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“Alas for the Red Dragon:” Redefining Welsh Identity through Arthurian Legend

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For graduation with Honors

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Abstract

Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae*, *Prophetiae Merlini*, and *Vita Merlini* reimagine British history in an attempt to renegotiate the boundaries between English and Welsh culture. Through the figure of Merlin, Geoffrey co-opts key elements of Welsh culture as part of the larger Norman colonization effort. I argue that the effectiveness of Geoffrey's colonization attempt lies in his embodiment of Welsh figures and his hybrid identity that allowed him to insert himself into the Welsh narrative and reconstruct it from within. I also argue that a reconsideration of *Vita Merlini* reveals a new dimension of Geoffrey's colonial project. Merlin's changing identity across these texts allows for a shifting of the Welsh from rightful sovereigns to degenerate barbarians, and finally to an uncivilized but harmless wild populace existing on the periphery of English society. A combination of cultural criticism and elements of postcolonial studies shows that as Geoffrey carves out a new place for the Welsh within a larger English identity, he takes ownership of Arthurian legend away from the Welsh and places it in service of the Anglo-Normans.

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Critical Preface

Throughout history, the story of King Arthur has captivated readers and scholars alike. His story has become a centerpiece of English identity, and has resurfaced again and again during times of turmoil. Arthur is the Once and Future King, lying in wait to return to Britain when he is most needed, and he has done just that. In *The Once and Future King*, T.H. White used the story of Arthur and Merlin to understand the devastation of World Wars One and Two; Alfred, Lord Tennyson wrote *The Idylls of the King* to express the longing and anxieties of the Victorian era through King Arthur's court; Sir Thomas Malory wrote *Le Morte d'Arthur* in response to the changing feudal world. These writers engaged with the literary Arthur, the King of legend and myth. Others turned to the historical Arthur, shaping his story towards their political gains in a sort of medieval pseudo-historical propaganda. Edward I built his rule upon heavy-handed Arthurian symbolism, and during the War of the Roses Henry VII used the image of Arthur as a symbol of unity and legitimate succession when reuniting the houses of Lancaster and York (Barron 50-55).¹ All of these interpretations share a common ancestor in Geoffrey of Monmouth, an early twelfth century historian of Welsh or Anglo-Norman descent. Geoffrey was responsible for three works, all of which in some capacity approach King Arthur's story through the figure of Merlin. In his most significant work, *Historia regum Britanniae (Historia)*, Geoffrey blended the Welsh story of a legendary King Arthur with a Norman-centered construction of history in order to create a new literary-historical version of Arthurian legend that could be used to colonize the Welsh.² Upon its release in 1136, Geoffrey's epic chronology brought the Welsh Arthurian legends to an international audience, and forever changed the cultural landscape of Britain.

As a whole, the *Historia* traces the rulers of Britain from the Roman foundation by Brutus to the Saxon invasion and conquest of the Welsh. It is written as a chronicle, though there are notable diversions into the more fantastical “Prophecies of Merlin” and tangentially related episodes of Arthur’s reign. Geoffrey situates Arthur within the list of legendary or historical rulers, thus making a claim to both the legendary status and historical existence of a King Arthur who fought to unify the British Isles, who represented the best and worst of Celt and conqueror. Framing the reign of Arthur is Merlin, a representative of Britain’s Celtic past. The entirety of the book blends fact and fiction, but in its time it was accepted as a great history. Regardless of whether Arthur was believed to be a historical figure or a folk hero at the time, the fact remains that Geoffrey of Monmouth co-opted important Welsh cultural figures and brought them to the attention of an international audience. The international introduction to Arthurian legend, then, was based on Geoffrey’s invention and co-opting of Arthur as a true British king rather than an indigenous Celtic figure of legend. The ripples from this shift can be traced throughout Arthurian literature, and are reflective of the wider cultural conflicts that arose from English colonization of the Welsh and other Celtic peoples of Britain.

Although Geoffrey claimed to be writing history, the consensus among scholars is that there was no historical Arthur as imagined by the legends. There may have been elements of history that informed certain factors, but it is more likely that Arthur was an element of popular folk legend in ancient Wales, a figure of an oral tradition of which much has been lost. Rachel Bromwich’s enormously influential collection of the Welsh Triads, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein* showed that Arthurian legend has origins in Welsh oral tradition that predates more distinctly English sources.³ His roots are Celtic, but the mythology of Arthur was built around the rewriting by Anglo-Norman rulers who were attempting to conquer the native Welsh. Part of the

colonization process included taking the Welsh stories and redefining them, twisting them so that they supported English claims of hereditary sovereignty.

The publication of *Historia regum Britanniae* in Latin in 1136 brought Arthurian legend to an international audience, and the work spread throughout the continent, taking hold most prominently in France and leading to the development of the French Arthurian romances. The French romances added many of the most lasting elements to the legends: the romance of Lancelot and Guinevere, a great emphasis on chivalry and courtly love, the quest for the Holy Grail, and much of the religious nature the tales took on. Prior to the introduction of such figures, the most recognizable of Arthur's supporting cast was Merlin. Because Geoffrey's works were published before the French romances, I will leave these elements behind in favor of Merlin, who plays a central role in Geoffrey's colonial project. Merlin has roots in the story of a "Celtic Wild Man" archetype. This wild man character featured in a number of disparate Celtic sources as a sort of wild hermit who rejected society, and was often imbued with magical powers (Thomas). Geoffrey borrows elements of this character, but also creates a new persona for Merlin by Latinizing his name and function in society. As a result, Geoffrey was left with a hybridized character who could be used to both support and marginalize the Welsh. Although the overall focus is always Arthur, Merlin takes center stage as the orchestrator of Arthur's reign; he is the figure who gives Arthur his meaning, his cultural relevance, and his legendary status as English national hero.

My first section deals with the larger context of the *Historia* within which Geoffrey situated the Merlin and Arthur chapters. I begin with a discussion of Geoffrey's border identity and his complex relationship to Wales. Using Michelle Warren's theories of border identity, I look at the way Geoffrey's position in the ambiguous space between Wales and Norman England

influenced the overarching goal of the *Historia*. Geoffrey's true heritage is unknown, but recent scholarship has shown that he is most likely from the border region of the Welsh Marches (Warren 25). Ambiguities in the text fed into his unclear heritage, and as a result, a debate over whether the *Historia* favored the Welsh or the Norman colonizers has dominated scholarship of Geoffrey's work for centuries. I offer my position in the debate by arguing that while Geoffrey exhibits some degree of sympathy for the Welsh, the overall direction of the text serves to cast them aside and establish the decline of their race. As evidence, I delve into the Arthurian portion of the *Historia*. Though the text is a chronology of the entire history of British rule, Geoffrey spends more time on Arthur than any other king, and the tone of this portion is markedly different from the rest. Geoffrey diverges from the chronicle style of history into a more narrative-driven account of Arthur's origins, rule, and fall. It is in these narrative elements, reminiscent of Welsh legend, that Geoffrey wrests Arthur out of Welsh culture and places him into the context of a new English history. This section of my project provides the background information to support my overarching argument about the colonial project of the *Historia*: that Geoffrey's border identity gave him the tools necessary to carry out colonization on the cultural front by taking elements of Welsh culture and recreating them in a way that supported Norman dominance and crushed Welsh hopes of future sovereignty. Though chronologically, the *Historia* takes place between the other two texts, I place this section first in order to provide necessary context before moving into a deeper discussion of the role of Merlin. Because, as Kimberly Bell showed in "Merlin as Historian in 'Historia Regum Britannie'," Merlin fulfills the role of Geoffrey on the page, it is necessary to understand the author's background before exploring Merlin in any depth.

