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ROLE IN THE "EXPUGNATIO HIBERNICA"

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GIRALDUS "SILVESTER" OF WALES AND
HIS *PROPHETIC HISTORY OF IRELAND*:
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EXPUGNATIO HIBERNICA

BARBARA LYNNE McCAULEY

Introduction and Purpose

The character of Merlin, like that of Morgan la Fée, has received paradoxical treatment in Arthurian tales. Like Morgan, who is both nun and witch, healer and betrayer of Arthur, Merlin has been presented both as benevolent advisor and evil genius, one who serves his king and country wisely and well, assisting in political decisions and even in the achievement of the Grail, or one who deliberately misleads Arthur and his knights so as to bring down the kingdom and who causes his own demise by wallowing in his unsatisfied lust for the lady Nimue.

Unlike Morgan, however, Merlin, along with Arthur and Mordred, enjoys outside the romances a quasi-historical status in the British Isles. Of course, the question of whether Merlin, or, for that matter, Arthur, really existed is irresolvable. One either believes the early documents that mention them, or one believes that their absence from other early documents proves that they are fictitious.

One irrefutable point is that the mention of the Arthurian personalities in the "histories," however rare, indicates that there were people in the Middle Ages who believed that those personalities must have lived. Both Merlin and Arthur had such outspoken advocates among the Welsh nationalists from before the time of Henry II that, by the time he took the throne, Henry was at considerable pains to repudiate their mythical significance and/or their historical authenticity. He had a tomb which reportedly contained Arthur's remains exhumed to disprove the "rex quondam rex futurus" claims and arrogantly challenged Merlin's authority as a prophet.¹ With Wales in periodic patriotic "rebellion,"² both Henry and his predecessors had reason to feel that they had a stake in discrediting by challenge, suppression, and adoption, or even by fictionalization in romances and in obviously literary chivalric cults the stories about or prophecies of the two colossi of Welsh patriotism and independence, Arthur and Merlin.

In the native literature of Ireland, Merlin does not exist. Although

there are Arthurian tales which are set in Ireland, there is no reference to the bard or to any other Arthurian character or "historical" figure in the very ancient Irish national tales, histories, or regnams. Certainly, this is because the Irish had both their own mythological heroes like Cuchulain and their own legendary kings like Brian Boru, the greatest High King of all Ireland. But it still seems odd that the Irish, who held their bards in almost religious reverence and accorded them a blood-price equivalent to that of their kings, would never have adopted the most famous bard of the medieval British Isles, unless one is aware that the Arthurian tradition and, especially, Merlin were used as a political weapon against them. The guilty party is the Welsh-born Norman-Welsh Giraldus Cambrensis, author of *Expugnatio Hibernica*, whose family led the expedition of Normans, Welshmen, and Flemings to conquer Ireland on behalf of Henry II of England in 1169. However, before examining Giraldus's motives for the use he made of Merlinian³ material in this work, it will be helpful to elaborate upon the probable origins of Merlin's dual reputation.

Demon Unjustified: the Shallow Roots of Merlin's Evil Reputation

The well-known identification of Merlin with his so-called demon father and the classification of the bard as evil are not in evidence before the Norman reign. The story of the son of a father-unknown originated in Nennius's *Historia Brittonum* (c. 800) which tells of a boy named Ambros who says his father is a Roman consul. It was not connected with Merlin until 1136 in the *History of the Kings of Britain (HKB)* by the first Norman-Welsh historian Geoffrey of Monmouth, whom Giraldus viciously condemned.

In the *HKB*, Merlin appears as a youth who is brought before Vortigern because the king has been told by his magicians that he needs a human sacrifice so his men can build a keep as his last retreat from the attack of the Romans. The sacrifice must be a boy without a father, and the first person found who qualifies is Merlin. Vortigern questions the boy and his mother, the princess of Demetia, and finds that the woman claims to have had relations with no one except someone who came to her "in the form of" a handsome young man. It is unclear exactly what she did with this individual. She claims not to have had intercourse with him, and yet she says he made love to her "as a man would do." Sometimes he was invisible. It is a curious explanation, but no one doubts her veracity (or her sanity). She concludes cryptically to Vortigern that "you must decide, in your wisdom, who the father of the boy is for

I do not know."⁴

Presumably unable to decide for himself, Vortigern calls Maugantius, whom Geoffrey does not otherwise identify (perhaps Vortigern's own principal advisor or wise man), who says that Merlin's father must have been an incubus demon, the magical shape-changing spawn of the fallen angels described in the Book of Enoch (although Maugantius mentions no Biblical connection).

After hearing this accusation and recognizing his peril, Merlin demands that the king's magicians be brought before him so he can prove that "they have lied" about the necessity of a human sacrifice. The king does this, and without hesitation Merlin gives them a natural (and truthful) explanation for their problem: they are building their tower over a sink hole. The magicians are "terrified"; the tower is successfully raised in a slightly different location, and much later Vortigern, because of his own cowardice and treachery, is burnt alive in it by his enemy the Roman consul Aurelius Ambrosius, Uther's brother.⁵

This story seems to establish for all time Merlin's reputation as demon-spawn, a tradition certainly taken up by authors like Malory in the witch-hunting fifteenth century.⁶ However, close examination of the events recounted here leaves some doubt as to whether this demon-link was Geoffrey's clear intent. Like Giraldus, he was a Welshman writing for Normans. The episode is followed directly in *HKB* by Merlin's prophecies which proclaim, it might be said, Welsh independence but which are dedicated to Alexander, bishop of Lincoln (Wright I.xi).⁷ It has often been hypothesized that Geoffrey was attempting to strengthen a connection between the Celts and the Normans against the Saxons, but many of Merlin's prophecies as they appear in *HKB* could be read as predicting Welsh national supremacy. Hinting at but not clearly establishing a connection between Merlin and Satan would create a protective ambivalence for Geoffrey, a Welshman whose livelihood depended on Norman patronage, against anyone who might suggest that his purveyance of these "nationalistic" prophecies was intended to be anything other than informative.⁸ Perhaps this blurring of the line between the prophet, whom Geoffrey's "successor" Giraldus often places beside the saints, and the demon is part of the reason the younger Welshman detested the *HKB* as a book on which devils rejoiced.⁹

