



“Ain’t gonna study war no more”:
Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia
regum Britanniae* and *Vita Merlini*

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ABSTRACT: This article compares the treatment of war and nationalism in two of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s texts, the *Historia regum Britanniae* (ca. 1136) and *Vita Merlini* (ca. 1148–50), arguing that the *Vita Merlini* critiques the earlier text’s problematics of colonial sovereignty. By contrast, the *Vita* explores a politics of the local, the natural, and the geographically and emotionally connective. It renounces the war-producing dynastic rivalries of the *Historia* and instead imagines healing through a local community of friendly exchange and knowledge production. The *Vita*’s critique illuminates the unanswerable ambiguities of the *Historia* and witnesses further to the human and political futilities of its version of British nationalism.

If there is anything that radically distinguishes the imagination of anti-imperialism, it is the primacy of the geographical in it. Imperialism after all is an act of geographical violence through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted, and finally brought under control. For the native, the history of colonial servitudes is inaugurated by the loss of locality to the outsider; its geographical identity must thereafter be searched for and somehow restored.

—EDWARD SAID, *CULTURE AND IMPERIALISM*¹

1. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York, 1994), 77.

This article reads the culture of war in Geoffrey of Monmouth's Latin prose *Historia regum Britanniae* (ca. 1136) by approaching it through Geoffrey's much less famous but equally compelling poem, the *Vita Merlini* (ca. 1148–50), written in elegant Latin hexameters.² In the *Vita* Geoffrey revisits the character of Merlin, who had amazed the *Historia*'s auditors with his ambiguous words (“ambiguitate verborem”),³ relating the darkest moments in British history. By contrast, the *Vita* wrests away Merlin's role as British prophet and historian, setting him instead as an explorer of the fecund British landscape. When three of Merlin's companions-in-arms are killed in a savage border dispute, the prophet goes mad with grief and escapes to the wilderness. The regional landscape that Merlin discovers in the woods of Celedon resolves the military crises with pastoral harmony. Although this natural geography offers no less harsh an environment than the embattled court culture that Merlin abandons, its cycles offer both respite and redemption. This alternate geography transcends the culture of aristocratic warfare and national epic.⁴ It also critiques the British, Anglo-Saxon, and Norman colonialisms that organize Geoffrey's long historical narration.⁵ Finally, it connects with other

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2. Latin text and English translations quoted from the *Historia* are from Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain: An Edition and Translation of De gestis Britonnum [Historia regum Britanniae]*, ed. Michael D. Reeve, trans. Neil Wright (Woodbridge, 2007) (hereafter cited as “*Historia*, book.line, ed. Reeve and Wright, page numbers”). For the Latin text of the *Vita Merlini*, I cite from Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Life of Merlin. Vita Merlini*, ed. and trans. Basil Clarke (Cardiff, 1973) (hereafter cited as “*Vita*”). English translations of the *Vita* are drawn from Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, ed. and trans. Michael A. Faletra (New York, 2008), 241–75. For both texts, some translations, where indicated, are my own. For other studies of the *Vita*, see Stephen Knight, *Merlin: Knowledge and Power through the Ages* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2009); Basil Clarke, “Introduction,” in his edition of the *Life of Merlin*, vii–viii, 1–50; and Michael J. Curley, *Geoffrey of Monmouth* (New York, 1994).

3. *Historia*, 8.1, ed. Reeve and Wright, 160–61.

4. Compare Francis Ingeldew, “The Book of Troy and the Genealogical Construction of History: The Case of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae*,” *Speculum* 69 (1994): 665–704; Kellie Robertson, “Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Translation of Insular Historiography,” *Arthuriana* 8 (1998): 42–57; Valerie I. J. Flint, “The *Historia regum Britanniae* of Geoffrey of Monmouth: Parody and Its Purpose. A Suggestion,” *Speculum* 54 (1979): 447–68; C. N. L. Brooke, “Geoffrey of Monmouth as a Historian,” in C. N. L. Brooke, D. E. Luscombe, G. H. Martin, and Dorothy Owen, eds., *Church and Government in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, U.K., 1976), 77–91; Lee Patterson, “The Romance of History and the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*,” in his *Negotiating the Past* (Madison, Wisc., 1987), 197–230; Carol A. N. Martin, “Hoel-Hearted Loyalty and the Ironization of Arthur in Geoffrey's *Historia regum Britanniae*,” *Arthuriana* 11 (2001): 21–48; and Patricia Clare Ingham, *Sovereign Fantasies: Arthurian Romance and the Making of Britain* (Philadelphia, 2001), 31–40.

5. Michelle R. Warren, “Postcolonial Perspectives through Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae*,” *Arthuriana* 8 (1998): 115–34; and Michelle R. Warren, *History on the Edge: Excalibur and the Borders of Britain, 1100–1300* (Minneapolis, 2000), 25–59.

islands and landscapes similarly bound together by overarching natural law and fecundity, thereby escaping the agonies of particular empires.

In reading the *Vita* in this way, I argue that Geoffrey explores an alternative to the impasse reached by the culture of aristocratic war in the *Historia*. A fellowship gradually coalesces around Merlin in the Celedon woods, as he is joined by the poet Taliesin, another madman, and his sister who eventually inherits his prophetic gift. By altering the field of study from the diachronic agonies of violent foundational history to the synchronic diversities of the natural world, Geoffrey allows Merlin to doff the cap of prophet and conduce to a more intimate world of friendly conversation and natural observation.⁶ Ultimately, Geoffrey forgoes in the *Vita* the homosocialities that drive the *Historia*'s masculine rivalries, exploring instead more reciprocal alliances based on knowledge of the natural world.

Merlin and the Abyss of History

Merlin is Geoffrey's own concoction, drawn from pseudo-Nennius's character of Ambrosius and from early Welsh traditions surrounding two different Myrddins, which I discuss further below.⁷ Merlin enters Geoffrey's *Historia* at its midpoint as a possible solution to the quandary of Vortigern's collapsing fortress, in an episode drawn from pseudo-Nennius that encapsulates the British monarchy's continual self-destruction by internal rivalries. Just as sovereignty in the *Historia* is driven by each ruler's individual ambitions, not by the long-term health of the nation, Vortigern's fortress is incapable of standing longer than a single day. When the king consults his magicians, they tell "him to seek out a young man who had no father, and, when found, to kill him and pour his blood over the cement and stones; this, they claimed would make the foundations sound."⁸ Merlin is apparently this youth without a father, and, according to Vortigern's incompetent prophets, his blood will stabilize the fortress's foundation. This solution tries to resolve the *Historia*'s violent dialectic of family struggle by simply removing family from the equation. But Geoffrey's text makes

6. Kimberly Bell, "Merlin as Historian in *Historia regum Britanniae*," *Arthuriana* 10 (2000): 14–26.

7. D. R. Howlett, "The Literary Context of Geoffrey of Monmouth: An Essay on the Fabrication of Sources," *Arthuriana* 5 (1995): 25–69.