In the second section, I move into the *Prophetiae Merlini*. Prior to writing the *Historia*, Geoffrey wrote *Prophetiae Merlini*, which consisted of Merlin's prophecies foretelling in ambiguous terms the rise and fall of Arthur, the Saxon invasion, and the decline or fall of the native British population. Geoffrey also included these prophecies within the *Historia* as "The Prophecies of Merlin," citing their popularity and the behest of his patron, Alexander, Bishop of Lincoln (*History* 170). I reference the text as contained within Lewis Thorpe's translation of the *Historia*, as the original work is not typically translated on its own. This section focuses on the way Geoffrey inhabits Welshness through Merlin, who functions as his surrogate on the page. Merlin's hybridity and Welsh identity make him a valuable tool for Geoffrey; his Welshness manifests in the form of prophecy, which Geoffrey is then able to manipulate in order to strip the Welsh of a central piece of cultural resistance.

My third section focuses on Geoffrey's continued manipulation of Welshness through Merlin in *Vita Merlini*. Geoffrey wrote this text about a decade after the *Historia*, and it exhibits a very different portrayal of Welshness than his earlier works. As suggested by the title, the *Vita* is written in the tradition of the Welsh Saint's Lives, and is yet another example of Geoffrey appropriating Welsh tradition for his own aims. Though the text appears to offer a somewhat more sympathetic view of the Welsh through its story of Merlin's madness and embrace of nature, I argue that this sympathy is another facet of Geoffrey's overarching project. By this text, Geoffrey has neutralized what the Normans perceived as the Welsh threat, and is able to once more redefine Welsh identity. In this portrayal, he shifts the focus from degeneracy to simplicity. Though his portrayal on the outside looks sympathetic, Geoffrey is casting the Welsh into a subordinate place by relegating them firmly to the past, as part of Britain's cultural heritage, but

not its future. In this way, figures like Merlin enrich the cultural identity of the English, but do not challenge Anglo-Norman hegemony.

Many scholars have debated Geoffrey's loyalties and his role in creating the historical Arthur. The most influential of these to my study are Patricia Clare Ingham, Michael Faletra, and Michelle Warren. In her 2001 book *Sovereign Fantasies: Arthurian Romance and the Making of Britain*, Ingham introduces the concept of a "sovereign fantasy." She uses this term to denote the stories created by those in power to legitimize their claims to a culture and past not necessarily their own. In the context of Arthuriana, she applies the term to the ways "Arthur's court becomes a fiction of historic British sovereignty useful for competing accounts of British identity" (Ingham 2). Geoffrey of Monmouth was a crucial figure in the establishment of this sovereign fantasy. Much of Ingham's book centers on later Arthurian romances, but she begins with Monmouth, and her application of postmodern cultural theory and the concept of a sovereign fantasy offers a useful and relevant framework for envisioning the processes of Arthur's transition from folk legend to national hero. In *Wales and the Medieval Colonial Imagination*, Michael Faletra offers a historically-grounded look at the colonization of the Welsh and the importance of sovereign fantasies in the process of colonizing and justifying English dominance over the Welsh. In *History on the Edge: Excalibur and the Borders of Britain, 1100-1300*, Michelle Warren provides a useful framework for understanding the role of Merlin in the colonization process by drawing on postcolonial theory to understand Wales and Arthurian legend as a hybrid space, or borderland. These three scholars provide a critically relevant framework to explore the ways Geoffrey achieved his colonial project, and are representative of the current state of the field.

The majority of my sources do not focus on Merlin himself, though all frequently reference him in their discussion of Arthur. In my research, I discovered that while nearly all Arthurian scholars dedicate a significant amount of time to Geoffrey of Monmouth, very few look beyond the *Historia*. This makes sense; *Vita Merlini* is brief and seemingly inconsequential in comparison to the epic historical chronology that is the *Historia*. It is easily written off as a parody, or a brief anecdote of Merlin's life after Arthur. Furthermore, it complicates the already ambiguous implications of the *Historia* and modifies Merlin's first set of prophecies in uneasy ways. The inconsistencies between the texts caught my attention, and greatly shifted the focus of my project. Whereas previously I had been interested primarily in Geoffrey's treatment of King Arthur, I now began to see that the real work happened through Merlin. To me, Geoffrey's persistent return to Merlin signified that something important was happening with the character, and the numerous inconsistencies pointed not to poor writing, but to a motive that lay beyond the level of narrative.

Geoffrey's colonial project carries implications beyond Arthuriana. He was only one force of many behind the Norman colonization of Wales, but his efforts lasted because they took place in the realm of fantasy. Geoffrey's work was not confined to a particular historical moment, and so was able to endure far longer than any tangible political change. He attempted to change the very language of Welshness and the narrative of definition until it became a new myth. This new myth stands at the heart of English identity. Understanding how Geoffrey was able to create such an enduring myth allows one to see how these same processes occurred elsewhere. In the cross between cultural criticism and postcolonial studies, it is possible to reexamine the very foundational myths of a country. Examining the stories that were silenced or appropriated in the struggle for power is essential work, and can point out historical wrongs that

must be confronted. Geoffrey of Monmouth provides a clear picture of the process of cultural appropriation as it happened, and recognizing these patterns allows the modern reader to not only understand how England came to be, but to see where these processes have been repeated throughout history and into the present.

The greatest challenge in writing this thesis was narrowing my focus. I approached the topic widely, from the vantage point of a lifelong love of Arthuriana stemming all the way back to the King Arthur picture book I still have on my shelf. Because the legends have lived on for so long, because they have pulled so many writers into their orbit, there is a wealth of material from which to choose. I have always been more interested in the Welsh aspects of the legends than in the elements of the French romances, more intrigued by Merlin and Gawain than Lancelot and Elaine. Initially, I had planned to trace the movement of earlier Welsh elements through to later English texts, such as *Le Morte d'Arthur* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. This still incorporated a large amount of material, though, with countless directions to take my argument. I wanted to write them all. When I found Geoffrey of Monmouth, I was captivated by the seemingly anachronistic placement of pages upon pages of prophecy in the midst of an otherwise dry, historical chronicle. Much had already been written about Geoffrey, though, and it was not until I discovered *Vita Merlini* that my argument came together. The rest, I leave up to future projects.

Though I focused my thesis on just Geoffrey's use of Merlin, there are many avenues I still want to explore, both about Geoffrey of Monmouth and other aspects of Arthuriana. This paper is just the beginning. I plan to develop the ideas outlined in this paper further for my master's thesis, and build from that into a full dissertation for my Ph.D. In future projects, I will expand my study with a more in depth analysis of the text and the application of deeper

theoretical approaches. There were also limitations on what I could do in this study because of the accessibility of materials and relatively brief nature of this thesis. The primary limitation was that of manuscripts. I avoided using manuscript sources for numerous reasons, many of which would not be factors in later studies. Using manuscript sources would have expanded my study beyond what was possible for this project. Because they are so old, many of the manuscripts exist only in fragments. Additionally, there are many inconsistencies between versions. The *Historia* has a complicated translation history, and a number of variations exist between Latin versions. When the *Historia* was translated back into Welsh, translators changed key aspects of the text so that it was more sympathetic to the Welsh cause. This history is fascinating, but too much to account for here. In future studies, a comparative analysis of the Welsh and Latin versions of the *Historia* will greatly enrich my study, but it will have to wait until graduate school, when I have the resources and type of project necessary for such an endeavor. In the meantime, I chose authoritative translations of my primary sources, with an eye for what versions the most current scholarship is using. Lewis Thorpe and John Jay Parry are hugely influential figures in the history of Arthurian scholarship, and though they are by no means new translations, they are current enough to still be cited frequently, and are as close to authoritative as possible in such as field.