Geoffrey's "Fatidici Vatis": Merlin as Bard-king

Geoffrey's own ambivalence about the character is further shown by the fact that in his other significant work about Merlin, the *Vita*

Merlini (*VM*) in 1150, there is no hint of any association between Merlin and demons or demonic intentions. In fact, in the opening line, Geoffrey calls his subject "fatidici vatis" (bard of prophecy). He elaborates that Merlin was once a prophet-king and lawgiver in South Wales who went mad with grief after a terrible and costly battle with Scotland in which most of the males in the royal family of South Wales perished—a humanitarian response surely. To heal himself, Merlin abandons his wife Guendoloena and his station to retreat to the woods and become a "silvester homo," a man of the woods (l. 80). In the poem, he is retrieved once by his love for his wife and once by force. He prays in anguish (l. 87), prophesies in song (l. 580 ff), recounts events to which he has no objective access (l. 510), instructs in the creation and operation of the natural world (l. 737 ff) and in the history of Arthur, which he remembers from youth, and in the history of Britain (l. 982 ff). In the forest, he cures a madman, Maeldin, who remains with him and addresses him thereafter as "pater venerande," venerable father (l. 1453), attracts a proselyte Taliessin, and eventually transcends his physical needs to retire to a life of simplicity and contemplation. His beautiful widowed sister Ganeida follows him and his associates as caretaker, rather like a nun might attend upon a small community of priests. She is also his protege in prophecy, a role which was perhaps an asexual inspiration for the later French creation of Nimue since Nimue succeeds to Merlin's role of prophet-guide in Arthur's court. The poem ends, in fact, with Merlin's pronouncing Ganeida his successor after her first prophecies. "Sister, is it you the spirit has willed to foretell the future? He has curbed my tongue and closed my book. Then this task is given to you. Be glad of it, and under my authority declare everything faithfully" (ll. 1521-24).

Probably on the basis of these two accounts, the *HKB* and *VM*, and on what he knew of Welsh folklore, Giraldus would later invent the idea that there were two Merlins: Merlin Ambrosius, the character in *HKB* and the Arthurian tales, and Merlin of Celidon or Merlin Silvester (the woodsman, or wildman) of Welsh prophetic tradition and *VM*, with whom Giraldus himself wished to be identified.

Giraldus's theory shows several things circumstantially. First, it shows that some people in Giraldus's time believed in the demon-spawn story. Second, it shows that there was probably a Welsh tradition that said otherwise. Third, it shows that Giraldus was interested in improving "the real" Merlin's image, either for patriotic or personal reasons or both, as will be demonstrated.

The Welsh Merlinian Connection: The Informants of Geoffrey and Giraldus

Merlin's reputation as a prophet seems to have arisen mainly outside of Arthurian tradition. It is not certain what prophecies Giraldus translated from the manuscript he says he found, but it is apparent that there was in the Middle Ages a considerable body of material which was being attributed to Merlin, much of it prophetic. In W. F. Skene's *Four Ancient Books of Wales*, one may find the Black Book of Caermarthen in a manuscript dating from the reign of Henry II; the Book of Aneurin a manuscript written in the latter part of the thirteenth century; the Book of Taliessin from the first half of the fourteenth century; and the Red Book of Hergest put together over the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. These manuscripts contain Welsh poems, prophetic and otherwise, of the four bards Taliessin, Aneurin, Llywarch Hen, and Myrddin, along with the miscellaneous writings of a few less famous artists, all of whom the editor asserts lived and composed in the sixth century.

Although Macdonald thinks that Geoffrey had no "direct knowledge of the Welsh Myrddin poems" (5), it seems clear that if he had not seen the manuscripts themselves (only the Black Book could have been available to him), he was certainly familiar with and made use of the tradition which produced them. There are several significant similarities that sharply separate this material from the later "softer" character of Arthurian romance besides the total absence of any suggestion of Merlin's demonic paternity. Merlin is given two love-interests: a wife Guendoloena and an "Apple Woman." Unlike the Frenchified Merlin, however, the Welsh Merlin is never presented as besotted in any way. He is never in the submissive position to either woman, even though he wrongs his wife terribly and publicly and should therefore beg her pardon. There also is a part of the tradition that gives Merlin a sister, Ganieida in Geoffrey and Gwendydd in the poems. She is married to Rydderch (poems) or Rodarch (*VM*), and Gwendydd (poems) has a reason to be angry with her brother, perhaps that he revealed Ganieida's (*VM*) infidelity to the king, her husband.¹⁰ In both the poems and the *VM*, Merlin is closely identified with Taliessin in terms of poetry and prophecy, although who is the master and who is the apprentice is variable. From these similarities and from the unlikelihood that a Welsh poet (or for that matter Geoffrey himself) would elect to further dramatize a Welsh figure who might be tainted by Satanic connections, it is possible to conclude that both Geoffrey and the anonymous poets were writing from

the same tradition. The fact that Giraldus also alludes to traditional Merlinian poetic and prophetic material, some of which he found written down and some of which seems to have been proverbial, is an indication of its availability and importance to those of Welsh extraction.

