precisely this ambiguity. Through the figure of Maugantius, Geoffrey introduces the possibility that Merlin might have been fathered by a demon of a minor, even perhaps of a benevolent kind. Geoffrey, however, does not elaborate on the possible implications of this for Merlin's character, prophecies, or other interventions in the *Historia*. Consideration of this he leaves to his readers, and this is possible for him because allegedly, he is only translating 'a very old book in the British tongue' that was given to him by a dear and highly respectable friend, Walter the archdeacon of Oxford; thus, Geoffrey does not claim authorship.²² In the *Historia* Merlin is characterised by ambiguity, as is Maugantius himself, whose proclamation is delivered in the company of Vortigern's other councillors. These included the very magicians who had recommended the killing of an innocent fatherless child, so that his

blood could be used as a mortar to help Vortigern's tower stand, when it kept falling down day after day.²³ Vortigern could not build a standing tower, his advisors could not tell him how to do this effectively, so it was up to Merlin to tell him that, just like the kingdom under his rule, his tower could never stand the test of time.

It is important now to examine how Wace dealt with these ambiguities in his *Roman de Brut*, the first vernacular translation of the narrative (finished in 1155). On the surface, in most of the episodes concerning Merlin that are translated by Wace, the text appears to stay close to what is presented by Geoffrey. Thus, as expected, Vortigern finds himself threatened by his enemies, flees, consults his magicians, and is advised to build a tower for sanctuary. Once again he fails, as whatever is built during the day again disappears overnight. As a result, his magicians advise him to find a fatherless boy and the envoys he sends throughout the kingdom find Merlin, who is brought to court together with his mother. Wace does not engage with the potential controversy surrounding Merlin's parentage. This stance cannot be attributed to his address to a less learned audience, since it is also adopted by the impressive list of twelfth-century chroniclers who accept Geoffrey's text as valid.²⁴

It is in the interview between the king and Merlin that we find the first differences in tone between Geoffrey's Latin text and Wace's vernacular rendition of it. Geoffrey presents a commanding child, using the imperative *iube* to tell the king what to do:

'iube magos tuos uenire coram me, et comunicam illos mendacium adinuenisse'

[order your magicians here before me, and I shall prove that they have lied].²⁵

Wace's tone comes through as less imposing, less demanding:

'Ja Deu, ço dist Merlin, ne place / Que par mun sanc ta tur estace. / Pur menteürs ferai tenir, / Si tus faiz devant mei venir, / Tuz cels qui de mun sanc sortirent; / Menteür furent si mentirent'.

['if you make all those men, who prophesied about my blood, come before me, I shall have them adjudged liars: they were liars and lied'].²⁶

Instead of the imperative, Wace's use of the conditional when Merlin speaks to the king, sets a more appropriate tone for his address, thus setting up adequate boundaries to their relationship, something Geoffrey was not concerned with. Thus, the scene introduces one of the significant but subtle changes that are important to Wace when dealing with Merlin; in this case a redefinition of his relationship to the king and the court. Wace sets Merlin within the boundaries of the authority of the king, inside the power circuit of the court; with a target audience in mind, Wace's Merlin is inscribed inside a set of appropriate social relationships. Wace appears to emphasise that, in this setting, a polite request would go further than an outright command, even for a being as powerful as Merlin.

The next time Merlin intervenes in Geoffrey's narrative, Vortigern has fallen, and Aurelius has taken the crown but finds himself at an impasse when he tries to honour the fallen British heroes who had been killed by Saxon treachery during the 'Night of the long knives'.²⁷ Again, on this occasion, Merlin is not stationed at court, he needs to be summoned, and is not simply at the king's disposal. Aurelius in fact does not know about Merlin, and it is one of his advisors, the archbishop of Caerleon, Tremorinus, who advises the king to call upon him. Tremorinus declares that there is none in the kingdom who is more 'distinguished in foretelling the future or in feats of engineering' [*sit clarius ingenium siue in futuris dicendis siue in operationibus machinandis*].²⁸ In his first interview with King Aurelius, Merlin not only reveals his profound knowledge of the hidden properties of the natural world, when he recommends using the stones at Mount Killaraus in Ireland because of their healing properties, but also knows the reason why the stones are special: they belonged to giants.