Aside from the question of manuscripts and limitations, the greatest challenge has been the type of project itself. Though this is an English Literary Studies project, the true discipline I am writing from is Medieval Studies. This is an interdisciplinary field, and includes English, History, Modern Languages, and numerous other areas. Medieval Studies fits well within the goals of the honors program, because by nature it puts various fields in conversation with one another, and work must be accessible to scholars from a variety of disciplines. It has been

difficult to figure out how to navigate a Medieval Studies project from the perspective of an English department. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's book *The Postcolonial Middle Ages* has been essential in learning how to write about the medieval from a modern perspective. In all, pursuing the field of Medieval Studies has taught me what it means to engage with an interdisciplinary audience, how to synthesize a variety of source types, and how to pull together multiple approaches into a focused argument.

Introduction

In the English cultural imagination, King Arthur represents the best England has to offer, and his rule invokes pictures of a period of extreme wealth, stability, and unity. In Geoffrey of Monmouth's version, though, Arthur is more of a symbolic figurehead, and the true driving force behind Arthurian legend is Merlin. Much of the mystery of Arthuriana can be attributed to Merlin, who hovers on the edges of Camelot like a specter of the Celtic past that Geoffrey at once revives and disavows. It is Merlin who introduces the idea of Arthur's future return, Merlin who imbues the tales with mystery and magic and Celticism that the later English became so nostalgic for. Through Merlin, Geoffrey shaped the mythology of Arthur into the form that rests at the center of English identity, but he did so at the expense of the Welsh originators of the legend.

Despite the nostalgia that so dominates literary representations of Arthur, his golden age never existed in history. There has long been interest in finding the historical origins of King Arthur and his Round Table, of locating Camelot or Avalon within the ancient landscape of Great Britain and establishing a factual base for Britain's most enduring legend. However interesting, the historicity of Arthur is not my primary concern. Rather, I am more fascinated by the literary and cultural construction of Arthur as a historical figure through the work of Geoffrey of Monmouth. Even if there did once exist a historical Arthur, the popular image of Arthur was created through literary sources. The text that shaped him in his earliest singular conception, *Historia regum Britanniae*, followed the medieval form of a history, and was not beholden to fact. Because the fictional Arthur was so conflated with historical reality by those such as the Tudor kings, Edward I, and Geoffrey of Monmouth himself, the rule of Arthur *seems* real, and occupies a central place in English culture. The image of Arthur these figures cultivated

and the nostalgia it invokes was carefully constructed through the literature of those in power, the Anglo-Normans. In order to ensure their domination over the Welsh, the English had to legitimize their rule both in history and in literature. Because in medieval times history was conceived of mythologically rather than chronologically, Geoffrey was able to legitimize Norman rule over the Welsh on both the historical and cultural fronts. In creating a new history, he also rewrote a legend into something entirely new. He was able to rewrite the Welsh stories of King Arthur until they fit the new conception of Britain that he was building for the Norman rulers.

In this project, I will explore the role of Merlin in Geoffrey's recasting of King Arthur as a hallmark of a distinctly English identity by looking at the way Merlin, as a surrogate on the page for Geoffrey, represents the interests of both English colonial claimants in Wales and Welsh resisters. The *Historia* is a liminal text, situated uniquely on the divide between the English and the Welsh at a time when tensions between the two cultures were coming to a point of crisis. The focus of the work is not solely King Arthur; the lengthy history begins with Brutus, the Roman founder of Britain, and details every king through to Cadwallader, who allegedly lost ownership of Britain to the invading Saxons. Geoffrey situates King Arthur towards the end of this great genealogy, at the prime of Welsh sovereignty, a golden age of Britain marked by glory but doomed to fail. It is in the tale of Arthur that Monmouth waxes poetic, markedly diverging from his previous quest of establishing historical lineage in order to make sweeping claims about the British people of past and present. Here, his often-criticized excessive forays into fantasy become evident, and the political agenda of the author and his patrons becomes critically important.⁴ By situating Arthur within the lineage of English sovereignty, Geoffrey is making a claim about the importance of Arthur to his contemporary audience. Norman England needed to

justify their dominance over the Welsh, who resisted their rule. Arthurian legend was used to justify claims on both sides, so the tales were already politically charged when Geoffrey took them up.

Geoffrey used Merlin as his primary tool in the process of colonizing Welsh culture; through Merlin, he took early Welsh source material and reframed it to appear English. However, he did not seek to deny the Celtic origins or elements of Welshness that remained. In fact, many Celtic elements remained intact, and account for much of the interest in the later legends. In later English texts, these elements take on a different note. Some of the changes can be explained as a legend developing naturally in the crossover between two cultures in close proximity, in the way language develops. Much like language, though, the legends can also develop more consciously, and can be deliberately manipulated for control and power. Stripped of their historical context, the Welsh elements of the Arthurian legend became a tool of colonization. In the *Historia*, Geoffrey portrays the Welsh as a dangerous and degenerative people. By his later work, *Vita Merlini*, though, they have taken on a new character. Rather than being a threat, here Geoffrey sets up the Welsh as a native presence that enriches English culture with magic and a peaceful simplicity. At the same time, he describes them as degenerate, uncivilized, wild. Geoffrey strategically chose elements of Welshness to place in contrast to “civilized” English life in order to highlight the intriguing yet outdated past that Arthur, as a specifically English king, served to combat and civilize. Many of the most lasting and recognizable elements of Arthurian legend originated in the Welsh tradition, but the Welsh claim on the legend was largely erased through Geoffrey’s work.⁵ He presents them in a paternalistic light, as a charming but misguided and ultimately dangerous population that needed political oversight. Geoffrey himself sat on the line between Wales and England, with a work that is

clearly sponsored by the Norman rulers who sought to benefit from conquest of the Welsh on the cultural field as well as the political, but that also exhibits a familiarity with Welsh legend and culture. One can detect a fondness for Wales in Geoffrey's representation, but this fondness is problematic, as it is not a true valuing of Welsh culture, but rather the view of a colonizer. In this perspective, elements of Welsh culture enrich the construction of English heritage Geoffrey is building, but are not enough to justify Welsh sovereignty.