8. "dixerunt ut iuuenem sine patre quaereret quaesitumque interficeret ut sanguine ipsius caementum et lapides aspergerentur; id enim prodesse asserebant ut fundamentum constaret" (*Historia*, 6.507–9, ed. Reeve and Wright, 136–37).

Merlin more uncanny than merely a fatherless being. Merlin is the hybrid of a spirit (perhaps an incubus, a supernatural figure of irresistible sexual desire) and a royal nun (a figure of renunciation whose resistance recalls the war bride Innogin and the proud Armorican virgins, as well as the fierce virgin goddess Diana who inspires Britain's foundation).⁹ As such a hybrid, Merlin does not evade the conflicts of masculine desire and resistance that destabilize foundation in Geoffrey's text; rather he intensifies them, playing them out in a metahistorical key.

Vortigern accepts Merlin's authority as a native informant and listens to his diagnosis of the building's foundations: it turns out that the tower sits on a pool of water where two dragons, one white and one red, sleep inside two hollow stones.¹⁰ Although the fortress is built on a pool whose waters render the fortress unstable—a pragmatic engineering assessment of the problem—Merlin penetrates to the figural heart of the problem: two dragons, asleep in the stones, who make war when released. The stones are a significant addition; in pseudo-Nennius they are urns. Stone renders the dragons elemental and chthonic, naturalizing and mythologizing the forces of human conflict between the Britons and the Saxons they represent. Additionally, the dragons are bound in stone so they can break forth all the more fiercely. The very violence of their struggle, driven by fury at the implacable constraint, renders the problem of war and desire in the text unsolvable. It can only play itself out, again and again and again. And that repetition becomes, in a twisted way, its own fierce gratification. While acknowledging the human cost of British foundational violence, Merlin's literary meditation on the larger dialectics of British history renders the violence magnificent, monstrous, even pleasurable. Distracted by its phantasmatic variety, we forget that Merlin speaks it only after he bursts into tears (“in fletum erumpens”).¹¹ Like the stunned auditors at the side of Merlin's pool, we watch as Geoffrey pulls back the curtain of historiographical realism, permitting us to glance at the strange figures whose violent desires make up the historical unconscious.

The prophecies of Merlin that follow this scene, formalized as the *Prophetiae* and circulating separately in many manuscripts, are the dark center of Geoffrey's *Historia*, a rampage of animals, humans, monsters, landscapes, and marvels that pertain only elliptically to the rest of Geoffrey's text.

9. Knight, *Merlin*, 25.

10. *Historia*, 6.590–91, 567–70, 573–74, ed. Reeve and Wright, 158–61. For Geoffrey's *Prophetiae*, see Reeve and Wright, 144–59.

11. *Prophetiae*, line 32, in *Historia*, ed. Reeve and Wright, 144–45.

By no accident are they conjured at the crumbling foot of Vortigern's tower; it is because the quandary of sovereign foundation is unsolvable that the prophecies are needed. They refigure the truth that Vortigern, like Brutus—and even like Arthur—cannot shape a lasting sovereignty. The prophecies speak the truth of the desperate monarch's imminent death, but they do it in a way that is distractingly metaphorical. Further, in the absence of a key, they pour forth a poetry of pure gesture, and most of the gestures are violent or desolate, and ultimately unheeding of the lives they refuse to illuminate. Finally, Merlin's prophecies surge towards apocalypse. At the end, the elements that compose the Ptolemaic cosmos—the fire of the stars, the air of the heavens, the water on the earth, and the dust of the earth—themselves succumb to wild and vivid war.¹² Here, the *Prophetiae's* displacement from history allows us to take pleasure in history's grimmest eventualities.

By making the cosmic movements of history pleasurable (and Geoffrey's dedication of the prophecies to Bishop Alexander glows with self-congratulation), Geoffrey effectively transforms the problem into the solution.¹³ As romanticist Alan Liu explains, apocalypticism is at once an escape from and an immersion in history: "That such figuration denies history is indisputable. But surely such denial is also the strongest kind of engagement with history."¹⁴ In a similar way, Geoffrey places the *Prophetiae* at the heart of his *Historia* because their "fantastic figurations" alchemize history into mystery and thereby render it not only livable but fascinating to audiences eager to decode its wild style.¹⁵ In the prophecies Geoffrey replaces epic foundations and dynastic struggles (that correspond to events right up to the eve of the civil war between Stephen and Matilda) with a pantheistic bedlam of warring dragons, apple-bearing hedgehogs, and shouting forests, because the fantasies of prophetic figuration intensify interpretive play, even as they communicate, in the energy of their escape, the unendurability of what they displace.

In sum, the character of Merlin at the center of Geoffrey's *Historia* both meditates grimly on the *Historia's* textual dynamics and manages to distill pleasure from them.¹⁶ Merlin is Geoffrey's acknowledgment that there is no solution to the problem of human transience. But Merlin allows Geoffrey to redramatize the problem in a narrative vein that distances it from what

12. *Prophetiae*, lines 302–4, in *Historia*, ed. Reeve and Wright, 158–59.

13. Ingham, *Sovereign Fantasies*, 34–35.

14. Alan Liu, *Wordsworth, the Sense of History* (Stanford, 1989), 32–40.

15. Liu, *Wordsworth*, xx.

16. Ingham, *Sovereign Fantasies*, 31–40.

is tragic and pathetic. He leads us away from monarchical *weltschmerz* and into a strange dream in which the movements of empire and war can be defamiliarized and thus translated not just into durability but into intellectual fascination and a pleasure in the strange. No wonder the prophecies became such an obsession to the audiences of Geoffrey's *Historia*: Norman and Welsh, Breton and Cornish writers would generate their own Merlinic prophecy-scapes for the next five centuries.¹⁷

Twelve years later, when Geoffrey returns to his character of Merlin in the *Vita*, he has become disenchanted with such vatic delectation. The *Vita*'s Merlin watches the stars as routinely as a modern businessman would watch the nightly news, and he prophesies compulsively not to kings in portentous circumstances, but to anyone in earshot. Moreover, the *Vita*'s sovereign and regnal portents carry equal weight with intimate and domestic ones. In one star-watching scene, Mars in the sky gives Merlin the story of Conanus's bloody succession, while Venus in the same sky tells him his wife has chosen another husband and that he owes her some wedding presents. In these micro-movements, the *Vita Merlini* takes the problem of war into more personal and localized Welsh and Scottish territories, and finds a very different solution: *Just walk away*.¹⁸

Into the Woods: Three Cures for Madness

The *Vita Merlini* begins by reversing the metaliterary detachment of the *Historia*'s Merlin. The *Vita* brings Merlin very painfully out of the heavens and back to the battlefield to face at close range the depredations of aristocratic warfare. The Merlin we encounter at the beginning is neither the fatherless child nor the strange hybrid of desire and constraint of the *Historia*; instead, he is integrated into the aristocratic culture of North Wales.¹⁹ His sister Ganiada is married to Rhydderch, king of the Cumbrians, and he himself

17. Curley, *Geoffrey of Monmouth*, 48–74; Karen R. Moranski, "The *Prophetiae Merlini*, Animal Symbolism, and the Development of Political Prophecy in Late Medieval England and Scotland," *Arthuriana* 8 (1998): 58–68; and Jean Blacker, "Where Wace Feared to Tread: Latin Commentaries on Merlin's *Prophecies* in the Reign of Henry II," *Arthuriana* 6 (1996): 36–52.