Furthermore, in this episode Merlin clearly sets himself once more outside of the system of the court and beyond the power of the king. When he is asked by Aurelius to prophesy for him he refuses on the grounds of the vanity of the request, or as he himself puts it:

‘Non sunt reuelanda huiusmodi misteria nisi cum summa necessitas incubuerit. Nam si ea in derisionem siue uanitatem proferrem, taceret spiritus qui me docet et cum opus superueniret recederet’

[‘Such mysteries should only be revealed in times of dire necessity. If I prophesied for entertainment or without purpose, the spirit that instructs me would fall silent and abandon me when I needed it’].²⁹

The key phrase here being *in derisionem siue uanitatem proferrem*. Merlin’s refusal has to do with the nature of his power of prophecy, a power he does not control, for it depends on the will of a spirit bent on aiding him only upon serious and pressing needs. What this means is that Merlin cannot serve the king when and as the king requires it, but only when he truly needs it, and the nature and urgency of such need is not decided by the king but by Merlin. Thus, his own nature sets Merlin outside of the system and the authority of the court and its leader, the king, while at the same time asserting his good character by criticising the court’s vain morality.

Just as in his version of the Vortigern episode discussed above, Wace softens Merlin’s attitude towards Aurelius’ court through the use of an expansion and an explanation:

Sire, dist Merlin, nu ferai, / Ja ma buche nen uverai / Se n’est
par grant necesseté / E dunc par grant humilité. / Se jon
parloe par vantance / Ne par eschar ne par bobance, / Li
espirites que jo ai, / Par ki jo sai ço que jo sai, / De ma buche
se retrareit / E ma science me toldreit, / Ne ma buche ne
parlereit / Plus ke buche d’altre fereit. / Lai ester les devins
segreiz; / Pense de ço que faire deiz

[‘Sire’, said Merlin, ‘I will not do so; [that is concede to prophesy for him]; I will never open my mouth unless it is really necessary, and then only with great humility. If I spoke boastfully, in jest, or arrogantly, the spirit I possess, from whom I know what I know, would leave my mouth and take my knowledge with him, and my mouth would no longer

speak differently from any other. Leave secret divination alone; think of what you must do...'].³⁰

Here, neither the court nor the request of the king is directly deemed vain, instead Merlin takes the responsibility for potential arrogance and boastfulness onto himself and justifies his refusal through a lengthier explanation of the workings of his gift of prophecy. The outline of the narrative remains the same, the outcome is not altered, but the sensibilities that are being addressed here suggest that the framework of authority at court is again being placed above Merlin by Wace, who stresses rather his willingness to serve Aurelius, depicting him as a wise adviser. A new touch is, however, introduced by Merlin's suggestion that prophecy which pried unnecessarily into the future would fall into the category of divination.

Once in Ireland, Merlin uses his ingenuity, his *ingenium*, in a contest to prove to the king's men and to his brother Uther, that there are cases in which intellect surpasses brute strength. The challenge here is to raise and then transport the giant stones on Mount Killaraus that are needed for Aurelius' monument. The men in the army who accompany Merlin and Uther use all manner of contraptions, including ropes, pulleys and ladders, but are not successful. However, with special devices of his own, his so-called *machinationes*, Merlin is easily able to achieve what Uther's men could not.

Ad imperium igitur eius indulserunt unanimiter multimodis machinationibus et aggressi sunt choream deponere. Alii funes, alii restes, alii scalas parauerunt ut quod affectaban perficerent, nec ullatenus perficere ualuerunt. Deficientibus itaque cunctis, solutus est Merlinus in risum suasque machinationes confecit. Denique, cum quaeque necessaria appouisset, leuius quam credi potest lapides deposuit, depositos autem fecit deferri ad naues et introponi, et sic cum gaudio in Britanniam reuerti coeperunt.