Historia regum Britanniae

Geoffrey of Monmouth's writing is a product of the synthesis of Welsh and Anglo-Norman culture. Though details on his life are scarce, Michelle Warren ascribes to him a "border identity" based on his epithet, *Monemutensis* (Warren 25). This suggests that he had some degree of identification with the Welsh, though the extent remains unknown. His texts reveal a relatively large amount of knowledge about Welsh culture, but his bias leans resolutely towards the Normans. Geoffrey was firmly on the side of the colonist, but nevertheless, he did not entirely devalue Welsh culture. At the time of the Norman Conquest, Welsh culture was still very insular, and their literature was largely self-contained, or else tied only to other Celtic literature. As the Normans continued to move into Welsh territory, the Welsh were pushed further to the periphery. After a time, the borders between the two groups, concentrated primarily in the Welsh Marches, became a crossing point (Warren 8). As the Normans settled and the colonization process continued, contact deepened, and the region developed from a point of exchange into a true borderland. Geoffrey, supposedly living in this hybrid region, was in a unique vantage point to observe both cultures. However, the content of his works and their overall implications suggest that he was not himself Welsh, and viewed the culture with the eyes of a colonizer, and from a position of power. At the same time, his situation at the crossing-point shaped his view of

the world and his interpretation of the cultural exchange taking place runs at the core of his works. Moments in the *Historia* suggest a genuine identification with the Welsh cause, and a degree of sympathy for their plight. At one point early in “The Prophecies of Merlin,” Geoffrey writes, “Alas for the Red Dragon, for its end is near” (171). The Red Dragon was Merlin’s symbol for the native Britons, and it can still be seen today on the Welsh flag. This line conveys a sense of genuine mourning for the lost Welsh sovereignty. The sense of tragedy this line invokes reverberates throughout his text, though it concentrates in the section it originates in, “The Prophecies of Merlin.” Merlin’s words continue to lament the Welsh loss, even while Geoffrey’s ultimate goal and the tone of his later passages contradict this sympathy. The tension between Merlin and Geoffrey, between the words and the overall purpose, are the result of Geoffrey’s border identity. Warren writes, “Border historiography claims space while seeking to transform symbolically the identity of that space, and sometimes the nature of the claim” (8). Geoffrey did exactly that when he included pro-Welsh sentiments within a larger context that transformed them into something new and contradictory.

Although Geoffrey may have harbored some sympathy for the Welsh cause, his work ultimately functioned as a tool of the colonial regime. It played a large role in recasting Arthur as an English figure out of the hands of the Welsh, and its usage in this way has overshadowed any encoded Welsh sympathies. Subsequent translations somewhat complicate this matter, as translators emphasized different elements based on their audience, so that Welsh translations were more sympathetic to the Welsh cause than the Latin translations that made their way to France. Geoffrey’s initial text, though, portrays the Welsh in a negative light. In *Wales and the Medieval Colonial Imagination*, Michael Faletra argues that Geoffrey consciously portrayed the Welsh as subordinate from the beginning, always secondary even when they held some degree of

power, and always on the edges of civilization. Part of the process of shifting Arthur to serve the English required shifting what it meant to be Welsh. In reimagining British history into his own “sovereign fantasy,” Geoffrey had to account for the clear transfers of power that occurred with each invasion. He is most concerned with the Saxon and Norman invasions, as these are the most definitive events for Geoffrey’s historical moment.⁶ In the case of the Saxons and Normans, he had to account specifically for the loss of Welsh sovereignty, and create a viable justification for this loss that would preclude any resurgence of Welsh rebellion and keep the throne securely in the hands of the Normans. Geoffrey accomplishes this in the very last section of the *Historia* when he writes,

Indeed, the plague about which I have told you, the famine and their own inveterate habit of civil discord had caused this proud people to degenerate so much that they were no longer able to keep their foes at bay. As the foreign element around them became more and more powerful, they were given the name Welsh instead of Britons: this word deriving either from their leader Gualo, or from their Queen Galaes, or else from their being so barbarous. (284)

In this passage, Geoffrey attempts to take agency away from the Welsh, leaving them to be defined by their oppressors. Faletra writes, “Geoffrey, who certainly knew enough Welsh to know that the Welsh called themselves *Cymry*, is here explicitly imposing the language of the Germanic outsiders to the Britons’ degenerate descendants” (24). The Welsh have no voice here; they are named and defined by their conquerors. By establishing the language, Geoffrey is establishing how subsequent generations will think about the Welsh. He is reinventing their history through a colonist’s eyes, claiming even their origin, their very definition for the Normans. There is no longer any hint of mournfulness here, as there was when Merlin foretold

this very event. Now, through his own voice, Geoffrey cancels out what he previously implied through Merlin's prophecy, and his true intent becomes clear.

There is a disconnect in Geoffrey's work between his recasting of the Welsh as "degenerate" and "barbarous" and his portrayal of Arthur as a great king. For much of Geoffrey's narrative, the Welsh have not yet fallen from favor. Until the Saxon invasion, the Welsh still had a legitimate claim of sovereignty. However, Geoffrey was constantly aware of his overarching colonial project, and knew he ultimately had to cast aside the Welsh in favor of a better hope for a unified Britain, the Normans. Arthur typically represented a high point in Welsh insular sovereignty, so Geoffrey needed to establish a divide between him and his people. In order to create this divide, Geoffrey needed to present Arthur as a figure closer to the "civilized" Normans than the "barbarous" Welsh. Arthur traditionally came from Welsh legends, and was meant to be the savior for the Welsh. Geoffrey acknowledges him as a Briton leader for "the people of Britain," but goes to great lengths to remove any specific identification of Arthur with the Welsh (*History* 171). Part of the process of moving Arthur away from his origins included separating him from clearly Welsh identifications. At the same time, Geoffrey did not want to deny or cancel out what Arthur carried with him from older works such as the Triads. A number of Arthur's companions from the Triads remain in Geoffrey's account, as do Arthur's sword, shield, and spear.⁷ Geoffrey chose these elements because they were innocuous; they could emphasize the mysterious origins of Arthur without harming the overall objective. Merlin, though, was more dangerous. He remains a centrally important figure to Arthur's tale, but in Geoffrey's works, the two never cross paths. Merlin bookends Arthur's reign when he orchestrates Arthur's birth and prophecies his death, but he vanishes for the space between, only emerging again in *Vita Merlini*, which takes place well after the fall of Arthur. By keeping

Arthur and Merlin physically separate, Geoffrey relegates Merlin to the past, as an artifact of a time when the Welsh were powerful, but keeps Arthur apart from this period as a figure more forward-focused and closer in the progression towards eventual Norman rule.

Prophetiae Merlini

The dissociation of Arthur from the Welsh is facilitated by the figure of Merlin. In the *Prophetiae Merlini*, Geoffrey represents Arthur with the symbol of “The Boar of Cornwall” (*History* 171). This symbolic association still aligns Arthur with the native Britons more broadly, but disconnects him from his Welsh origins. Again, Geoffrey is establishing the language that will define how future generations perceive the story: Arthur is now forever linked with Cornwall by virtue of this epithet. Later in the text, Geoffrey continues to emphasize Arthur’s identification with Cornwall over Wales through Merlin’s orchestration of his conception. When Uther Pendragon desires Ygernia (Igraine), the Duke of Cornwall’s wife, Merlin uses magic to disguise Uther as the Duke, Gorlois. Uther then rapes Ygernia and conceives Arthur at Tintagel, a Cornish castle. By giving Arthur Cornish descent rather than Welsh, Geoffrey allows Arthur to retain his status as a native Briton without associating him with the politically dangerous Welsh. Cornwall was in many ways similar to Wales, but by Geoffrey’s time, the area had already been firmly conquered and did not pose a threat to Norman rule (Faletra 30). Through Merlin, Geoffrey was able to cast aside Arthur’s Welsh background, ensuring that “Arthur remains ethnically pure, free from the degeneration that threatens ... to destabilize the alleged nobility of his entourage” (Faletra 31). The presence of Merlin is problematic, though, for he is a heavily Welsh figure who Geoffrey uses towards distinctly anti-Welsh ends. This suggests a more complicated usage of Merlin, who served as Geoffrey’s mouthpiece in defining Arthur’s reign,

but also implicitly represents Welsh interests and subverts Geoffrey's project through his very presence at the center of the story.