18. Huw Pryce, "British or Welsh? National Identity in Twelfth-Century Wales," *English Historical Review* 116 (2001): 775–801; and E. M. R. Ditmas, "A Reappraisal of Geoffrey of Monmouth's Allusions to Cornwall," *Speculum* 48 (1973): 510–24.

19. Geoffrey was using Welsh sources concerning a later sixth-century Myrddin, Myrddin Wyllt, and mixing in the Scottish legendary figure of Lailoken; he is unconcerned with rendering the two Merlins consistent, though both are meant to be the same figure. The Merlin of the *Vita* recalls prophesying before Vortigern and clearly retains proprietary attitudes towards the prophecies lifted from the *Historia* (Knight, *Merlin*, 31–34).

is a princeling with a wife, Guendoluen. Merlin accompanies the armies of Peredur, prince of North Wales, to a border war with Gwenddolau, king of Scotland. While they are “despoil[ing] the innocent people in all the cities of the land,”²⁰ Merlin’s beloved companions, the three brothers of Peredur, rush into the battle so rashly that they are cut down and killed. While the battle continues to rage around him, Merlin stops fighting and begins to bellow and lament the loss of his companions who, a “mere moment ago . . . were racing through the enemy lines, but now . . . are beating the ground, reddening the soil with [their] lifeblood.”²¹ The last line crystallizes the futility and attrition of battle glory: the dying princes uselessly batter the earth and stain its soil, an expenditure of blood that generates nothing. Merlin’s grief does not abate, even after the battle is won and the princes are buried in state. Instead he incessantly reenacts their deaths, weeping, throwing himself onto the earth, and rolling around on the ground.²² Finally, unable to bear any more, he concretizes his longing to return to the earth by sneaking away to become “a wild man of the woods, [as if] a devotee of the forest itself.”²³

Merlin’s madness in the *Vita* is very specific. He never loses his reason but instead becomes entirely antisocial.²⁴ In his mourning for his slain companions, Merlin loses the desire to connect emotionally with any human being. Rather, he addresses the creatures of the woods as his dear companions, identifying most closely with the most desolate predator among them, the wolf, for whom all that is left is “to fill the breezes with your howling, and stretch out your weary limbs upon the ground.”²⁵ After he is partially healed by the music of a cithera, Merlin returns to society but not to sociality. He longs to return to the forest, and we see him coldly addressing his wife and sister, who try to entice him back to court life and marriage: “Freed from you both, I shall be clear from the stain of love.”²⁶ Love, desire, the capacity to connect to other humans, has become too costly for Merlin the prophet to sustain.

In the narrative space of Merlin’s first healing, Geoffrey depicts a prophet whose insights serve neither kings nor God; instead, they disenchant human

20. “insontes populos devastavisse per urbes” (*Vita*, line 25, ed. Clarke, 52; trans. Faletra, 243).

21. “Qui modo per cuneos discurrebatis in armis / . . . nunc pulsatis humum rubeoque cruore rubetis” (*Vita*, lines 51, 53, ed. Clarke, 54; trans. Faletra, 243).

22. “prostrates humi nunc hac illacque volutat” (*Vita*, line 67, ed. Clarke, 56; trans. Faletra, 244).

23. “Fit silvester homo quasi silvis deditus esset” (*Vita*, line 80, ed. Clarke, 56; trans. Faletra, 244).

24. Penelope Reed Doob, *Nebuchadnezzar’s Children: Conventions of Madness in Middle English Literature* (New Haven, 1974).

25. “complex ululatibus auras / at resupinus humi consumptos deicis artus” (*Vita*, lines 111–12, ed. Clarke, 58; trans. Faletra, 245).

26. “Mundus ab alterutro veneris sine labe manebo” (*Vita*, line 374, ed. Clarke, 70; trans. Faletra, 251).

relations, revealing them to be hypocritical and futile. The story of Merlin's three laughs is a potted history of disillusion. Merlin first laughs at a leaf in his sister's hair, which her husband King Rhydderch tenderly removes. Merlin finds the gesture funny because he knows she acquired the leaf while committing adultery. Merlin next laughs at a ragged porter begging before the city gates because, unknowingly, the beggar sits upon a buried treasure. Merlin's last laugh is the grimmest: when he sees a man buying new shoes (along with some patches for mending them), Merlin laughs at the pointless prudence of a man who will drown that same day. In these anecdotes it is clear that society torments Merlin with its betrayal, foolishness, and need; his sociopathic laughter is the only response he can muster. His subsequent behavior at his ex-wife's second wedding militarizes his sociopathy and gives it a personal sting. Predicting the time of the marriage, he turns up riding a stag and driving a herd of deer before him as a wedding present to Gwendoluen. When the bridegroom glimpses him from a window and laughs in amazement, Merlin plucks the rack of antlers from his stag and hurls them at the bridegroom, slaughtering him. This incident nicely communicates both the particular force of Merlin's affronted masculinity and his broader enmity against ongoing social relations in any form. The *Vita* underscores that when prophecy becomes personal it simultaneously becomes socially corrosive. The only thing that can comfort Merlin is a return to the woods, which at least initially means the absence of social relations.

Yet the forest does not remain a social abyss. The poem's middle and last parts recreate it as the ground for alternative social forms. Thus the *Vita* opens up a new meaning for the British landscape. Whereas the *Historia* presents Britain as a coveted object of desire, a treasure to be possessed, and a living palimpsest on which kings inscribe their petty deeds, the *Vita* exhibits a fascination with Britain's natural world as an exquisite structure and a marvelous creation of God's deputy, Nature, a gentle and enduring earth-scribe. By drawing upon the writings of Virgil's *Georgics* and such twelfth-century neoplatonists as Bernardus Silvestris, Geoffrey makes the natural world an object of study, thereby opening a door that leads both to a critique of normative aristocratic governance and to a vision of a different kind of society.

That Merlin, Taliesin, and their later adherents Maeldin and Ganiada are actually forming an alternate society—a counterculture—is adumbrated when Ganiada constructs a peculiar house, a *domus*, for Merlin in the forest, according to Merlin's specifications.²⁷ As a refuge constructed at the heart of the poem, Merlin's house echoes Vortigern's falling fortress in the

27. *Vita*, lines 555–63, ed. Clarke, 80; trans. Faletra, 255.