[At his command they all at once tried contrivances of all kinds in their efforts to take down the stone ring. To this end some employed ropes, others pulleys, others ladders, but without being rewarded by any success. Merlin laughed at

their failure, then prepared devices of his own. As soon as everything was ready, he took down the stones with incredible ease and had them carried to the ships and loaded, and so they joyfully embarked to return to Britain].³¹

The *Historia* does not expand on the nature of Merlin's methods, nor does it explain how they are different from the ones used by the men in Uther's army. How are they able to work, when others did not, remains a mystery that adds to the questions and uncertainty surrounding Merlin's abilities. It is clear from this episode that his achievement in dismantling and then re-erecting the stones has little to do with his prophetic gifts. Merlin himself credits his own inborn ability here, his *ingenium*, thus setting his achievement within an intellectual category that, unlike his prophetic gift, he does control. Wace's handling of this issue alters only a few words, yet significantly alters it. For Wace mystifies Merlin even more whilst also strengthening his link to the supernatural. First, Wace omits the detail about Uther's men's use of ropes, pulleys and ladders, stating that after being challenged by Merlin, they simply:

...Cil se sunt as pieres aërs / Detriés, devant e de travers; /
 Bien unt enpeint e bien buté; / E bien retrait e bien crollé; /
 Unches par force a la menur / Ne porent faire prendre un
 tur.

[... grasped the stones behind, in front and sideways; they pushed and thrust them hard, pulled and shook them hard, but however much force they used, they could not find a solution].³²

So, clearly, they tried to manipulate the stones using their own strength but lacked the skill and the knowledge necessary to apply technological solutions to the task. Merlin's superior abilities were described by Geoffrey as his *ingenium*, an ambiguous word which suggested skill with mechanisms as well as superhuman knowledge. Wace, however, avoids suggesting that Merlin used machines to achieve this wondrous feat:

‘Dunc ala avant si s’estut, / Entur guarda, les levre mut /
 Come huem ki dit oreisun / Ne sai s’il dist preiere u nun. /
 Dunc ad les Bretuns rapelez: / ‘Venez avant, dist il, venez! /
 Or poëz les pieres baillier, / A vos nefz porter e chargier.’

[He stepped forward and stopped. He looked around, his lips moving like a man saying his prayers. I don’t know if he said a prayer or not. Then he called the Britons back. ‘Come here,’ he said, ‘come! Now you can handle the stones, and carry and load them into your ships’].³³

Instead of crediting Merlin’s *ingenium*, Wace introduces a motif of quiet (and possibly prayerful) recitation to highlight Merlin’s abilities. The use of words has the potential to place Merlin’s actions within the spectrum of the magical and the supernatural, adding to his aura of mystery. The effect is also to turn him into a more coherent and less contradictory character, one whose supernatural powers are not so much linked to his possession of a superior form of ingenuity, as with Geoffrey, but to his connection to the mysterious and the wondrous.

Throughout his relationship with Aurelius, Merlin has set himself outside of the boundaries of the court, but it is with Uther that this relationship takes an even greater turn for the dramatic. Now he becomes a kingmaker. After falling ill through poison, Aurelius is unable to lead his army against Vortigern’s son Pascentius and the Saxon army still harassing the Britons. Instead, he sends his brother Uther to confront them. Before the battle, a brilliant star-group appears in the sky. Merlin is with the army and unerringly interprets for Uther and his men what has been seen in the heavens; he announces Aurelius’ untimely death and foretells Uther’s own successful future as a dynast and a ruler. Merlin then proceeds to advise Uther to cast aside the doubts assailing him after his brother’s passing and to join the battle. Only by fighting can Uther win and become the king he is meant to be. So, in spite of his own doubts, Uther follows Merlin’s advice and thus succeeds in his endeavours. In this episode Geoffrey is placing Merlin above the hierarchy of the court, as he builds his image as a kingmaker. This adds to the

complexity surrounding Geoffrey's version of Merlin's character. He is already a powerful *uates* with mysterious and inexplicable powers, who comes and goes at will, giving his advice only when he deems it truly necessary. Now he goes on to intervene directly in the most crucial affairs of the kingdom - its military survival and the succession to the throne. It is therefore not surprising to find a slightly different rendition of this section of the narrative in Wace's text:

Mais Merlin issil conforta:/ 'Uther, dist il, ne t'esmaier./ N'i
ad del mort nul recovrier./ Espleite ço que tu as quis;/
Combat tei a tes enemis./ La victorie demain t'atent/ Del rei
d'Irlande et de Paschent;/ Demain te combat si veintras/ E
de Bretaine reis eras'.