Merlin is a Welsh character, but in the *Historia* he functions as one of Geoffrey's most useful tools in the overarching colonial project. As Geoffrey invents the story of Arthur, he uses Merlin as his surrogate on the page. In "Merlin as Historian in *Historia Regum Britannie*," Kimberly Bell writes that Geoffrey's Merlin functions on a metafictional level as "a character whose actions reflect both the role of the reader and the various functions of the historian" (14). Merlin devises or prophesies the most central parts of Arthur's reinvented story, and provides the reader with cues on interpreting it through his prophecy. At the same time, he is something of a dual figure to Geoffrey, standing in for him on the page, but also exerting his own force on the story. He is a thin veil for Geoffrey's project, but the gravity of his origins cannot be escaped, and indeed are essential to the text. This tension between cultural appreciation and appropriation results in a third thing, a hybrid. Like Geoffrey, like Wales itself, this new version of Merlin is a hybrid of Welsh characteristics and Norman impulses.

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Michelle Warren both describe Wales as a borderland, a place where cultures collide in uneasy and paradoxical ways. Geoffrey of Monmouth's work can be mapped onto this paradigm through the figure of Merlin, who stands as a representative for the Welsh people as a whole. Merlin himself comes from Celtic sources, though Geoffrey created two distinct versions of Merlin over the course of his writings. In "The Celtic Wild Man Tradition and Geoffrey of Monmouth's 'Vita Merlini': Madness or 'Contemptus Mundi?'" Neil Thomas shows that Geoffrey conflated multiple tales of the Celtic "wild man" in his shaping of Merlin. Geoffrey's earliest characterization, seen in the *Prophetiae Merlini*, is grounded in this Welsh figure, but is also Anglicized. He is the child of a Welsh woman and a demon, and

possesses magical abilities, but at this point Geoffrey does not further emphasize the wild man story from which he pulled Merlin. In the original Latin text of the *Historia*, he refers to the wizard as “Ambrosius Merlinus” (*The Arthur of the Welsh* 131). By giving him a Latinized name, Geoffrey deemphasizes his Celtic roots in favor of a Latin association that puts him more in line with Geoffrey himself. The original text was written in Latin, so the name Ambrosius Merlinus in place of the more Welsh-sounding names “Emrys Merlin” or “Myrddin” further strengthens the image of Merlin as Geoffrey’s servant on the page. These names and elements exist side by side uneasily, and it is up to Geoffrey to define how they interact. Geoffrey manipulates Merlin’s inherent Welshness through the addition of Anglo-Norman motives and characteristics. The Norman qualities modify the Welsh: the Welsh style of prophecy is undermined by its anti-Welsh statements, his later return to nature is marred by his rejection of society and reason. Geoffrey’s manipulation of his source material does not succeed in making Merlin Norman, nor does it take Merlin’s Welshness away. Rather, he becomes a hybrid, full of literary potential. Merlin’s hybridity is what made it so easy for Geoffrey to achieve his project, for it allowed both the Welsh and the Normans to identify with the character. He was able to bridge the gap between cultures and fulfill in character form the function Cohen ascribes to a geographical region: “Wales as a bridge to that fantastic elsewhere becomes not an edge but a borderland, an ambiguous middle location caught between a distant, dominant, domestic center and a proximate, absolute, alien outland” (95). He made the outside, the other, more accessible, but also modified what was known and familiar in the self. Geoffrey made full use of this duality, and emphasized elements of each culture as needed.

The very language Merlin uses further emphasizes his hybridity and the way Geoffrey used it to achieve the colonization of Welsh culture. The bulk of Merlin’s role in the *Historia* is

concentrated in “The Prophecies of Merlin.” Geoffrey was as fascinated by the figure of Merlin as he was by Arthur, and the weight of the *Historia* rests in this section. This portion of the text, situated approximately halfway through, has been cited throughout the ages as evidence of both Geoffrey’s Welsh sympathies and his loyalty to the Normans. In style, the section is categorically Welsh, borrowing from their long-standing prophetic tradition. It begins when the demon-born sorcerer Merlin is called upon to explain why King Vortigern’s tower keeps falling.⁸ In response, the young Merlin, not yet famous, launches into an extended prophecy sequence. His prophecies are cryptic, ambiguous, and heavily allegorical. Through symbols of the white and red dragons, representing the Saxon invaders and the native Britons respectively, Merlin foretells the rise and fall of empires. He foreshadows the rest of the book in this condensed form, though it is difficult to pin a precise meaning to many of his symbols. Included in the sequence is the reign of Arthur, contained in its entirety from his conception to his potential death. It is in this section that Arthur’s tale takes on its most controversial – and most enduring – quality. Merlin prophecies that “the end of the Boar will be shrouded in mystery” (*History* 172). Though he makes no quantifiable claims and is purposefully vague, Geoffrey is referencing the idea of the Once and Future King, the idea that Arthur did not die in the final battle of Camlan, but was instead carried off to the Isle of Avalon to one day return and restore the glory of his people. This final portion is the most significant, because the question of who exactly “his people” were is crucial. The story has obvious religious overtones, and Arthur becomes a Christ figure, destined to return and lead his chosen ones to a bright, blessed future. The Welsh were quick to claim this future as their own, and the story became a rallying point of Welsh resistance against the Normans.⁹

Though many have interpreted the ambiguity of Arthur's death as a seed of hope, Geoffrey cancels out this hope later on in the text. He is able to safely build up the Welsh in this section, as they have not yet lost their right to rule. Later on, though, he writes that the Welsh forever lose their claim to the British Isles. In a footnote to his translation of the *Historia*, Lewis Thorpe writes that in one manuscript version, Geoffrey included an *explicit* that was not in other versions. This line came after his final casting away of the Welsh, and reads, "The Welsh, once they had degenerated from the noble state enjoyed by the Britons, never afterwards recovered the overlordship of the island. On the contrary, they went on quarrelling with the Saxons and among themselves and remained in a perpetual state of either civil or external warfare" (*History* 284). By ending the text with a passage on the degeneracy of the Welsh and their devolution into a wild fringe population, Geoffrey cancels out any pro-Welsh implications that may have been encoded in the prophecies. It was important that he did so effectively, because the genre he was writing in was heavily politicized. Faletra describes "tenth- and eleventh- century prophetic traditions" in which "the Welsh/Britons envisioned a return to their ancient status" and predicted the return of "various messiah figures or ... 'sons of prophecy'" (Faletra 7). Geoffrey writes out of this tradition, but warps it, turning it against its original purpose in a pattern that has by this point become standard. The result is particularly devastating here, for he uses a Welsh body to speak Welsh words of promise, only to turn it all around into a final negation of the Breton hope. A simple criticism of Welsh prophecy and its theme of hope likely would not have been as effective, nor would a story that did not rely so heavily on these forms. The key lay in inserting himself directly into the narrative and making himself a part of the larger tradition. Replicating the words and forms of Welsh literary tradition allowed Geoffrey to undermine them with the rest of his text. Though the prophecies are ambiguous, the conclusion of the text is not, and

follows the Latin structure of a dynastic history (Barron 11). The prophecies themselves appear to be Welsh by virtue of their form. However, the rest of the text makes it clear that they mean Welsh rule only for a brief time, only when the Welsh remain the best hope for an insular whole. They have not yet degenerated at the time of Arthur, but their future fall is inevitable.