The possibility also exists, of course, that the poems are based on the *VM* since many of them appeared in later manuscripts, but it seems less credible: the poetry is awkward and primitive, about animals and flowers and battles and tribal loyalty, and hardly is worthy of careful preservation on the basis of its artistic merit alone. If it were merely derivative of Geoffrey's original invention of a fictional bard, there would be no reason for the reverence. The poems are also in Welsh, and it seems unlikely that a Welshman would care to propagate anything about a possibly demonic "Welsh bard" invented for the Norman conquerors. Although it is admittedly improbable that Merlin himself wrote the poems (no self-respecting "great bard" would want to be associated with them), it is entirely possible that they grew out of the same Welsh tradition as *VM*.¹¹

Apotheosis: The Two "Silvesters" and the Expugnatio Hibernica: Liber Vaticinalis Historiae

There are reported to be 336 books of prophecy attributed to Merlin, one of which Giraldus claims to have discovered at Nefyn in Caernarvonshire (Caer Myrddin) where it was held in awe and reverence and which he says he translated from Welsh into Latin at the wish of Henry II in the third part of the *Expugnatio* (Scott 255). In the *Expugnatio*, Giraldus claims this book to have been written by Merlin Silvester and remarks that "it seemed to me that it was my responsibility to rescue the text from the obscurity in which it has long been concealed" (Scott 253). After that, he describes his method of translation and authentication, defends the importance of his project and names his next project, a topography of Britain (never completed). Then, abruptly, he reverses himself and says, "But enough of this. For, wiser counsel having prevailed, the publication of the third book and the new interpretation of the prophecies must wait until the right time has arrived. For it is better that the truth should be suppressed and concealed for a time, even though it is in itself most useful, and indeed desirable, than that it should burst forth prematurely and perilously into the light of day, thereby offending those in power" (Scott 257).¹² And that is the last line of the third part of the *Expugnatio*. If Giraldus ever

found and translated a book of Merlinian prophecies, it is yet to be rediscovered by modern scholars. Either the Plantagenets did not at all like what Giraldus presented to them, or Giraldus had some other reason for dropping the project.

Scott and his associate editors suggest that Giraldus lost faith in Merlin and decided to stick to "the facts," but perhaps that theory reflects the desire to turn Giraldus into a modern historian.¹³ Giraldus made great use of the weird and marvelous in both of his books about Ireland. In his *Description of Wales*, written after the *Expugnatio*, he defends strongly the Welsh prophetic bards and Merlin in particular. Scott admits this openly. Giraldus also does not hesitate to record his own impressions of people as if they were factual. He is anything but detached from his work. If the book of prophecies was suppressed by the author, it is because he felt it no longer served him to work on it. This brings us to Giraldus's four reasons for writing and for including Merlin in the *Expugnatio*.

First, he saw the opportunity to report a significant event of service to the Crown in which his family and their allies played the principal roles. Giraldus's family was an important one. On his father's side, he was a member of the famous de Barri family, the youngest son of William de Barri, whose personal bravery and courage won him the king's favor throughout his life and whose sons Dimock compares to the Knights of the Round Table (Rolls 21.1.x). On his mother's side, Giraldus was in a direct line of descent from the celebrated prince of South Wales, Rhys ap Theodor, his great grandfather. Giraldus's uncle, David, was a friend of Robert FitzStephen and was bishop of St. David's when Diarmait MacMurchada came across the Irish Sea begging for aid in reclaiming the kingdom of Leinster. Also through his mother, Giraldus was indirectly related to the Plantagenets. His grandmother, Nesta, "the Helen of Wales," had been the mistress of Henry I of England, by whom she had had a son, Henry. This Henry was the father of Meyler and Robert FitzHenry, who both figured prominently in the Irish campaign. Nesta's first husband Giraldus of Windsor fathered three sons on her, namely William, Maurice, and David (the bishop) FitzGerald, and a daughter Angareth, Giraldus's mother.

From this information, it may be easily seen that Giraldus had good reason to expect advancement owing to his very regal lineage and to the "heroic" adventures of his family in Ireland, especially since he accompanied them on the conquest which for them was

something of a "crusade" and probably even participated in some of the battles himself, although he does not say so. It may also be pointed out that South Wales was, according to tradition, Merlin's kingdom before he took to the woods. Additionally, if Merlin were the son of Aurelius Ambrosius, he would be Arthur's cousin, since Ambrosius was Uther's older brother, and so also related to his king, as Giraldus was related to the Plantagenets.

Second, Giraldus apparently felt a sense of competition with Geoffrey of Monmouth, certainly professional and perhaps political as well. Giraldus did not have much use for Geoffrey of Monmouth. Perhaps he felt that Geoffrey had sold out his Welsh heroes and the cause of Welsh independence in which Giraldus believed and which cost him his personal ambitions. Perhaps he simply was jealous of Geoffrey's fame and wished to better him as the foremost historian (or bard) of the British Isles. It is clear, however, that he considered Geoffrey a very successful liar, and he was not alone, although he probably would not have agreed entirely with William of Newburgh, who wrote in 1190, "It is quite clear that everything this man [Geoffrey] wrote about Arthur and his successors, or indeed about his predecessors from Vortigern onwards, was made up, partly by himself and partly by others, either from inordinate love of lying, or for the sake of pleasing the Britons" (Rolls 81.1.ii).

Giraldus's opinion of Geoffrey is shown in a story from *Itinerary Through Wales*, where he tells of Melerius who went mad and, after being cured at St. David's, was able to foretell the future with the assistance of "unclean spirits" (although he had become a monk). Through his power, he was able, like Merlin, to "see" things that he had not objectively experienced. If the spirits became too powerful, John's gospel was placed on Melerius's chest, and they flew away. Giraldus claims, however, "If Geoffrey's Arthurian book was placed on him, the demons returned and danced on the open pages for a long time" (Rolls 21.6.58). It would be a humorous condemnation if it were not so obviously and bitterly sincere.