Historia, but it could not be more different from it. Merlin commissions a scholar's dream: free food, movement, access to research resources, and a team of secretaries to immortalize every passing insight. But even more important is the idea of a house that is barely a house, with seventy windows and seventy doors. Less a shelter against the natural world than an invitation to connect with it at every step, the house is a different evasion of time than was Vortigern's falling tower. Merlin's visionary house directs its temporal address to the cycles of the seasons and the changes in Merlin's life rather than to teleologies of sovereignty. This house and the forest fellowship it engenders amount to the second cure for Merlin's madness: he suddenly stops lamenting society and lyricizing nature, and instead becomes obsessed with natural science.

This halfway house also situates a new way of configuring social relations, not just for Merlin and his dutiful clerks, but also for his sister who visits; for Taliesin who can discourse with Merlin about natural science just as Merlin can share with him his prophetic and historical expertise; and for Maeldin, who finds healing there. At this stage, Merlin has not yet recovered the capacity for human feeling, which explains his willingness to exploit whatever services his sister and others can put at his disposal. Despite this, Merlin begins to enjoy intellectual conversations with Taliesin. In the course of their talk, the natural world of God's creation begins to displace regnal history and prophecy as an object of study. And where the *Historia's* prophecies disarticulate natural entities, such as hedgehogs, boars, and forests, into wildly juxtaposed figures, the disquisitions on nature in the *Vita* organize the same variety into a cornucopia signifying God's bounty and the harmony of his creation.

The Coming of Taliesin and the Recovery of Natural Geography

Taliesin introduces knowledge of the world in a form that is not associated with either prophetic nationalism or courtly harmony. Specifically, he introduces the idea of a natural cosmos, the investigation of whose parts is another way of discerning God's creative hand. It is through Taliesin's conversations with Merlin that Geoffrey accomplishes his new mythologization of Britain, both as a critique of colonial possessions by the Britons and (proleptically) the Normans, and as an imaginative recovery of the renaturalized British landscape.

Here postcolonial theory and ecocriticism together raise questions that illuminate Geoffrey's strategy. In a recent collection on postcolonial ecologies, Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley ask two central

questions: “How can an author recover land that is already ravaged by the violence of history? How can nature be historicized without obscuring its ontological difference from human time?”²⁸ While postmedieval industrialization, globalism, and climate change are far removed from the historical landscapes of Britain in Geoffrey’s work, both the *Historia* and the *Vita* repeatedly evoke an originally fertile British geography that has been depleted by the relentless practice of war.

The *Vita*’s central and transitional section revisits the *Historia*’s prophecies of Merlin in part to explicate the depredations of successive colonialisms, but also to get beyond the *Historia*’s apocalyptic impasse. In the middle of the *Vita*, Merlin paces through his perforated house, watching the stars and prophesying about war’s madness—both for the colonizing Britons and, eventually, for their colonizing successors, the Normans—in words recognizable from the *Historia*. Geoffrey’s citation of his own previous texts at once clarifies the former prophecies and explicitly underscores the foundering in civic anarchy of not only the British and Saxon but also the Norman colonial projects. The *Vita* describes both British *and* Norman forms of sovereignty as forms of madness. This national madness takes a familiar form, as the *Vita*’s Merlin himself has incarnated it: the corrosion of social bonds through the violence of war.

At the beginning of this prophecy, Merlin describes the British as so crazed by the riches of conquest that they prefer war with their brothers over the peace of Christian charity.²⁹ In the sequence that follows, the prophecies are much clearer than in the *Prophetiae*. They recount first the Anglo-Saxon invasions and the re-paganization of England, next the Augustinian mission and the people’s re-Christianization, and finally the Vikings. At the end of that sequence, the Normans sail across and conquer the isle, instituting a false peace undermined by civil strife and moral laxity. A significantly less laudatory characterization of the Normans than that found in the *Historia*, Geoffrey’s revision of his earlier text here invests the Normans with more ambiguity from the very onset. When they invade the island, they are two-faced, “bearing a face in front of them and a face behind them.”³⁰ The Normans achieve only a brief moment of seigneurie before the same “Erinus” (Fury) that goaded the British infects the Normans as well. This

28. Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley, eds., *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment* (Oxford, 2011). See also Gillian Rudd, *Greenery: Ecological Readings of Late Medieval English Literature* (Manchester, U.K., 2007).

29. *Vita*, lines 580–89, ed. Clarke, 82; trans. Faletta, 255.

30. “vultus ante suos et vultus retro ferentes” (*Vita*, line 655, ed. Clarke, 86; trans. Faletta, 257).

Fury crystallizes and mythologizes the drive toward war and the erosion of all social bonds that follow. It is expressed as a flood of venom flying all about (“circumquaque volans”) to pour out (“diffundere”) its poison.³¹ Here the *Vita* shows unmistakably that the Normans are subject to the same divisive forces and war fury that destroyed the British. They are beholden to an anarchy in which all forms of love are betrayed and even the Church takes up arms. Merlin—still mad and lacking the capacity for social relations—becomes an apt prophet of Norman erosion.

The ecological costs of Norman colonialism surface later, not from Merlin’s mouth but from his prophetic heir’s. At the very end of the *Vita*, Ganieda’s last prophecy explicates the human and ecological aftereffects of Norman aggression: blood saturates the ground and famine stalks the Welsh people and the Scottish cattle. She commands the Normans to leave, for “There is nothing left now worth feeding your greed, for you have gobbled up everything that Mother Nature has long produced here in her marvelous fertility. Christ, aid Your people! Hold the Lions back. Restore the realm’s tranquility and freedom from wars.”³² Here the prophetic figuration, which in the *Prophetiae* flows freely between the human and natural realms, becomes opaque. Where the entire geographical storehouse of Britain has been depleted, we cannot simply read through those cows and calves to the peoples. Whether Welsh or Scottish, human or animal, all suffer together; their shared experience doubles their literal pain, even as it conducts figural meaning. The “Natura creatrix” (creator Nature), who appears at the end of the passage, both feminizes and mythologizes geographical fecundity, connecting the depleted land to the Welsh woman who speaks the prophecy, in a bitter anticolonial protest against the Normans.³³ Thus the passage yokes not only human and nature, but also past and present, as Britain’s colonized past looks forward to its recolonizing future. Ganieda’s last prophecy is the dark side of the *Vita*’s antifoundational dialectic. It paints the picture of an exhausted landscape and ravaged woman each beyond recovery so long as the invaders remain. This prospect sharpens DeLoughrey and Handley’s first question: “How can decolonial recovery happen in an already ravaged landscape?” The very intractability of this problem surfaces in the *Vita*’s obsessive concern with the ravages of war.

31. *Vita*, lines 661–62, ed. Clarke, 86; trans. Faletra, 257.