Given the nature of his Norman sponsorship and the clarity with which he ends the text in anti-Welsh terms, Geoffrey cannot be promising the return of Welsh sovereignty. Neither, though, is he condemning the Welsh to remain a subjugated and scattered people. Rather, he is using Welsh tradition to create a new place for the Welsh in his version of history. By using the tradition to enrich his own narrative, Geoffrey was able to “revel in the rich magic of a past British return, or borrow the poignancy and energy of British loss, while continuing to gain the political and economic riches of a Welsh colony” (Ingham 63). He could harness the energy implicit in the Welsh legends and styles and re-channel it towards colonization rather than resistance. Doing so took the stories out of the hands of their originators and redefined them, utterly warping their purpose in an attempt to cancel out rebellion and dissent from the very source. This process was literary, but it had a very real political and cultural effect. By depriving the Welsh of their cultural heritage and reclaiming it for the English, Geoffrey took away the common thread that united the subjugated Welsh against their oppressors. Arthur represented a period of Welsh sovereignty and cultural prowess, as well as a hope for a future return to insular unity. Geoffrey tried to change the narrative by reinventing it at its core, so that it appeared to mean what it always had, but ultimately achieved the opposite meaning, so that “despite the ... ambiguity ... despite his occasional nods to the uncanny power of hybridity and the open-endedness of prophecy, and despite the illustrious prehistory of the Welsh he provides ... the *Historia* as a whole seems dedicated to maintaining the contemporary Welsh as a peripheralized

and almost antipolitical polity, ...excluded forever from the history of Britain” (Faletta 25).

Geoffrey resolutely casts the Welsh aside, thereby eliminating their perceived threat. Once the threat was neutralized, then, he was able to recast the Welsh in a new light. He did so again through Merlin.

Vita Merlini

Approximately a decade after Geoffrey wrote *Historia regum Britanniae*, he returned to the figure of Merlin, this time in *Vita Merlini*. This text received far less attention than Geoffrey’s other work, both in its reception and in subsequent scholarship. This is partially because it was a far less ambitious work, only a few pages of Latin verse compared to the enormity of the *Historia*. It did not carry the same political weight or colonial implications as the earlier text, though deeper analysis shows that Geoffrey was carrying out much the same work, with only a change in tactics. A comparison of the two texts reveals a shift in the figure of Merlin that suggests something of Geoffrey’s changing attitudes towards the Welsh. On the surface, *Vita Merlini* seems far more sympathetic to the Welsh cause than Geoffrey’s earlier writing. It carries on the story of Merlin, but this time Geoffrey emphasizes his Welsh characteristics. He is the same figure from the *Historia*, and one can assume a continuity between works, but the similarities exist only on a surface level. The character himself is drastically different, though his tendency towards near-hysteric prophesying remains. Merlin in this story is “a king and a prophet; to the proud people of the South Welsh” (*Vita* 1), whereas in the *Historia* he was a powerful advisor and magician to the Briton kings. In *Vita Merlini*, he retains his magic, but it is far more grounded in nature, and far less powerful. Whereas before his magic was tied to rulers and politics, now his prophecies are the result of madness, and can be interpreted more as the ravings of a disillusioned madman than the promises of a powerful sorcerer. The shifts in

Merlin's character emphasize the shifts in Welshness that Geoffrey has achieved. Whereas the Welsh were once powerful leaders, now they are better equipped for the wilderness, for a place where nature supersedes societal bonds. The scene of the text is that of the constant infighting and "inveterate habit of civil discord" Geoffrey referenced in the *Historia* to justify the Welsh loss of sovereignty (*History* 284). The opening battle is between the North Welsh king Peredur, the Cumbrian king Rhydderch, and the Scottish ruler Gwenddoleu (*Vita* 1). Merlin, here identified as a Briton king, is driven mad by the destruction and bloodshed in the battle. This madness renders him unable to cope with the demands of society, and he "became a silvan man just as though devoted to the woods" (*Vita* 2). By turning to the forest for solace in his madness, Merlin reverts back to the Celtic Wild Man prototype. In his madness, he becomes almost otherworldly, fae, embracing magic and prophecy and a way of life very much opposed to courtly society. When he is at court, he must be chained up to prevent his constant attempts to escape again into nature, and he reacts to the petty disputes of court life with derision or else by withdrawing into himself. He is only truly at home in nature, and does everything in his power to return there even when his madness abates. His pull to nature reveals a new, more nuanced portrayal of the Welsh. This new representation is far less demeaning on the surface than the outright accusations of degeneracy in the *Historia*, but still suggest a manipulation of the Welsh and a new approach at the same colonial project.

Geoffrey repeatedly associates the Welsh with nature, and the bulk of these associations take place in his Merlin texts. The connotations of this association change between works, though, as Geoffrey's project shifts. After the Saxon invasion at the end of the *Historia*, the Britons disperse to Brittany to live out their days in exile, with the exception of "a few little pockets of Britons who stayed behind, living precariously in Wales, in the remote recesses of the

woods” (*History* 282). It is these groups that Geoffrey says degenerated and came to be identified as the Welsh. Their existence is peripheral, almost primitive. They are free from Saxon rule for the time being, but have no power, no civilization, and a tendency towards barbarity that prevents them from ever reclaiming what they once possessed. In the *Historia*, the Welsh return to nature is a return to the primitive, and the region of Wales becomes synonymous with lawlessness, degeneracy, and all things opposed to civilized society. In *Vita Merlini*, though, Geoffrey presents the Welsh return to nature as something more positive, an embrace of peaceful community, knowledge, and simplicity.

In *Vita Merlini*, Merlin, as a representative of the Welsh, repeatedly turns away from developed society in favor of nature, and by the end of the story has renounced the world entirely and moved into the forest with a group of prophets and other disillusioned characters. His prophecies restate those of the *Prophetiae Merlini*, but also reach further into the future. By the end of his prophetic sequence in this text, the cycles of destruction and domination that the *Historia* detailed come even to the Normans, and Geoffrey offers a far more explicit critique of Norman rule than his more ambiguous stance earlier on. This somewhat clearer text is a valuable tool for interpreting Geoffrey’s earlier work, and scholars such as Christine Chism argue that *Vita Merlini* indicates a softening of Geoffrey’s earlier stance and supports the argument that Geoffrey harbored Welsh sympathies. In “Ain’t gonna study war no more”: Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia regum Britanniae* and *Vita Merlini*,” Chism argues that the *Vita Merlini* offers a counter-vision to the “war-producing dynastic rivalries of the *Historia*” in favor of a return to nature (458). However, this counter-vision does not necessarily mean a shift to the side of Welsh support. A disillusionment with the Normans does not necessarily entail support for the Welsh, and the impact of Geoffrey’s earlier text cannot be forgotten when considering the latter.

Chism sees Merlin's renouncement of society in a positive light, as evidence that Geoffrey is arguing a turn away from the warlike patterns of conquest and dynasty set up in the *Historia* in favor of nature, knowledge, and peaceable society. Given Geoffrey's past pattern of associating the Welsh with nature, and the presence of the recognizably Welsh figures Merlin and Taliesin, this turn appears to represent a move on Geoffrey's part away from the Normans and towards the Welsh.¹⁰ For these reasons, *Vita Merlini* has been cited as evidence that Geoffrey is advancing the Welsh cause. However, this view does not take into high enough consideration the clear terms on which Geoffrey ends the *Historia*, nor does it consider the possibility of a more complex use of Welshness to further Geoffrey's colonial objective. Though Geoffrey may have harbored some degree of sympathy for the Welsh, his works ultimately carried out the work of the colonizer in subordinating and discrediting the Welsh.