Third, Giraldus wished to improve Merlin's credibility as a prophet rather than as demon spawn, especially with his royal Plantagenet relations. Giraldus had a great deal of respect for the legends of Merlin, apparently, even if he realized that there were those who did not believe them. In the preface to the projected Merlinian book of the *Expugnatio*, he says, "The fastidious reader who casts his eye over this book must not wax indignant and rush to accuse me, if I seem to turn aside from history

to myth. For everything which gives the impression of being fictitious is not mythical, just as everything which bears the likeness of truth cannot immediately be accepted as true fact" (Scott 255). Elsewhere, he writes of the soothsayers of Wales, the *awenddyon* (which means in Welsh, "those inspired to poetic rapture") that as they prophesy they invoke God and the Trinity and pray that their sins will not prevent them from speaking the truth. "I do not assert they are the acts of a Pythonic or diabolic spirit; for as foreknowledge is the property of God alone, so is it in his power to confer knowledge of future events" (Rolls 21.6.197). Giraldus quotes St. Jerome's comment on the answer of the powerless magi to Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 2.10, "The diviners and all the learned of this world confess that the prescience of future events belongs to God alone; the prophets therefore, who foretold things to come spoke by the spirit of God" (Rolls 21.6.197). Of Merlin in particular Giraldus says, "Some object that if the spirit of God led [the Welsh bard-prophets] that they would preface [their statements] with 'Thus saith the lord God' or use some other prophetic expression. And as such a prophetic method is not used by Merlin, and because no mention is made of his sanctity, or devotion, or faith, many conjecture that his power was given him by a pythonic spirit. To this I respond that the spirit of prophecy was not only given to the holy but to infidels and Gentiles, like Baal and Sibyl, and even to the evil, like Caiaphas" (Rolls 21.6.197-8). The fact that Merlin was a pre-Christian (or not necessarily Christian) bard does not exclude him from receiving God's inspired prophecies. God gives the prophetic spirit to whom He wills. Giraldus concludes that it should not be considered odd that those who suddenly receive the Spirit of God temporarily seem to go out of their earthly state of mind, as the *awenddyon* or Welsh prophets were accustomed to do and as Merlin reportedly did (Rolls 21.6.200). It is a very clear-cut defense of the bard and his gifts.

Fourth, and most important, both personally and politically, Giraldus wanted to advance the cause of the ecclesiastical independence of Wales and his own life-long ambition of serving as the "Archbishop of St. David's" with equal prestige and power to that of the Archbishop of Canterbury.¹⁴ In this last purpose did all the others reside. Not only did Giraldus admire Merlin and believe in the validity of his prophetic ability, but it also seems that during this time in his life he even wanted to be identified with him. The similarities in family background have already been alluded to. And, although he did not himself claim descent from Cassandra, as he did for the Welsh

awenddyon, he did tell of a "prophetic" dream vision that he had which pertained to Henry's reluctance to give his assent to the request of Heraclitus in the *Expugnatio* (Scott. 213-17) and of another in *De Rebus a Se Gestis* of Prince John in Ireland (Rolls 21.1.64). He follows the latter with a recounting of some thirty-one visions in which he figures prominently, most of them counselling his appointment to his hoped-for Archbishopric of Wales at St. David's (Rolls 21.1.155-78). This dream in itself seems based on a Merlinian pronouncement which Giraldus quotes in *Itinerary Through Wales*, "Menevia [the city where St. David's resided] pallio Urbis Legionum induetur" (Rolls 21.6.56). There are even stories in which Merlin is associated with the first bishop Dubritius. Lastly, in the second preface to the *Topographia Hibernica*, Giraldus's first book about Ireland, he writes to "the illustrious king of the English Henry II from *his Silvester* (Rolls 21.5.20).¹⁵ This is almost surely a reference to all his hopes: court poet-historian-prophet, scholar, tutor to the youngest prince, descendant of Welsh royalty, spiritual descendant of Merlin Silvester, wildman (as his enemies called him), obviously the only suitable candidate to be Archbishop of Wales.

This all collapsed around him, however, when he finally lost the battle for the See of St. David's for the second time in 1203, "refused" by both Richard and John as he had been earlier by their father. After that, he had no more need for the prophecies of Merlin Silvester of Celidon. One also might imagine that he knew he had pushed his suit about as far as he should: a translation of *more* prophecies might endanger more than his ambitions, especially as paranoid as King John had become about the increasing power of the Norman-Welsh families both in Wales and in Ireland.¹⁶ Giraldus had already been charged with horse-stealing (Rolls 21.3.249), declared a public enemy (Rolls 21.3.314), and accused of being an enemy of the crown (Rolls 21.3.200) because of his activities. All things considered, it would make sense for Giraldus to have just dropped the whole idea, since his prospects for success were, by this time, *nil*. Scott says that he even apparently went back and cut some of the prophecies from the first two books of the *Expugnatio* (lxvi), although Dimock attributes the cuts to a later hand (21.5.xlii).

Giraldus included in the *Expugnatio* fourteen Merlinian prophecies. All, including some attributed by Giraldus not to Merlin but to the Irish saint Moling, are in appendix I following. Eleven of the fourteen are presented as they appear in the fifteenth century Medieval Hiberno English manuscript Trinity College Dublin 592. Despite what Giraldus

says about their all being in the “book” of Merlin Silvester of Celidon, at least one (26.21-23) seems suspiciously close to that of Merlin Ambrosius’. Some (18.78-80, 24.9-10, 26.18-21, 35.37-45) can be found in the “Prophecy of the Eagle.” I believe that the earliest version of this document had some strong association with the “book” Giraldus intended to publish since he alludes to that book several times when quoting from “Eagle.” A few of the prophecies in the *Expugnatio*, especially those which Giraldus associates directly with the invaders, I have as yet not been able to trace. What seems as likely is that Giraldus, in the tradition with which he was so familiar, added some prophecies himself and attributed them to the bard. The subtitle of the work practically announces his intention to do so; as has been discussed, it was a common rhetorical practice to do so in “histories.”