32. “Non est unde gulam valeatis pascere vestram. / Consumpsistis enim quicquid natura creatrix / fertilitate bona dudum produxit in illa. / Criste, tuo populo fer opem, compesce leones, / da regno placidam bello cessante quietem” (*Vita*, lines 1513–17, ed. Clarke, 134; trans. Faletra, 276).

33. N. Jardine, J. A. Secord, E. C. Spary, eds., *Cultures of Natural History* (Cambridge, U.K., 1996).

Yet this problem is also the goad to the text's counter-imaginings of the British geography as an ecology of peace. Thus DeLoughrey and Handley's first question intersects with their second: "How can nature be historicized without obscuring its ontological difference from human time?" That is, how does the poem resist the overlay of human over nature to recharacterize nature as fundamentally different, strange, and fascinating in its own right? How can nature be reimagined to show its ontological difference from sovereign appropriations, such as the British and Norman regimes, and their historical movements of rise and fall, invasion and domestication, settlement and depletion? This is a question that underlies many of the geographical invocations throughout the *Historia* and *Vita*.

The next section of this article discusses the conversations between Merlin and Taliesin that occupy the *Vita's* last section, where prophecy, human temporality, the vicissitudes of sovereignty, and postcolonial melancholia find counterpoints in discourses on the natural world. In the last part of the *Vita*, decolonialization is enacted not as a political solution (which would reiterate the dialectics of war), but rather as a literary remythification of the land as a marvelous object of knowledge and human inquiry, which simultaneously nourishes its human inhabitants and presents a fascinating range of alternate socialities. We proceed from the *Historia's* inaugural gesture of trafficking in women, with Innogin as the foremother of the British people, to a larger trafficking in a feminized Nature that emerges in the *Vita* as a revitalizing force that transcends national boundaries.³⁴ Thus the *Vita's* discourses on natural science do not simply demonstrate epistemological mastery—another form of colonialism—but rather situate regional boundaries in the context of open-ended global ecologies.

Adumbrating this shift from colonial exploitation to ecological exploration is a new character, drawn like Merlin from Welsh traditions: the bard, scholar, and poet Taliesin. The minute Merlin enters his new house, Merlin craves Taliesin as a companion, and Taliesin's joining of Merlin in the wood, along with Ganiada's, gives their fellowship a cooperative liveliness; they now have a much broader access to the many forms natural science can take. In making Taliesin the interlocutor for this new preoccupation with the woods and the natural world, Geoffrey strikingly diverts one of his Welsh sources, *Ymddiddan Myrddin a Thaliesin* (*The Dialogue of Merlin and Taliesin*), found in the Black Book of Carmarthen (ca. 1250) along with two other sources for Geoffrey's *Vita*, *Yr Afallennau* (*The Apple Trees*) and *Yr Oianau* (*The Greeting*).

34. I am grateful to Elizabeth DeLoughrey for suggesting this idea.

The *Ymddiddan* is thought to have been composed by 1100 and thus predates Geoffrey's *Vita* by at least forty years.³⁵ Its thirty-eight lines stage an account of two battles. The first is a battle probably fought before 547 between the men of Dyfed (in South Wales) and an army led by Maelgwn, probably Maelgwn Gwynedd (of North Wales) (d. ca. 547). The second battle is the Battle of Arfderydd, which the *Annales Cambriae* assigned to the year 573, in what is now Scotland.

In the first twenty-two lines of this Welsh dialogue, Myrddin seems to speak for the side of Dyfed, South Wales, while Taliesin seems to speak for the side of Maelgwn, North Wales.³⁶ Each laments his side's own carnage, naming the individual warriors who have died. The first part of the dialogue is a dialogue in name only: the speakers' perspectives are at cross-purposes, and the war hero to one is the ravager to the other. By contrast, the second part of the dialogue, devoted to the Battle of Arfderydd, abandons any sense of triumphalism or individual heroism, concentrating instead on litanies of the dead presented in ritual groups of seven. In this part, the competition between the two speakers transforms into a competition for authority. Taliesin has the disadvantage because he has no associations with the Myrddin Wyllt traditions and the Battle of Arfderydd, while Myrddin is front and center because he encompasses the army with his own legendary fate. The litany of the battle's casualties ends with a mad, mass exodus to the wood. Myrddin's last lines perhaps reveal the *Ymddiddan* poet's aim in yoking together these two battles and these two preeminent poet-prophets: "Since I Myrddin am second only to Taliesin, / Let my words be heard as truth."³⁷ By associating two conflated Myrddins from Welsh traditions with the preeminent ancient Welsh bard Taliesin, the *Ymddiddan* poet is able to ascribe authority to the later and less auspicious Myrddin, Myrddin Wyllt. Geoffrey seized on the *Ymddiddan*'s hybrid Myrddin and other traditions associated with Myrddin Wyllt in order to revise his own pseudo-Nennius character, so different in the *Historia*, for the *Vita Merlini*. The thematic echoes are clear between the *Ymddiddan*'s battle lament and the earlier parts of Geoffrey's *Vita* that recount the laments of Merlin, his madness, and his withdrawal to the woods. Geoffrey also echoes

35. A. O. H. Jarman, "The Merlin Legend and the Welsh Tradition of Prophecy," in Rachel Bromwich, A. O. H. Jarman, and Brynley F. Roberts, eds., *The Arthur of the Welsh* (Cardiff, 1991), 117–45, at 120.

36. Jarman, "The Merlin Legend," 120.

37. "Can ys mi myrtin guydi. taliessin / Bithaud. kyffredin vy darogan" (lines 37–38, in *Ymddiddan Myrddin A Thaliesin (O Lyfr du Caerfyrddin)*, ed. A. O. H. Jarman [Cardiff, 1951], 58).

the *Ymddiddan* when he structures the second part of his *Vita* around a series of dialogues between Merlin and Taliesin.

Geoffrey changes his sources, however, in ways that refocus the dialogue from losses of war to profits of knowledge. First, he radically shifts the content of those dialogues from dueling battle lamentations to exchanges of information about prophetic history and the natural world. Second, in contrast to the speakers' antagonism in the *Ymddiddan*, Geoffrey's version of the dialogue shows the speakers cooperating: Merlin craves Taliesin's natural learning, while Taliesin respects Merlin's prophetic gifts. Geoffrey depicts the two enthusiastically recounting the creation of the four natural elements *ex nihilo* and the establishment of celestial and terrestrial regions, and from there detailing the species and properties of seas, fish, birds and their lore, islands, springs, lakes, and rivers. Sometimes these conversations are punctuated by grim prophetic retrospectives, lifted from the *Historia*, on the darkening world beyond the woods. These glimpses of the final spasms of British devolution further reinforce how salutary is the devotion of Merlin and his companions to more regenerative cycles. The natural learning introduced by Taliesin is both old—deriving from such postclassical encyclopedists as Isidore of Seville, Bernardus Silvestris, and the *Liber Floridus* author, which were known to most of Geoffrey's literate audience—and also new—thanks to the influx of new translations from Arabic texts on natural science and astronomy, especially at Oxford, where Geoffrey had spent a great deal of time.³⁸

The progress of Taliesin's first discourse demonstrates how knowledge of the natural world confers power and heals wounds. His taxonomical tour de force describes Air (clouds, winds, stars, celestial bodies, and its three regions as well as their respective inhabitants), Sea (the currents and its three regions), Fish (its species plus their attributes and uses for men), and Islands (beginning with Britain and, after an excursus around the known world, concluding with Avalon).³⁹ Taliesin reveals a source of his knowledge when he unexpectedly inserts the story of Arthur's transportation to Avalon, which he had witnessed as a member of the king's entourage "guided by Barinthus, who knows all the seas and all the stars of heaven."⁴⁰ Once they arrive, Morgen, the

38. Clarke, "Introduction," 6–15.

39. *Vita*, lines 732–940, ed. Clarke, 90–102; trans. Faletra, 259–64.