The progress of the *Historia* is linear, a succession of kings and empires leading towards the Britain that Geoffrey knew. Succession here is defined by war and conquest, and represented by large periods of destruction and growth, decimation and surplus. Operating above all this is the will of God. In medieval times, transfer of power was conceived of in terms of God's will, and a loss of power happened when one no longer followed God, or was otherwise unfit to hold their power. In the case of the Welsh, Geoffrey made it clear that their excessive infighting and cowardice caused them to lose the British Isles forever. As the last Briton king, Cadwallader, sails to Brittany in a final retreat, he laments:

The vengeance of His might lies heavily upon us, even to the point of uprooting us from our native soil – we whom the Romans, long ago, the Scots, the Picts and the Saxons, in their cunning treachery, were unable to exterminate Come back, you Romans! Return, Scots and Picts! And you too, Ambrones and Saxons! The door to Britain now lies wide

open before you. The island which you could never capture stands empty now through the wrath of God. It is not your valour which is forcing us to leave but the power of the Supreme King, whom we have never ceased to provoke. (*History* 281)

The native Britons have lost not only their right to rule, but also their right to exist on the island at all. Though this passage claims that the island is entirely empty, later lines reveal that this is not the case. There are still those “few little pockets of Britons who stayed behind, living precariously in Wales” (*History* 282). Geoffrey’s exclusion of these groups shows that in his mind, the mind of the colonist, native inhabitants no longer count. They are not a people to be considered so much as a wild presence, like that of native flora and fauna. Viewing a region as empty, open for the taking, is typical of a colonialist mindset, as is seeing the native population as savages, animals, or part of the natural resources of the region. Geoffrey’s portrayal of the Welsh as a degenerative and primitive race is clearly in line with the colonial characterizations of Native Americans, of the Irish, and of conquered groups everywhere. His method of colonization is cultural, and Welsh legend and literary tradition become the resources open to mine.

The *Historia* suggests that Welsh sovereignty is an artifact of Britain’s primitive past. The Welsh were once a powerful force on the island, but lost this claim forever due to their inherent cultural flaws. Reversion to an earlier state of primitive oneness with nature is simpler, easier, and comes with a sense of gratification. Ultimately, though, it is not the direction society is pointing. In *Vita Merlini*, Merlin and the other forest dwellers renounce society in favor of this simpler existence within nature. In this characterization, lawlessness is rampant in society, while nature is peaceful and restorative. Geoffrey views Merlin’s group in an overall sympathetic light, but his views are at odds with his earlier description of nature and Welshness as a place of degeneracy and lawlessness. A shift in the portrayal of Welshness has occurred between the

Historia and *Vita Merlini* that mirrors the shift of Merlin from political prophet to Celtic Wild Man. By *Vita Merlini*, Welshness is portrayed not as a threat to English sovereignty, but as a harmless and simpler state of societal development devoid of the concerns of civilization and progress. In this text, Geoffrey puts his two characterizations of the Welsh into conflict with one another. The warring princes represent the constant fighting that Geoffrey claims justified the Welsh loss of sovereignty, and Merlin's withdrawal into nature mirrors the withdrawal of the Welsh into the wilderness of Britain upon their loss of the island. Merlin's rejection of the warring Celtic groups is meant to be perceived favorably by the reader, as a renunciation of the worst of Celtic society in favor of a more simplistic existence in nature. The warfare and Merlin's inability to cope with it suggest the inability of the Welsh to properly handle political power. Merlin's rejection is the appropriate response, according to Geoffrey's view. His embrace of simplistic nature is more in line with the Welsh sensibilities Geoffrey sought to emphasize, and shows the place of the Welsh in the view of society Geoffrey has constructed. Through yet another manipulation of Merlin, Geoffrey casts the Welsh aside.

The other Celtic-based figure in this text, Taliesin, works in much the same way as Merlin. Though not present in the *Historia* and far less known in the wider canon than Merlin, Taliesin too claims an intimate connection with King Arthur when he speaks of his presence on the barge that took Arthur to Avalon to heal from his near-fatal wounds at Camlan (*Vita* 12). Taliesin's account resolves much of the ambiguity around Arthur's demise; it is now established in Geoffrey's canon that Arthur lives on, but his future return still remains uncertain. Here, as Chism points out, the emphasis is on Arthur's healing process at the hands of Morgan and his revitalization in a place of nature and magic. The narrative is no longer one of conquest and return, but of nature and healing, of rebuilding the whole. This shift in emphasis represents an

important step in the co-option of the Arthurian legend. By this point, Geoffrey is able to use Welshness in this nostalgic way because the threat has been neutralized. His previous work in the *Historia* resolutely cast the Welsh aside, so that in the *Vita*, he can present them as a thing of the distant past, a culture to be examined and appreciated for its simplicity and harmlessness. He has changed the narrative of Welshness by claiming a separate cultural source for Arthur, and by channeling the more divisive aspects of Welsh tradition, most notably political prophecy and Arthur's eventual return, into a new version of the Arthurian legends. Now, Arthur is firmly of the past, and if he were to come back, it would be for the English, for Merlin's reaction to bloodshed proved that the Welsh could not handle the necessary demands of civilization. They lost power from their infighting, and degenerated to a point where they could no longer realize a future path to power. Geoffrey at this point has firmly relegated Welsh political power to the distant past, which leaves Welsh culture open to explore and mine for the benefit of the English.

The style of *Vita Merlini* is also important, and undermines the Welsh sympathies Geoffrey exhibits on the surface. Geoffrey again made use of a Welsh literary tradition when he wrote *Vita Merlini* in the style of the Welsh Saints' Lives. These Saints' Lives were intended to cast historical saints in a legendary light, and to glorify the saint in question over other secular heroes or rival saints. King Arthur made numerous appearances in these chronicles; much like in the Triads, he was used as a standard of comparison. Generally, his depiction in the Saints' Lives was more negative, almost humorous, and served to highlight the conflict between secular and sacred (Padel 29). Though Arthur is not physically present in the *Vita Merlini*, the work retains much of the lighter tone of the other Lives, and Geoffrey himself describes it in the introduction as "a humorous poem" (*Vita* 1). The tone and function of the *Historia* is more serious and political, and strikes a very different note than the *Vita*. Reading this later work as humorous,

almost parodic, complicates the question of Geoffrey's intentions. In this light, his sympathetic portrayal of the Welsh appears to be even less sincere. Geoffrey again took a Welsh tradition and turned it on its head. The Saints' Lives were intended to glorify a particular saint, so by titling the piece in the format of the other Lives, Geoffrey implies that this text is a glorification of Merlin. The common pattern in the Lives of comparing the saint against Arthur can be applied here too: Merlin is glorified by comparing him to Arthur, so that Arthur is cast in a less flattering light. Merlin here is a more humorous character, however, and though the return to nature has spiritual elements, the overall tone of Geoffrey's works is always more political than religious. He makes use of a religious Welsh tradition, but his intent is political. Merlin's spiritual connection with nature, reminiscent of the Welsh hermetic saints often glorified in earlier Lives, is emphasized in opposition to the characteristics of Arthur's court, marked here by warfare and infighting between Celtic peoples.