This idea is also lent credibility by Giraldus’s inclusion in his prophetic history of some predictions about the subjugation of Ireland supposedly made by the Irish saints Columkille and Moling. Every Merlinian prophecy about Ireland is “backed” with one of these, in fact. Sean O’Curry reports, however, that, after a lifetime of pouring over manuscripts relating to Ireland, he never found a single one that contained any prophecies made by an Irish saint indicating any such event. In point of fact, two of the three prophecies attributed by Giraldus to Moling (24.11-13, 26.15-18) actually appear in the “Prophecy of the Eagle.” If Giraldus could invent or adapt saintly prophecies to support his “good cause,” one which the Welsh troupes adopted as their “Crusade,” then he would hardly balk at inventing and interpreting bardic ones.

So the conclusions of the Merlinian aspects in Giraldus’s *Expugnatio* are these: first, that Merlin’s literary life grew out of a traditional life that preceded it among the Welsh; second, that Merlin was held among them to be an *awenddyon*, a seer, and prophet, rather than a magician allied with Satan and that the perception of him as evil was probably a Norman political invention and one which was not necessarily adopted by unbiased contemporary or subsequent purveyors of the legend; third, that Giraldus wished to restore Merlin’s “rightful” reputation and use it to serve his cause of Welsh ecclesiastical and eventually political independence; fourth, that he attempted to do that in his books about Wales and Ireland, and especially in the *Expugnatio*, which he himself called throughout his life the *Prophetic History of Ireland*.

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NOTES

¹Giraldus Cambrensis reports that, on passing by St. David's Church in Wales, Henry was accosted by a woman with a complaint against the resident bishop. When Henry did not satisfy her immediately, she became hysterical and began shouting in Welsh, "Avenge us this day, Lechlaver; take vengeance upon this man for our race and kindred." As Giraldus explains, she alluded to a "fictitious 'vulgar' untrue prophecy of Merlin's which says that the king of England, the conquerer of Ireland, will be wounded by a man with a red hand [a probable reference to the Irish Ui Neills] and, as he returns from Ireland to England through Meneviam [St. David's parish], he will die over Lechlaver" (Scott, 106). Upon learning that Lechlaver was a "magical" stone that lay across a stream just north of the church, Henry found it and, after a moment's thought, strode across it, turning with the indignant challenge, "Who will have faith anymore in Merlin the liar?"

The low opinion that Henry wanted his Welsh audience to have about Merlin is apparent here, as is the attitude of the author of the Medieval Hiberno English translation in MS Trinity College Dublin 592, when he adds (from the same story in the *Itinerary Through Wales*), "a man stode *per* besyde and herd, and wold, hys thankes, saue e prophetes sawe, answard the kynge and seyde, 'thou art nat that kynge that shal Irland conquer; ne Merlyn ne speketh nat of the'" (ch. xxix). The translator also did not choose to relay the passage quoted earlier stating that this particular prophecy was not true. One would not call this attempt by the English king to discredit the bard of Wales a total success.

²During Giraldus's time, Wales was in a state of semi-independence, administered by its three princes (of North Wales, South Wales, and Powys) with the consent of the English king. Henry II held hostages of the Welsh princes, and relations were not always amicable. After one rebellion, Henry put out the eyes of two sons of Owain Gwynedd and one son of Rhys ap Gruffydd, Giraldus's cousin several times removed. The last wholly independent prince of Wales was Rhys ap Tewdwr, Giraldus' great-grandfather. The last Welsh prince of Wales was Llewellyn ap Gruffydd. The Edwardian conquest in 1276 ended his rule.

³My thanks to Jed Allen O'Connor for this apt term.

⁴The Latin in the "standard" version has, "Uiuait anima mea et uiuit anima tua, domine mi rex, quia neminem agnoui qui illum in me generauit. Unum autem scio quod, cum essem inter consocias meas in

thalamis nostris, apparebat mihi quidam in specie pulcerrimi iuuenis et sepiissime amplectens me strictis brachiis deosculabatur. Et cum aliquantulum mecum moram fecisset, subito euanescebat ita ut nichil ex eo uiderem. Multotiens quoque alloquebatur, dum secreto sederem, nec usquam comparebat. Cunque me in hunc modum frequentasset, coiuit mecum in specie hominis sepius atque grauidam in aluo deseruit. Sciat prudentia tua, domine mi, quod aliter uirum non agnoui qui iuuenem istum genuerit” (Wright I: 72) In the poetic (Bretonic) version: “Uiure caste / Uirginibus sociata sacris a uirgine cepi. / Interea thalamis clausis portisque seratis / Quidam sub specie iuuenis, pulcherrimus ore, / In cunctis placidus, coram me stare solebat / Et repetita michi dare basia, deinde iocose / Luctari mecum; cuius michi lucta placebat. / Sed gratiam passe uiolate non uiolatam. / Inde recedebat tenues dilapsus in auras, More reuersurus solito, sed tardus amanti. / Aut hec causa mei partus fuit aut sine causa / Hunc pepererit puerum: meus est, ignoro parentem” (Wright V: 140-42). Another version reads: “Uiuit anima tua, rex, et uiuit anima mea quia neminem agnoui qui illum in me generauerit. Unum autem scio quia, cum essem in thalamo parentum puella, apparuit michi quidam in specie formosa iuuenis, ut uidebatur, et amplectens me strictis brachiis sepiissime deosculabatur et statim euanescebat ita ut indicium hominis non appareret; loquebatur aliquando non comparens. Cunque in hunc modum me diu frequentasset, tandem in specie humana miscuit se michi et grauidam dereliquit. Sciat ergo prudentia tua me aliter uirum non cognouisse” (Wright II: 99).