[But Merlin comforted him thus. 'Uther,' he said, 'don't be dismayed; there is no remedy for death. Carry out what you intended; fight your enemies. Victory awaits you tomorrow over the Irish king and Paschent; fight tomorrow and win, and you will be king of Britain'].³⁴

In Wace's narrative, Merlin acts more like a wise advisor who counsels the king and nudges him in the right direction with positive encouragement, to which Uther listens. This stands contrary to Geoffrey who has Merlin commanding Uther to act, again with the double use of the imperative, *festina*, and almost in a detached manner. Uther doubts, but acquiesces, the alternative being the downfall of the whole kingdom:

'Festina ergo, dux nobilissime Vther, festina et conflictum
facere cum hostibus ne differas. Victoria tibi in manu erit, et
rex eris tocius Britanniae.'

[Make haste noble duke Uther, make haste and attack the enemy without delay. Victory shall be yours and you shall be king of all Britain'].³⁵

Once again, the difference is a subtle, though a consistent one: the tone shifts, the command is softened while the line of the narrative itself is preserved. As with the initial confrontation with Vortigern,

replacing the use of the imperative with an argument that relies on its power of persuasion would prove more palatable to the courtly audiences for whom Wace was writing.

The final episode where Merlin intervenes directly, in the *Historia*, involves Uther and his beloved Igera. The wife of one of his strongest and most faithful supporters, Gorlois of Cornwall, Igera catches the eye of the king at a banquet he is giving to celebrate his military victories. Uther is so besotted with her that he finds himself distracted, and even in fear of death, because of his love for her. Again, to resolve the situation, Merlin is asked to come to the court, this time on the advice of one of Uther's men, Ulfín of Ricaradoc. Seeing Uther's troubled state of mind, Merlin suggests the use of his own new wonder drug [*medicamen*], which can change the king's appearance into that of duke Gorlois, so that he can trick Igera into lying with him.

Perhaps this is the most morally ambiguous episode of those involving Merlin in the *Historia*. He is facilitating adultery and the betrayal of Gorlois who, following the king's interest in his wife, has decided to defy Uther and is actually fighting the royal army at the time of the deception. Merlin manages this feat by shifting the appearance of things, making them look like something they are not, using what could be construed as deception and trickery. What Merlin is doing here closely resembles what medieval learned audiences would identify as the workings of the magical arts, as depicted by Geoffrey himself in the characters of Vortigern's magicians and King Bladud. The latter combined *ingenium* with dangerous magic, and died as a result. Yet not even here does Geoffrey refer to Merlin as a magician, or a *magus*, as he does these other figures.³⁶ Merlin is still the *uates*, the prophet, working for the benefit and ultimate good of the kingdom - or is he? It is true that from this illicit union between Uther and Igera Arthur is born, and Arthur is the epitome of kingship and knighthood in the *Historia*. Perhaps within his own unique and mysterious knowledge, Merlin understands that Uther's treachery and betrayal of Gorlois is necessary for the conception of Arthur, so it may be that he is acting for the ultimate good of the kingdom. But, if the concerns of readers such as William of Newburgh about Merlin's ancestry are taken into account,

this might be considered as evidence of the difficult and dubious character of an incubus' child.