40. "conducente Barintho, / equora cui fuerant et celi sydera nota" (*Vita*, lines 930–31, ed. Clarke, 102; trans. Faletra, 263–64).

governing sister of Avalon, who is the most beautiful and skilled in healing, assesses Arthur and delivers a good prognosis if he remains with her.⁴¹

Taliesin's first discourse thus begins as an ordering anatomy and rapidly becomes an expandable network of associations. Air leads to Sea leads to Islands, but the islands do not stop at Britain: they continue through the Mediterranean and the South Seas, to the mythological island of natural beauty and healing: Avalon, the earthly paradise, the isle of Apples, feminized, mythologized, and governed by the figure of Morgen. What better destination for the wounded body of Arthur than this mythological site of natural healing? By interpolating this story into Taliesin's earlier reformulation, Geoffrey transforms his earlier investment in Arthur's preservation at Avalon in hopes of future return. Rather than perpetuate the possibility of a restored British sovereignty, the *Vita* now underscores the extreme need for healing that Arthur's injurious pursuit of sovereignty has wrought. It also shows that healing can occur only in Avalon's natural sanctuary.

In subsequent conversations, Merlin and Taliesin fail to develop a judgment about the value of prophecy in the midst of civil strife. Merlin begins by lamenting the anarchy that follows Arthur's departure: the British nobles have decimated the realm with their infighting, thereby opening the door to the final Saxon victory.⁴² Taliesin is appalled and wants to launch an expedition to fetch Arthur back from Avalon immediately, for "if he has healed by now . . . he may drive out the enemies as he used to and restore to the people the peace they once enjoyed."⁴³ Merlin dissuades him, however, saying that the British defeat is God's will for now. Eventually Conan and Cadwallader, not Arthur, will reunite Britain, along with the scattered Welsh, Scots, Cornish, and Armoricans, in order to govern the realm by holy laws ("sacratibus") and direct their war making only to far-off peoples ("remotos").⁴⁴ Dissatisfied, Taliesin immediately returns us from these prophetic victory-scapes to the everyday present, commenting sadly that that no one now living will live to see those days.⁴⁵ Both the myth of Arthur's sovereign return and the hopes for a more cooperative Britain might as well be phantasms, for they will not alleviate the suffering of present people. Taliesin then sympathetically remarks that no one has seen as many civil wars as Merlin has. This remark

41. *Vita*, lines 934–39, ed. Clarke, 102; trans. Faletra, 264.

42. *Vita*, lines 941–52, ed. Clarke, 102; trans. Faletra, 264.

43. "si jam convaluit, solitis ut viribus hostes / arceat et cives antiqua pace reformet" (*Vita*, lines 956–57, ed. Clarke, 102; trans. Faletra, 264).

44. *Vita*, lines 973–74, ed. Clarke, 104; trans. Faletra, 264.

45. *Vita*, line 974, ed. Clarke, 104; trans. Faletra, 265.

provokes from Merlin a lengthy citation from Geoffrey's *Historia*. Beginning with Vortigern, Merlin synthesizes the backstory of Arthur's reign, hastening through the reigns of Uther and Ambrosius and ending up with Arthur's imperial campaigns, his betrayal by Mordred, and the civil war, tyranny, and renewed bloodshed of his reign's aftermath. Merlin's tragic diachrony provides a dialectical counterpoint to the harmonious synchrony of Taliesin's previous disquisition. His reiteration of the *Historia* shows he is still trapped by the disastrous cycles of regnal history. It also shows that political misery resists amelioration by notional structures such as cosmology and prophecy. It is possible, however, to read Merlin's speech as intensifying the need for Taliesin's cosmological alternatives.

Taliesin's second discourse is sparked by the appearance of a spring with curative properties. After the waters cure Merlin, he wants to know more about springs, and Taliesin lists numerous springs and other waters with healing or transformative properties, including the Zema in Africa that beautifies its drinkers' voices, the twin fountains of forgetfulness and memory in Boeotia, the noxious lake that induces an excess of aggression and sexual desire, and the spring of Cyzicus, which extinguishes love and desire. In his extensive list, association and repeated patterns of doubling and opposition endow the liquid world with balance and symmetry. Far-flung parts of the globe speak to each other across regional boundaries. When this fluid and multiply resonant world is compared with *Historia*'s occasional spurts of natural history and signification through landscape, Taliesin's focus on natural harmony is brought into relief. Thus, although Arthur's Scottish expedition in the *Historia* dramatizes Arthur's knowledge of British natural prodigies and marvelous lakes,⁴⁶ it also understands the landscape as a political allegory. For example, peace is maintained in the square lake because the xenophobic fish allow no miscegenation. Recalling Saidian colonial epistemology, Arthur also amasses authority from his knowledge of the wonders of his realm's resistant borderlands. In comparison, Taliesin's descriptions traffic in nature to create world-spanning ecologies, and he frames them not as curiosities bespoke among battle leaders in the intervals between colonial battles, but rather as forays into discourses of twelfth-century natural science, which were recreating the world for Geoffrey's clerical and Oxford audiences.

The third and last discourse on nature in Geoffrey's text, a discourse on birds of flight, is delivered not by Taliesin, but by Merlin himself after his final cure. And unlike Taliesin, Merlin claims that his own knowledge comes

46. *Historia*, 9.176–501, ed. Reeve and Wright, 203–19.

from “living so many days in the wilderness.”⁴⁷ Merlin’s discourse on birds highlights not only their unique and independent ontologies, but also the many shapes of their social organization. For example, cranes fly in formation and reinforce each other’s weaknesses, while the stork fosters its offspring, and its offspring feed it, in turn, in old age. Through Merlin’s litany of birds with their unique social and family habits, the text insists on the polymorphism of natural bonds that link beings together and befit them to their diverse ways of life. Not like human bonds at all, they appear strange and wonderful. And unlike Taliesin, Merlin does not reiterate the utility of birds to humankind but instead investigates each species for its unique natural endowments.