⁵One of the most interesting theories about Merlin’s family tree is put forward by Mary Stewart in the first book of her Merlin Trilogy, *The Crystal Cave*. She believes that Geoffrey suggests by association that Merlin’s secret father might have been this very Ambrosius. Of course this fictional treatment cannot be equated with scholarship, but in the absence of any “proof,” the logic of such a possibility seems as worthy of consideration as anything else, at least as explanation of Merlin’s literary lineage. The explanation works nicely. Such paternity would give the princess reason to be vague about how she came to be pregnant: Vortigern had cause to fear Ambrosius and his issue, as is later made evident. One also presumes that she would not have been the first to hint at supernatural paternity for a child born out of wedlock.

This interpretation of the story would also give Merlin convenient and believable access to Arthur. Arthur’s intimates at court would honor the familial tie and respect Merlin as *awenddyon*, and his enemies

would be intimidated by the supposed demonic connection.

Before one becomes too rigid in discounting such poetic license, one should remember that Geoffrey has much in common with the people we classify today as historical novelists. He undoubtedly researched his work, but his assimilation of this story alone proves that he had no compunction about adapting from his source material.

⁶The witch-hunters had their own "bible" called *The Hammer for Witches (Malleus Maleficarum)*, written by the two Dominican scholars Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger with the backing of Pope Innocent VIII and published in 1486, one year after *Le Morte Darthur*. It was edited in 1928 by Montague Summers. In it, interestingly, there is a long disputation refuting wholly the possibility of the impregnation of human beings by various kinds of demonic beings (21-28).

⁷The *HKB* was dedicated in its entirety to Robert earl of Gloucester, the natural son of Henry I, and also to Waleran son of Robert de Beaumont. The *Prophetia* was probably done first and circulated separately, says Wright (I.xi).

⁸Ambivalence is a well-known ploy of "prophets," as well, of course. In Biblical times, the penalty for "false prophecy" was death, a good reason to veil what one said unless one was absolutely(!) sure of its accuracy. In classical and medieval times, "prophecy" was shrouded in complex symbolism or incoherence or else artificially constructed after the fact. The Sibylline "prophecies" are typical.

⁹This medieval picture of Merlin as "saint" is further illustrated by an illumination in a fourteenth century English commentary on his prophecies. In this illumination, which appears on the frontispiece of the published edition by Caroline Eckhardt of *The Prophecies of Merlin: A Fourteenth Century Commentary*, Merlin appears tonsured and in priestly garb.

¹⁰Geoffrey seems to have "anglicized" the names for his readers/listeners.

¹¹To illustrate the fact that the demon-spawn theory was not the only one adopted by later authors of Arthurian legend, it is only necessary to look at the thirteenth century French romance, the *Didot Perceval ou la Quête du Saint Graal*. In it, Merlin speaks to Perceval and Blaise, "son maistre," of his retirement. He explains that he has been commanded by God to withdraw from dealings with the world and prophesy from his "esplumoir" until the end of the world (278-79). "Esplumoir" is a word unique to this romance which John Matthews defines as a "moulting cage" and identifies it with the "Bird's Nest" of

Jewish tradition which is an intermittent retreat of the prophet Elijah. In fact, the importance of Merlin as a prophetic figure in the *Perceval*, in which he often appears as a guide and goad to the achievement of the holy quest, has led Matthews to place him in the equivalent position to Old Testament prophets like Elijah and Enoch. In the *Four Ancient Books*, Taliessin, who there-in represents himself as Myrddin's master, says also, "I was instructor to Elijah and Enoch," who, in Celtic tradition, await Judgement Day on a mysterious island, as Merlin is supposed to reside on Bardsey or Insula Sanctorum off the coast of Wales in the Irish Sea. Matthews (122) calls Elijah, Enoch, and Merlin "hidden or inner kings, beings who have responsibility for a particular aspect of tradition or teaching and who continue to administer this even after they have withdrawn from active participation in the events of the world, although they are not actually dead. . . . They are all mysterious, shadowy beings, who appear at a time of crucial import, and who seem to have neither an orthodox beginning nor end to their lives."

This bird association, suggested also by the bard's Anglo-French name, is inadvertently supported by Sutton and Vissar-Fuchs in their essay on the origins of the Dark Dragon of the "Prophecy of the Eagle" in which they explain why they believe Merlin is the Eagle. They draw a parallel between Merlin and the Biblical Nebuchadnezzar who had a prophetic dream, went mad, and was driven out of his kingdom, whereupon his hair "was grown like eagles feathers and his nails like bird's claws" (5).

Another most interesting theory is that of Nicholai Tolstoy, who casts Merlin as an only slightly different kind of prophet, an early tribal shaman. He suggests that the "esplumoir" is a feathered coat and draws the parallel between Merlin and the Irish literary and traditional hero Suibne Geilt who also goes mad after a battle and, under the curse of a priest, takes the form of a "bird-soul in travail" until he is rescued by St. Columba or Columkille. "As a prophet and avatar of the High God, Merlin was a link between the divine and the human, and ultimately a guide on the road to the Otherworld," says Tolstoy (161). Interestingly, this modern scholar relies heavily on Giraldus's description of the soothsayers of Wales, the *awenddyon*, whose prophetic ability was clearly accepted by Giraldus. Tolstoy also makes the probable suggestion that most of the old Welsh poetry is actually history presented as prophecy, a view shared by Margaret Griffiths in her conclusive *Early Vaticinations in Welsh*. Giraldus himself testifies that it was common practice for poets to "add many prophecies of their own to the genuine

ones" (Rolls 21.5.401).