This line of thought might further lead the reader to consider whether Arthur was really what was best for the Britons. Undoubtedly, he marks the peak of their history as a nation, but he also initiates his own downfall, arguably through hubris. Moreover, his actions after his last campaign against the Roman army in Europe prove disastrous, leaving the kingdom in a state of disarray and instability not unlike the one his dynasty was called upon to prevent. However, whilst Geoffrey's readers are left free to ponder these issues, Wace once again appears more concerned by the needs of the king and the court than anything else. Geoffrey keeps the description of Uther's impairment by love concise:

'Vror amore Igernae nec periculum corporis mei euadere existimo nisi ea potitus fuero. Tu igitur adhibe consilium quo uoluntatem meam expleam, aut aliter internis anxietatibus interibo'.

[I am aflame with love for Igera and cannot go on living if I do not have her. Tell me how I can fulfil my desire before my inner turmoil kills me'].³⁷

Wace's rendition of Uther's plight is far more overpowering, detailing the extent of the king's impediment and therefore justifying the actions to come:

'L'amur Ygerne m'ad suspris,/ Tus m'ad vencu, tut m'ad conquis/ (Ne puis aler, ne puis venir,/ Ne puis veillier, ne puis dormir,)/ Ne puis lever, ne puis culchier,/ Ne puis beivre, ne puis mangier,/ Que d'Ygerne ne me suvienge;/ Mais jo ne sai cum jo la tienge./ Morz sui se tu ne me conseilles'.

[love for Ygerne has struck me down, completely defeating and conquering me. I can neither come nor go, wake nor sleep, arise nor rest, eat nor drink, without thinking of her. But I don't know how to possess her. Without your advice, I'm a dead man'].³⁸

This same stance in Wace is also evident in the passage that describes Merlin's summons, and that stands in stark contrast to the pithiness of Geoffrey's version:

Credulus itaque rex iussit uocari Merlinum; nam et ipse ad obsidionem uenerat. Vocatus confestim Merlinus Qui comperta anxietate quam rex patiebatur pro ea commotus est super tanto amore ipsius et ait:

'Vt uoto tuo potiaris, utendum est tibi nouis artibus et tempore tuo inauditis. Scio medicaminibus meis dare tibi figuram Gorlois ita ut per omnia ipse uidearis.'

[The king was persuaded, and ordered that Merlin be called, since he too was present at the siege. Merlin was swiftly summoned When he saw how troubled the king was on her account, Merlin was moved by Uther's great passion and said:

'For your wish to be granted, you must resort to strange arts, unheard of in your time. With my medicaments I can give you the exact appearance of Gorlois].³⁹

Wace's description of the king's need feels far more pressing and urgent:

Tut li ad sun busuin mustré;/ Preié l'ad e merci crié/ Que conseil le dunt, se il puet,/ Kar senz cunfort murir l'estuet/ Se d'Igerne sun bon ne fait;/ Quierë e face que il l'ait./ Del suen li durra se il vult,/ Kar mult ad mal e mult se delt./ 'Sire, dist Merlin, tu l'avras,/ Ja pur Ygerne ne murras./ Tut t'en ferai avoir tun buen,/ Ja mar m'en durras rien del tuen./ ... jo te mettrai bien dedenz/ Par nuvels medecinemenz;/ Figure d'ume sai muer/ E l'un en l'autre sembler/ E l'un faiz bien a l'autre per./ Le cors, le vis, la cuntenance/ E la parole e la semblance/ Que li cuens ad de Cornoaille/ Te ferai tut avoir senz faille./

[He begged and prayed him to advise him, if he could, for without help he must die, unless he could have his will of Ygerne. He besought him to help him. He would reward him, if that was his wish, for he was in great distress and suffering. ‘Sire’, said Merlin, ‘you shall have her; you shall never die on Ygerne’s account. I shall make you have all your desire and never shall you give me anything of yours. ... I will easily get you inside, using new potions: I know how to change a man’s face so that one turns into another, the first seeming to be the second and the second apparently identical to the first. I will make you assume, without fail, the body, face, bearing, speech and appearance of the count of Cornwall. ... Thus you can carry out all you desire ...’].⁴⁰