Taken as a whole, the three conversations on nature transition readers from the culture of war and its costs, to an exploration of nature as an ecology of unique and diverse animate societies. In the process, nature is mythologized as the antidote to the culture of war, while Celidon’s regional beauties and bounties become worth more than all the riches and bounty of the world.⁴⁸ The experience of observing nature becomes a devotional practice of discerning the Creator’s hand in his creation, which also becomes a form of healing.

New Spring

Geoffrey explicitly signals this regenerative capacity of Celidon by depicting Merlin’s third and final cure from madness through the waters of a new spring. Merlin has just concluded a litany of regnal prophecies for Taliesin when “the servants rushed in and announced that a new spring had arisen at the foot of the mountains and was pouring forth clean waters which even now were spreading all through the valley and splashing through the meadows as it skipped along.”⁴⁹

These fresh waters penetrate and restore not only the landscape’s hollows (“concava”), but those of Merlin himself: “The moisture of that draught coursed through him and its humors settled within his body. At once he regained his mind and recognized himself. His madness fell away, and the

47. “Sic didici multis silvis habitando diebus” (*Vita*, line 1300, ed. Clarke, 122; trans. Faletra, 271).

48. *Vita*, lines 1280–91, ed. Clarke, 120–22; trans. Faletra, 270–71.

49. “cito venere clientes / et dixere sibi fontem sub montibus illis / erupisse novum laticesque refundere puros, / qui jam manantes longe per concava vallis / girabant saltus reflu cum murmure lapsu” (*Vita*, lines 1136–40, ed. Clarke, 112; trans. Faletra, 268).

feelings that had for so long been dormant within him returned.”⁵⁰ Merlin’s final cure is also the end of his prophetic gift – it is replaced by his capacity to connect with others. This loss of insight is blissful, figured as a neoplatonic return to divine origins. Merlin praises God, the source of all things natural, and, for the first time in the narrative, he reflects on the shape of his own life, admitting that his prophetic gifts denied him the peace of mind he now possesses. As Merlin remembers his uncanny prophetic detachment, his former insights are recharacterized as an epistemological prison: he knew the secrets of all the movements of nature but was constrained by his knowledge, which equated to a constricting law (“*districta lege*”).⁵¹ When he returns to himself, the movements of nature are no longer divided from him. Rather, his consciousness is moved by the same animating spirit that enables his soul to move his body. Suddenly he can feel emotion again, and he expresses that emotion: gratitude to God, both for his cure by the pure spring and also for the continuing bounty of the water itself, which continues to flow.

This new spring deinstitutionalizes baptismal imagery while making the mundane sacred, for it is simply the dark, potentiating earth that generates this miraculous spring. Taliesin explains its powers as a consequence of the natural obstacles the waters overcame to burst forth. The very mundanity of the explanation deserves attention. A transient natural phenomenon becomes regenerative not from tradition, eternity, or its figural association with Christ’s blood or Aaron’s staff, but rather from the mystery of an earthly origin that is fortuitous yet undivided from God’s providence.

This description of the spring holds up a reversing mirror to the pool at the foundations of Vortigern’s tower in the *Historia*. The pool in the *Historia* is called a standing pool (“*stagnum*”),⁵² whose stillness is a thin skin beneath which chthonic rage can erupt at any moment. By contrast, this spring is called a fountain (“*fontum*”),⁵³ and although Taliesin explains it as producing energy from obstruction, that energy bursts forth not destructively in a battle of pent-up dragons, but instead joyously and bountifully.⁵⁴ Merlin’s sanity-restoring natural spring speaks also to that flood of madness that the Fury poured out to incite Britons and Normans to madness (“*rabiem*”) and war in

50. “*utque per internos alvi stomachique meatus / humor iit laticis subsedavitque vaporem / corporis interni, confestim mente recepta / sese cognovit, rabiem quoque perdidit omnem, / et qui torpuerat per longum tempus in illo / sensus item rediit mansitque quod ante manebat, / sanus et incolumis rursus ratione recepta*” (*Vita*, lines 1147–54, ed. Clarke, 114; trans. Faletra, 268).

51. *Vita*, line 1166, ed. Clarke, 114; trans. Faletra, 269.

52. *Historia*, 6.568, 569, 571, 573, 575, ed. Reeve and Wright, 141.

53. *Vita*, line 1137, ed. Clarke, 112; trans. Faletra, 268.

54. I am grateful to Zrinka Stahuljak, Barbara Fuchs, and the WIP group for this suggestion.

Merlin's earlier prophecy.⁵⁵ We have both natural and divine explanations for the cure, and the two are inextricable. The properties of the world become a means of regaining health, connecting with God, and revivifying human community.

Once Merlin realizes this, a new society is born. The members of this society swear to spurn the hypocrisies of court and belligerence of conquest in order to engage instead in conversation, the friendly exchange of knowledge, and investigation of nature. Geoffrey's depiction of this society draws on ideas of monastic withdrawal and penitential renunciation wedded to both classical conceptions of the lyceum and the encyclopedic preoccupations of the medieval university. The last part of the *Vita* depicts this society's expansion, as it attracts other refugees from courtly society: Ganieda (after Rhydderch dies), Taliesin (after Merlin's cure), and another madman, Maeldin, a former hunting companion of Merlin who was driven mad (Adam-like) by a poisoned apple. In this new sylvan order, all members renew vows of worldly renunciation, mutual service, and common property. Driving a final wedge between this solidifying utopian community and aristocratic honor-culture, Taliesin curtly dismisses his noble attendants: "But you, my lords, leave now and defend your cities. It would not be right for you to disturb our tranquility beyond all measure with your chatter."⁵⁶

Yet Geoffrey cannot end the poem without implicating his contemporary readers, whether Welsh, Norman, or Scottish, and driving home his rejection of sovereign interests. He does this unexpectedly by transforming Ganieda into Merlin's prophetic heir at the poem's end.⁵⁷ Up to this point, the text has treated Ganieda relatively roughly. A powerful, adulterous queen, she plays the narrative role of Merlin's chief antagonist, and she is an adversary to be reckoned with. The brother's madness and insight are misogynistically transmuted into the sister's feminine wiles and canny self-interest. Ganieda involves herself in every stage of her brother's evolution, hiring a musician to entice him back to court and overseeing his courtly imprisonment. When Merlin reveals her adultery to Rhydderch, she tricks him into making a prophecy only to cast doubt on his insight. Yet it is also she who

55. *Vita*, line 580, ed. Clarke, 82; trans. Faletra, 255.

56. "Vos set abite, duces, urbes defendere vestras. / Non decet ut nostrum vestro sermone quietem / a modo turbetis" (*Vita*, lines 1461–63, ed. Clarke, 130; trans. Faletra, 274).