There was a pervasive interest in prophets and prophecy in Giraldus's time, probably centering on the availability in Latin of the prophecies of the Oracle of Baalbek or the Tiburtine Sibyl. The prophecies of the Tiburtine Sibyl seem to have been the model for much of the predictive material in the tenth-twelfth centuries. Following the example of the fourteenth century commentator, R. J. Stewart makes a serious attempt to interpret Merlin's *HKB* prophecies in *The Prophetic Vision of Merlin*, although most modern critics take a more skeptical view. Some of the prophecies are easy to trace to historical events or people. There is, for instance, a long poem in the (late) Red Book of Hergest detailing the regnum of Wales, including the Plantagenets (462-78). There are other prophecies veiled in lost or confused totemic symbolism and some which are mystical and apocalyptic, and conveniently impossible to interpret with certainty. There is no doubt that Giraldus Cambrensis realized the ambivalent character of the Sibylline and Merlinian prophecies, for he subtitled the *Expugnatio* "A Prophetic History."

¹²I have considered and rejected the possibility that Giraldus abandoned the project because the manuscript was simply no longer in his possession. Before one of his missions to Rome, he left his books (he thought for safe-keeping) in exchange for a pittance with the monks at Strata Florida in Wales. When he returned for them years later, he was informed to his shock that in fact he had *sold* them to the monks who had no intention of returning them (Rolls 21.4.154, 161). His political fortunes were so low at the time, both in and outside of the Church, that he made no effort to recover them. Besides that, Giraldus was a fervently idealistic cleric, and such people are not to place high value on material possessions, although he could not help himself from feeling their loss acutely. If Giraldus had abandoned his Merlinian project because of this episode, however, I can see no reason for him to have invented his elaborate political excuse. He could easily have told the truth and even turned it to his advantage by launching into a treatise on the vanity of material possessions.

Giraldus certainly had his own viewpoint on things, and sometimes he reported hearsay as if it were fact, not unlike his contemporaries. He also felt free to participate in rhetorical conventions and take generous poetic license whenever it served his idea of the greater good, also a common practice among the educated men of his day. But only a pathological liar lies for no reason.

¹³For a discussion of their assessment of Giraldus's motives, see Scott and Martin's introductory material, pp. lxi-lxviii. With all due respect to their otherwise extremely impressive work (of which their comments on this Merlinian question are brief and obviously secondary), Giraldus simply and plainly states why he abandoned the project, and there is no logical reason for circumspection without having first exhausted the parameters of that statement.

¹⁴Giraldus's ambition to get a Welshman (preferably himself) appointed as bishop of St. David's parish at Menevium on the western tip of Wales was lifelong. He was elected twice by the brotherhood at St. David's to the post but was turned down both times by the Crown because of his Welsh royal blood and because he made no secret of his dream to raise the diocese of St. David's to archepiscopal status equivalent to Canterbury's in England. This ambition sounds very self-serving, but no perceptive reader could make that accusation against Giraldus. The picture is of a man who throws his own comfort, fortune, and reputation to the winds in pursuit of (in his own eyes) a holy and valiant mission to raise the Welsh Church above the abuse of Canterbury. In the name of that mission, he refused significant offers of advancement both in Wales and in Ireland, made several rigorous trips to Rome, endured abuse, accusations, discomfort, threats against his personal and professional safety, and arrest. The *Expugnatio* was written in 1189, between his first rejection by Henry II in 1176 and the death of Bishop Peter de Leia in 1198. Giraldus and his supporters kept the See of St. David's vacant until 1203 in their all-out war of words and influence with the Archbishop of Canterbury and former chief justiciar of England, Hubert Walter, a war which only ended when the clerics of St. David's were frightened out of supporting Giraldus and rumors began to circulate that consequences of his actions were about to be visited on his family.

Giraldus writes at great length on this battle. It is the main subject of *De Iure et Statu Menevensis* (Rolls 21.3). Some of his correspondence can be found in *De Rebus a Se Gestis* (Rolls 21.1). His hostility against his enemies and some of the prophecies he claims are in *Invectioibus* (Rolls 21.1 & 3). He mentioned some aspect of the dispute in nearly everything he wrote after it took place. The reader is referred to my account or any number of other accounts of the battle. It was such an important event in his life that some mention can be found of it in nearly every writing on him.

¹⁵My emphasis. There has been critical speculation that this epithet was a tribute to Bernard Silvester whose "Cosmographia" Giraldus

could have read as a student in Paris. That work is a poetical treatment of the creation of the world. Giraldus wrote a similar poetical treatment in his youth. Bernard does not seem to have been much of an influence, however, if Giraldus read him at all. Giraldus quotes only one passage from Bernard in all of his writings, and Bartlett believes that quotation could have come to him by way of another philosopher Nequam, especially since it was not added until around 1200 (128). More likely, the original motive for including the epithet was that it was being used against Giraldus by his English enemies, an allusion to his Welsh connections, birthplace, and (perhaps) temperament. By adopting it himself as a positive association (with Merlin and maybe even with a contemporary established philosopher as well), he partially disarmed his detractors. He also apparently signed parts of his *De Invectiones* with the same epithet (Rolls 21.3.5).

The apparent allusion to Merlin Silvester the mage is made even more credible by a bit of papal history (and legend). Silvester II, who lived from 945-1003 and whose original name was Gerbert of Aurillac, also fought a great battle for possession of his chosen see, Rheims. When he assumed the Silvestrian epithet, Giraldus could probably only imagine what striking parallels his own battle for St. David's would take to Gerbert's battle for Rheims. Unlike Giraldus, however, Gerbert eventually abandoned his quest to accept the See of Ravenna and then of Rome. A man of fiery temperament and considerable scholarship, Gerbert became Pope just before the turn of the millenium. The legend of the "Pontifex Magicus" Silvester originated in a schismatic tract against Pope Gregory VII (1073-85) and was developed broadly by William of Malmesbury in his *Gesta Regum Anglorum* (1125). In that work, Gerbert Silvester is said to have studied the *ars magica* under a Saracen in Spain and to have possessed a bronze head with oracular powers.

¹⁶Even Henry was paranoid. He had Robert FitzStephen brought before him in chains in *Expugnatio*.