Merlin’s reply is less expedient and more sympathetic to Uther’s plight, framing within a different moral setting the actions that follow. Merlin is answering the dire necessity of the king, he is righting a situation that is making Uther unfit to rule, he is solving an elaborate and complex political crisis, and this whole affair is spelled out by Wace in a manner that Geoffrey does not. If Geoffrey’s intention was to lead the reader down the path more explicitly signalled by Wace he did so covertly, leaving space, as with so much else, for possible alternative readings. On the contrary, Wace’s intention to smooth out some of Geoffrey’s ambiguity becomes starkly clear with his expansion of this particular passage. It is evident that his intention is to provide context to the scene, a context that would explain Merlin’s questionable actions to his audience, rendering them acceptable by the threatened death of the king. Uther cannot achieve his goal, or maintain rational rule, any other way. As before, Wace does not alter Geoffrey’s line of argument. However, his expansion, the context he provides, offers the clarity needed to overcome the potential controversy arising from Geoffrey’s narrative at one of its most critical points: the conception of King Arthur.

Overall, Wace turns Merlin into a less controversial, and also less complex character. In the *Historia*, Merlin is ambiguous, and it is not easy to establish whether he acts for the good of the kingdom or for his own undecipherable reasons. Even the terminology Geoffrey uses

to describe him is vague for, unlike other characters in the narrative with similar abilities, he is not referred to as a ‘magus’ or a magician, but as a *uates* or pagan prophet. This gives him moral ambiguity, for the use of the term ‘magus’ would have carried negative overtones, which as a *uates* he could avoid. However, *uates* in itself is ambiguous, for it does not refer to a Christian prophet, but to a pagan one. On the one hand, labelling Merlin a pagan prophet instead of a Christian one could tone down the type of controversy that appears to have fed William of Newburgh’s criticism of Geoffrey’s Merlin: the purported existence of a very powerful character, fathered by a demon and hitherto unknown to anyone but him. On the other hand, the use of the term *uates* still alludes to a pagan figure within a Christian setting, and even though there is a case for arguing for the presence of virtuous paganism in the *Historia* during pre-Christian times, Merlin does not belong to that era. Thus, Merlin’s status is skilfully left ambiguous.

Wace appears more concerned by the relationship Geoffrey depicts between Merlin and the court. He particularly takes measures to soften Merlin’s approach to kings in direct speech, thus rendering his interactions within a set social hierarchy more acceptable to his target audience. Similarly, he tries to turn Merlin into a more coherent character, by simplifying the range and nature of his supernatural abilities, emphasising his prophetic powers and his mysterious knowledge of the wonders of the natural world over his *ingenium*. Furthermore, he endeavours to explain the reasons behind Merlin’s apparently immoral actions. Thus, Wace’s Merlin, despite his similarities to the versions found in Latin chronicle writing, is subtly different in his attitude to the king and his court. In the Latin chronicles there was a greater emphasis on Merlin’s image as that of the prophet and the outsider.⁴¹

What emerges from this analysis is that writers of fictional entertainment, like Robert de Boron, were able to elaborate upon the narrative of Geoffrey of Monmouth, expanding on the traits that made the *Historia*’s Merlin so controversial and appealing at the same time. Merlin’s troubled and troubling ancestry, the scope and nature of his power, and the moral standing of his actions all received increased attention and explanation.⁴² Wace’s translation, restricted by form and

convention as it was, could not do that. Nonetheless, it still had to cater to a different audience to Geoffrey's own, so it softened some of the issues, turning Merlin into a more plausible and coherent character for the courtier, while still maintaining the philosophical explanation that Geoffrey had outlined for the Latin clerical reader. It did so despite the constrictions and bindings set up by its status as a translation, or perhaps, because of them. It was through such economical means as the turn of a phrase or a short expansion that Wace managed sometimes to blur and sometimes to sharpen the outlines of a character who was, in the Middle Ages, as now, complex, mysterious and fascinating. Thus, the irony stands, for it is through translation that Merlin could blossom and grow as a less controversial figure, and yet it had been through invoking translation, 'from a very old book in the British tongue' that Geoffrey had been able to present him as such a powerfully ambiguous character in the first place.