At the end of *Vita Merlini*, Geoffrey identifies himself with the Britons rather than the Normans, writing "Therefore, ye Britons, give a wreath to Geoffrey of Monmouth. He is indeed yours for once he sang of your battles and those of your chiefs, and he wrote a book called "The Deeds of the Britons," which are celebrated throughout the world" (*Vita* 18). This is in line with the surface meaning of the text, where Geoffrey identifies with the Welsh through the mad yet sympathetic figure of Merlin. Merlin repeats much of the same prophecy as in *Prophetiae Merlini*, but here the ultimate goal does not appear to be the same, and the prophecies do not ultimately point to the marginalization and subsequent degeneration of the Welsh. Rather, *Vita Merlini* takes place in a time that already supposes the success of the Norman conquest of Wales. When removed from time and viewed from Geoffrey's eyes, with, as Bell writes, Merlin as the historian, this text takes place after the conquest of Wales has been achieved, both politically by

the Normans and Saxons and culturally by Geoffrey. At this point, he no longer needs to emphasize the negative qualities of the Welsh, and is able to explore their culture with a less focused view. This allows him to create a new narrative of the Welsh that modifies his earlier work. Though he approaches this new text with less overt colonial propagandistic tendencies, the impact of his past work cannot be erased. Furthermore, elements of his earlier racism and Norman bias live on, though they are now more subtly integrated. *Vita Merlini* takes place after the colonization of the Welsh has been completed and they as a group are less dangerous, less of a threat to Anglo-Norman society. In his new seemingly sympathetic portrayal, though, Geoffrey plays the part of the colonizer and depicts his subject as simplistic and less civilized. He does not portray the Welsh as degenerate to the extent he did in the *Historia*, but he does view them paternalistically, as a group unable to manage the demands of civilized society. This is a new, more nuanced level of his overarching colonial project. Once his initial text was completed and the dangerous elements of Arthuriana were wrested from Welsh hands, Geoffrey was able to explore their traditions more deeply. His focus no longer had to be restricted to neutralizing a political threat, and he was able to embark on an effort to reintegrate the Welsh into his narrative, albeit in a paternalistic, degrading way.

Conclusions

Geoffrey's version of Wales exists in the English imaginary as an Avalon-like space, a wellspring of magic connected only loosely to the civilized world. Geoffrey created this space in the *Historia*, then moved his version of the Welsh into it through Merlin's prophecies in *Prophetiae* and *Vita Merlini*. Later English writers built up the canon from there, using the residual store of Welsh magic to enrich their conceptions of English identity without fully having to recognize the historical relationship of the two. This relationship is founded on the image of

Britain as a unified whole whose unity was based on the hierarchy established in the *Historia*. By the end of *Vita Merlini*, Welshness existed in a new space within a larger British identity that now included the Normans.

Within Wales, the effect of the *Historia* as Geoffrey intended was somewhat mitigated by translators who did not preserve the integrity of the original text. The translation history reveals that Geoffrey was not entirely successful in taking Arthur away from the Welsh; Arthurian legend remained a powerful cultural force, as Welsh translators left out or altered the most anti-Welsh sections, carefully selecting which portions of the Latin text to emphasize and which to leave out entirely. This resulted in a Welsh body of work directly based on the *Historia*, but very different in content. These works warped Geoffrey's words back into the service of the Welsh cause, and to an extent reclaimed the legends. These translations were largely confined to Wales, though, and the original Latin text remained the most influential elsewhere. Later English texts, most notably *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, show that Anglo-Welsh tensions were never fully settled, and lived on in Arthuriana. Still, though, the portrayal of Welshness in *Sir Gawain* and other key texts seems to pull more from Geoffrey's construction than from the original Welsh legends. This suggests that while Geoffrey did not fully succeed at his colonial project, he did succeed in creating a new space for a diminished version Welshness within a larger British identity.

From Geoffrey's position, all was not simply taking. In the hybrid space he inhabited, an exchange happened in both directions. Welshness seeped into Geoffrey's consciousness, pulling him back again and again into the world of Welsh legend and Arthuriana.¹¹ His project would have fallen flat without Arthur, without Merlin, without prophecy. Summarizing the view of twelfth century historian William of Malmesbury, Ingham writes, "Truthful histories need

figures like Arthur ... sovereign icons to inspire and captivate their countrymen” (Ingham 22). Geoffrey used Arthurian legend to give his work an emotional impact and resonance across audiences, and to give form to his colonial objective. His project relied on an identification with the Welsh that went beyond simple appreciation or familiarity; his unique perspective allowed him to view the Welsh loss of sovereignty as tragic, but ultimately necessary. This tragedy became an integral part of the legends, and thus a significant portion of English culture is built on a mourning for the lost Welsh. This mourning is empty, however, until the reasons for this loss are recognized and the English reckon with the bones of the Welsh they have cast aside.

Endnotes

¹ Edward I went so far as to fake a discovery of Arthur's body at Glastonbury in order to suppress growing Welsh dissent and claim his place as an heir to Arthur (Barron 50).

² The History of the Kings of Britain. I will be referring to Geoffrey's texts by their original Latin titles, though the texts themselves are in translation. The styling of his texts in Latin was crucial to their political importance, as Geoffrey set out to create a hierarchy of languages by avoiding the vernacular.

³ The Triads were ways of organizing the oral tradition from memory, and consist of groupings of story elements together in threes. Today, most Welsh literature is preserved only in fragments in the form of these Triads. Many of these groupings contain some of the earliest references to Arthur, and as a whole they provide some of the clearest insights into early Welsh legend (*Trioedd*).

⁴ Gerald of Wales, a contemporary of Geoffrey whose history remained somewhat more bound by fact, famously hated Geoffrey, going so far as to publish an anecdote of a man who was cursed so that demons would appear in front of him if he was faced with a lie. The demons dispersed when presented with the Bible, but when he replaced the Bible with the *Historia*, the demons returned in great numbers. (Crick 60).

⁵ References to characters such as Gawaine (Gwalchmai), Cai (Caius), and Bedivere (Bedwyr) occur in the Triads as well as numerous books of the *Mabinogion* as some of the earliest depictions of Arthur's court, and these characters are notable for retaining much of their Celtic associations as the legends developed (*Trioedd*).

⁶ In the cycles of conquest shown in the *Historia*, the Normans replaced the Saxons as foreign rulers of Britain. In many cases, the Saxon presence in the text can be read as Norman.

Geoffrey allows the current political conflicts to play out through the Britons and Saxons, with Arthur in between as a representative of an insular whole.

⁷ Caliburn, Pridwen, and Ron. Geoffrey does not emphasize their traditional powers, but their very inclusion calls up the magical, otherworldly quality that surrounded the Welsh Arthur.

⁸ Vortigern is important here, because as king he was the one who invited the Saxons invaders into Britain. His tower's faulty ground is an allegory for the inability of the Saxons and the Celts to live in harmony, as it rests atop the warring White and Red Dragons.

⁹ The belief that Arthur will return to lead the Welsh back into power is referred to as The Breton Hope, and it is this hope that Geoffrey was so concerned with eliminating (Ingham 52).

¹⁰ Taliesin was a bard or poet in early Welsh sources, and by the eleventh century was commonly referred to as a prophet, much like Merlin (*Trioedd* 500-503).

¹¹ While a student at Oxford, Geoffrey acquired the nickname "Galfridus Arturus" or, Geoffrey Arthur, because of his obsession with Arthurian legend (Barron 12).

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