APPENDIX I

Below is all the prophetic material which Giraldus credits in *Expugnatio Hibernica*. If the prophecy appears in T (Trinity College Dublin 592, entitled *The English Conquest of Ireland*), it is referenced by line number in my version of that text available from UMI.

3.12-13 Merlin Silvester: "A knyght wyth party armes shall formyst

brek þe clos of Ireland." In modern English this would read, "A knight with party arms [i.e. a coat of arms divided into quarters showing the same two designs diagonally] shall be the first to invade Ireland." The origin of this prophecy is untraceable. Giraldus says it applies to Robert Stevenson, his kinsman, who helped to lead the first invasion of Ireland.

14.9-11 Merlin Silvester: "þe brond come to-fore þe borned fyr, and rygh as the spark maked the brond come, also þe brond shal make þe fyr come aftyr." In modern English this would read, "The torch shall come before the fire it engendered, and just as the spark lit the torch so shall the torch light the fire." This prophecy is untraceable. Giraldus applies it to Henry II and Prince John.

14.12-15 Saint Moling: "A mych man shall erne to-fore and þe most heeddes of Desmond and ek of Leynestre he shal defouly and wyth streynth he shall noblych the wey opne to the wepned." This prophecy is untraceable. Giraldus says it applies to Richard Gilbertson, called Strongbow.

18.75-82 Merlin Silvester: "A newe martyr shal aryse wyth newe myracles that yn the worldes endyng yn the west of þe world by special virtue mannys lymmes out idraw and out ycorue ayayn shald make come. Sorow shal turne yn-to yoye whan þe sonnes shal sle þe fadyr yn hys modyr wombe. Prynces and hey menn shal come out of þe este yn-to the weste and lout ham to þe newe martyres fot-stappes." Giraldus applies this prophecy to St. Thomas Becket, whom he greatly admired. Most of this prophecy originates in the "Prophecy of the Eagle."

24.9-10 Merlin Silvester: "Out of þe este shal come a fyr bernynge and shal Irlond al about for-swely." In modern English this would read, "Out of the East shall come a burning fire and it shall burn all around Ireland." This prophecy is from "Prophecy of the Eagle."

24.11-13 Saint Moling: "Out of þe eeste shal come a stronge thondred and shal smyte yn-to þe weste and al the streynth of Ormond adouz brynge." In modern English: "Out of the East shall come a strong thunder and it shall smite into the West and bring all the strength of Ormond [a territory in Ireland]." This prophecy is attributed to Merlin in "Prophecy of the Eagle."

26.15-18 Saint Moling: "To-for hym shall foot falle þe prynces and trogh boxom fastines the lyme of pees shal vnderfonge." The import of this in the Latin is that the princes will fall down at his feet and win his support, pretending love of peace. This prophecy is attributed to Merlin in "Prophecy of the Eagle."

26.18-23 Merlin Silvester (quoting Ambrosius in last sentence): "Tho is lyght the foules of the iland shollen togedder fle and the most of ham with har wenges ibrant shollen ouer-throwen yn thraldome. The fyf deles shollen be broght yn-to on, and the [syxte shal] ouercome the strongest places of Irland." In modern English: "To his light the fowls of the island shall fly together and most of them with their wings aflame shall fall before him and be made his slaves. The five portions shall be brought into one, and the sixth shall overcome the strongest places in Ireland."

29.27-31 Merlin Silvester: "The kyng of England that shal wyn Irland shal be iwoundet yn Irland of a man wyth a rede hond, and, as he cometh ayeyne by South Wales, he shal deye up-on Lehlauar." Giraldus himself says that this prophecy cannot be referenced. It seems to have been part of the native Welsh oral tradition. In modern English: "The king of England that shall conquer Ireland shall be wounded in Ireland by a man with a red hand and, as he comes back through South Wales, will die on the stone Lehlaver."

35.37-45 Merlin Silvester: "The sonnes shullen a gylte ayeyn þe fadyr for hys gyltes, and the rather gylte shal be encheson of þe gyltes at aftyr shullen comen. The sonnes shullen aryse vpon þe fadyr and, for to awreke hys felonye ayeyne þe wombe, the tharmes shal swer ham togydder. In the man of blode, the blode shale aryse and wanhoply shal hys pynsyng be, tyl that Scotland þe penaunce of hys pylgrymage be-wepe." This prophecy is in "Prophecy of the Eagle" and was applied by Giraldus to the rebellion of Henry II's sons against their father.

46.11-12 Merlin Silvester: "A whyt knyght syttyng on a whyt hors, beryng fowles yn hys sheld, shal formest assayll Vlnestre." This prophecy is untraceable and was applied by Giraldus to John de Courcy, who showed three eagles in his coat of arms. John de Courcy was reported by Giraldus to have carried a book of Merlinian prophecies with him on his campaigns in Ireland, an unusual decision considering the value of books at that time. In modern English: "A white knight sitting

on a white horse and bearing fowls on his shield shall be the first to attack Ulster.”

There are a few prophecies omitted from T because the scribe of T does not include the portion of *Expugnatio* in which they appear:

Merlin Ambrosius: “His beginning will give way to his unruly passions, and his end will fly aloft to heaven” (Scott 209). This prophecy can be found in *HKB*.

Merlin Ambrosius: “The tongues of the bulls shall be cut out” (Scott 217). This prophecy can be found in *HKB*.

Merlin Silvester: “The sheep will rise against their shepherd and having driven their pastor far from the fold will be heard bleating for his guiding hand” (Scott 217). This prophecy is at present untraceable.

Merlin Silvester: “The fire will beget a spark for fear of which all the islanders will tremble. . . He will appear more formidable in his absence than when present and his second expedition will turn out better than the first” (Scott 229). This prophecy appears also in the “Prophecy of the Eagle.”

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