Notes

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- 1 Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The history of the kings of Britain, an Edition and Translation of De gestis Britonum [Historia Regum Britanniae]*, ed. M. D. Reeve and trans. N. Wright, Arthurian Studies LXIX, Woodbridge, The Boydell Press, 2007, pp. 136-139. Hereafter *HRB*.
 - 2 See particularly the case of the Spanish magician Pellitus, who is described as *sapientissimus* and *edoctus*. Geoffrey of Monmouth, *HRB*, p. 265.
 - 3 Augustine, *De Civitate Dei (The City of God)*, Books VIII & IX, ed. P. G. Walsh, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2013, Book VIII, *passim*.
 - 4 See for example the guidance that through a dream is given to Brutus by the goddess Diana at the beginning of the narrative, ensuring the settlement of the Britons and the founding of their kingdom. Geoffrey of Monmouth, *HRB*, pp. 18-21.
 - 5 William may have been commissioned to compose the work because, as a Cistercian, Ernald was not allowed to write any new book without permission from the General Chapter of his order. See: A Lawrence-Mathers, *Manuscripts in Northumbria in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries*, Woodbridge, Brewer, 2003, p.259.

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- 6 William of Newburgh, *The History of the English Affairs*, Book 1, ed. And trans. P.G. Walsh and M.J. Kennedy, Warminster, Aris & Phillips, 1988, p. 29.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid. pp. 33, 35, 37. See especially p.30: *...temperavit figmenta ut congruam possent interpretationem recipere praetera in libro suo, quem Britonum historiam vocat, quam petulanter et quam imprudenter fere per omnia mentiatur nemo nisi veterum historiarum ignarus, cum in librum illum incidit*
- 9 *Gaufridus hic dictus est agnomen habens Arturi, pro eo quod fabulas de Arturo ex priscis Britonum figmentis sumptas et ex proprio auctas per superductum Latini sermonis colorem honesto historiae nomine palliavit qui etiam majori ausu cujusdam Merlini divinationes fallacissimas, quibus utique de proprio plurimum adjecti, dum eas in Latinum transfunderet, tanquam authenticas et immobili veritate subnixas prophetias vulgavit.* Ibid p. 29
- 10 *...minimum digitum sui Arturi grossiorem facit dorso Alexandri Magni; [he makes the little finger of his Arthur broader than the back of Alexander the Great]* Ibid. p.34.
- 11 Ibid. pp. 31-35. See especially p.34: *at non inveniet fabulator noster tot regna in orbe nostro praeter regna memorata, quae utique nondum ille subegerat* [But our story-teller will not find that number of kingdoms in our world, on top of the ones Arthur had clearly yet to conquer].
- 12 Ibid. p.30: *Sane divinationum Merlini perspicua fallacia est in his quae in regno Anglorum contigisse noscuntur post mortem praenominati Gaufridi, ut divinationum illarum nenas ex Britannico transtulit, quibus, ut non frustra creditor, ex proprio figmento multum adjecit...* [Certainly the predictions of Merlin are clearly false in the events known to have occurred in the kingdom of the English after the death of this Geoffrey, who translated the infantile stories of these prophecies from the British tongue, and according to well-founded belief added considerably to them from his own imagination].
- 13 Ibid. pp. 31-35.
- 14 Ibid, pp. 28-30.
- 15 Augustine, *De civitate dei*, 8.14-22, 9.18-22. William of Newburgh, *op cit*, pp. 136-137.
- 16 See for example contemporary discourses on magic by John of Salisbury. M. C. Escobar Vargas, 'Magic, Technology and New Categories of Knowledge in the Central Middle Ages', *Reading Medieval Studies* 41 (2015): 59-61.