57. Fiona Tolhurst, "Negotiating Feminist and Historicist Concerns: Guenevere in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britannia*," *Arthuriana* 3 (1993): 26–44; and Fiona Tolhurst, "The Britons as Hebrews, Romans, and Normans: Geoffrey of Monmouth's British Epic and Reflections of Empress Matilda," *Arthuriana* 8 (1998): 69–87.

builds Merlin his many-apertured house and visits him repeatedly, no matter how hostile his response. In fact, Ganieda is the first of the company to frame her withdrawal into the woods as a devotional renunciation of the world, while retaining a sense of human fellowship.⁵⁸ And at the end of the narrative, she is welcomed into the society of the woods as readily as any other joyous renunciate.

It would seem in keeping with the text's earlier misogyny to seal Ganieda's renunciatory about-face with a penitential distraintment of her voice. Yet something much more startling happens: Ganieda receives the gift of prophesy, becoming Merlin's prophetic heir. Her prophecies proleptically reach beyond the sixth-century epoch of the narrative and into the twelfth-century reader's present. Whereas Merlin's *Prophetiae* make a pleasurable riddle-game of the devastations of British history, Ganieda's prophecies stem from darkness and doubt: "And so it happened that on a certain day, when she was standing in her brother's hall watching the windows gleam in the sun, she spoke out these doubtful words from her doubtful breast."⁵⁹ Ganieda's words are said to be occluded or doubtful, and they certainly would confuse an audience accustomed to reading Geoffrey straightforwardly as an apologist for Norman empire-building. These prophecies, which deal with wars among the Norman kings, including the Anarchy, end with a scathing denunciation of Norman rule: "Leave, Normans, and stop your wanton armies from bearing their weapons through our homeland. . . . Christ, . . . Restore the realm's tranquility and freedom from wars."⁶⁰ Essentially, Ganieda addresses Geoffrey's twelfth-century Norman audience from the perspective of a sixth-century Welsh ruler, effectively telling them: "Normans, go home!"⁶¹ Geoffrey could have diminished the force of Ganieda's prophetic address by undermining her authority; after all, she's known as a scheming adulteress, lacking Merlin's prophetic reputation. However, the narrative ratifies Ganieda's voice by allowing Merlin himself to bless her insight: "Sister, does the spirit, having silenced my tongue and shut my book, wish you to predict the future now? This labor is now given to you. Take joy in it, and speak out

58. *Vita*, lines 693–731, ed. Clarke, 88–90; trans. Faletra, 258–59.

59. "Ergo die quadam cum fratris staret in aula / inspiceretque domus radiantes sole fenestras, / edidit has dubias dubio de pectore voces" (*Vita*, lines 1471–73, ed. Clarke, 132; trans. Faletra, 275).

60. "Iteque Neustrenses, cessate diutius arma / ferre per ingenuum violento milite regnum / . . . / Christe . . . / da regno placidam bello cessante quietem" (*Vita*, lines 1511–12, 1516–17, ed. Clarke, 134; trans. Faletra, 276).

61. James L. Kugel, *Poetry and Prophecy: The Beginnings of a Literary Tradition* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1991), 158.

everything with true devotion. You have my blessing.”⁶² Merlin’s kindness in this passage contrasts to his earlier cruelty and bespeaks the value of the alternate society established through shared devotion, property, wisdom, wonder, and now love between these four friends. The *Vita*’s final scenes underscore the friendship and solicitude that binds human and family relations, brothers and sisters, in contrast to the *Historia*’s obsession with fraternal and paternal conflict.

And as Merlin passes on his voice, blesses Ganieda, and falls silent, Geoffrey takes his own leave of the narration, tagging his own accomplishments and soliciting laurels from the Britons as he affiliates himself to them as a national author making famous their deeds throughout the world:

I have now brought my song to an end. Therefore, Britons, give the laurel wreath to Geoffrey of Monmouth. He is yours indeed, for he has sung of your battles and of your leaders, and he wrote a book that is now called *The Deeds of the Britons* and [their deeds are] famous throughout the world.⁶³

This ending, coming after the scathing denunciations of war that preceded it, takes us firmly out of the textual world and into the sphere of literary self-promotion. Moreover, by subjecting himself to the Britons as their literary servant and voice, Geoffrey effectively returns us to square one, from an eclectic utopia back to the world of war that the *Vita* has rendered trivial and loathsome. With this ending, the author curiously leaves Ganieda in mid-sentence: “she did not fall silent here.”⁶⁴ This non-ending preserves Ganieda’s and Merlin’s last speeches as essentially unanswerable, open-ended invitations to the reader to question the deeds of war so *celebrata* in Geoffrey’s narratives.

The *Historia regum Britanniae* and the *Vita Merlini* are vastly different texts in serious conversation. Acknowledging this conversation broadens our conception of the ambiguous and inventive author-function that we

62. “Tene, soror, voluit res precantare futuras / spiritus osque meum compescuit atque libellum? / Ergo tibi labor iste datur. Leteris in illo / auspiciisque meis devote singular dicas” (*Vita*, 1521–24, ed. Clarke, 134; trans. Faletra, 276).

63. “Duximus ad metam carmen. Vos ergo, Britanni, / laurea sarta date Gaufrido de Monemuta. / Est etenim vester, nam quondam prelia vestra / vestrorumque ducum cecinit scripsitque libellum / quem nunc Gesta vocant Britonum celebrata per orbem” (*Vita*, lines 1525–29, ed. Clarke, 134; trans. Faletra, 276).

64. “Non super hoc tacuit” (*Vita*, line 1518, ed. Clarke, 134; trans. Faletra, 276).

call “Geoffrey of Monmouth.”⁶⁵ While both the *Historia* and the *Vita* offer their readers narrative pleasures that are to be found nowhere else in their time, those pleasures speak to significantly different political and generic investments. One is a history, and the other is a life; and in proceeding from one to the other, Geoffrey moves from the national and political to the personal and intimate, and from aristocratic genres to monastic and devotional ones. It is clear which text was the more beguiling to audiences at large. The *Historia* survives in over two hundred manuscripts spanning the medieval period, and the *Vita* is complete only in one dating from the late thirteenth century, though six more contain fragments. The *Vita*’s penitential and fraternal preoccupations must have appealed to a smaller, ecclesiastical audience. Nonetheless, there is evidence that, like the *Historia*, the *Vita* was read widely enough to influence other writings after Geoffrey’s time.⁶⁶ And, I would argue, the *Vita Merlini* matters to postmedieval scholars in a larger sense: both for the ecocritique of colonialism that it levies, and for the escapes from the prison house of history—and the *Historia regum Britanniae*—that it dreams.

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65. Martin, “Hoel-Hearted Loyalty,” 21–48.

66. Knight, *Merlin*, 32; and John Brannigan, “A Particular Vice of that People’: Geraldus Cambrensis and the Discourse of English Colonialism,” *Irish Studies Review* 6 (1998): 121–30.