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- 17 William of Newburgh, *op cit* pp. 34-5: *quomodo, inquam, vel nobiliorem Alexandro Magno Britonum monarcham Arturum ejusque acta, vel parem nostro Esaiae Britonum prophetam Merlinum ejusque dicta, silentio suppresserunt?* *quid enim minus in praescientia duntaxat futurorum tribuit suo Merlino quam nos nostro Esaiae, nisi quod ejus vaticiniis non audit inserere 'haec dicit Dominus', et erubuit inserere 'haec dicit diabolus', quippe hoc debuit congruere vati incubi daemonis filio?* [How, I ask, have the historians suppressed in silence one more notable than Alexander the Great - this Arthur, monarch of the Britons, and his deeds - or Merlin, prophet of the Britons, one equal to our Isaiah, and his utterances? In what sense does he attribute to his Merlin lesser foreknowledge of the future at any rate than we attribute to our Isaiah, except that he does not presume to insert in his prophecies "Thus saith the lord", and he was ashamed to insert "Thus said the devil" as should have been appropriate to a prophet who was the son of a demonic incubus?]
- 18 *Ibid* pp. 36-37.
- 19 Robert de Boron, *Merlin, Roman du XIIIe siècle*, ed. A. Micha, Genève, Librairie Droz, 1979, pp. 18-23. For an English translation see: Robert de Boron, *Merlin and the Grail. Joseph of Arimathea, Merlin, Perceval, The trilogy of prose romances attributed to Robert de Boron*, trans. N. Bryant, Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 2001.
- 20 Robert de Boron, *Merlin*, pp. 49-51; 68-69; 71-72; 99; 117; 247. Merlin also proves his efficacy in pp. 155-162.
- 21 Robert de Boron, *Merlin*, pp. 68-69; Robert de Boron, *Merlin and the Grail*, p. 60
- 22 Geoffrey of Monmouth, *HRB*, p. 4-5.
- 23 *Ibid*, pp. 136-137.
- 24 Amongst these could be included Orderic Vitalis, Henry of Huntingdon, Ralph Diceto, Geoffrey Gaimar, and to a certain extent, Gerald of Wales. See: Antonia Gransden, *Historical Writing in England, c. 550-1307*, London and New York, Routledge, 2008, pp. 136-246.
- 25 Geoffrey of Monmouth, *HRB*, pp. 140-141 (ll. 557-558).
- 26 Wace, *Wace's Roman de Brut, A history of the British, text and translation*, ed. J. Weiss, Exeter, University of Exeter Press, 1999, pp. 188-189 (ll. 7473-7478).
- 27 Geoffrey of Monmouth, *HRB*, pp. 134-137.
- 28 *Ibid*, pp. 170-171 (ll. 219-220).
- 29 Geoffrey of Monmouth, *HRB*, pp. 172-173 (ll. 228-230).
- 30 Wace, *Roman de Brut*, pp. 202-203 (ll. 8025-8038).

- 31 Geoffrey of Monmouth, *HRB*, pp. 174-175 (ll. 273-279).
- 32 Wace, *Roman de Brut*, pp. 204-205 (ll. 8137-8142).
- 33 Wace, *Roman de Brut*, pp. 204-205 (ll. 8143-8158).
- 34 Wace, *Roman de Brut*, pp. 210-211 (ll. 8324-8332).
- 35 Geoffrey of Monmouth, *HRB*, p. 179 (ll. 366-368).
- 36 The notion of trickery and deception was key to his depiction of these other magicians in the *Historia*. Geoffrey of Monmouth, *HRB*, p. 37; pp. 136-141.
- 37 Geoffrey of Monmouth, *HRB*, pp. 184-185 (ll. 478-480).
- 38 Wace, *Roman de Brut*, pp. 218-219 (ll. 8657-8667).
- 39 Geoffrey of Monmouth, *HRB*, pp. 186-187 (ll. 488-498). NB: 'medicaments' is here used to translate *medicaminibus*.
- 40 Wace, *Roman de Brut*, pp. 218-221 (ll. 8681-8722).
- 41 See A. Lawrence-Mathers, *The True History of Merlin the Magician*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2012, pp. 62-69.
- 42 These motives are keenly expanded and greatly elaborated upon with the expansion and invention of new narratives by Robert de Boron in his *Merlin*.