

# TEMENOS ACADEMY ONLINE PAPERS

SUMMER TERM 2020

2

IN SEARCH OF MERLIN

by

PROFESSOR JOHN CAREY



Merlin dictating his prophecies to his scribe, Blaise; French 13th century miniature

## In Search of Merlin

JOHN CAREY

**H**ow do you catch Merlin? According to the *Estoire de Merlin*, composed a little after the year 1200, the method to be followed is fairly straightforward. At the point in the tale at which the directions are given, Merlin has taken on the appearance of a wild man, and is hiding in the forests near Rome.

*Purchase pork seasoned with pepper, and milk and honey and hot bread, and bring four companions with you, and a boy who will turn the meat until it is cooked. And go in this forest to the thickest place that you can find, and put the table beside the fire, and the bread and the milk and the honey; and hide yourselves a little way from the fire. And do not doubt that the wild man will come without fail.*

In the story, this procedure works. Caught off guard after having enjoyed a heavy meal, the wizard is seized, and subsequently reveals all that his captors wish to know. But even though such a record of success is encouraging, I am not confident that I can repeat the performance. For one thing, I have an uncomfortable suspicion that the forests near Rome may no longer exist; and even if they were still to be found, Merlin himself surely moved on long ago. Worst of all, the talking stag who gave these instructions was himself Merlin, in yet another of his disguises, who had engineered the drama of his own capture for his own inscrutable purposes: he is unlikely to be caught in the same way a second time. I hope that you will bear with me, accordingly, if I fall back on techniques with which I am in any case better acquainted, and attempt to track Merlin down using the tools of scholarship.

Such a pursuit could lead in various directions. Starting with such romances as the *Estoire*, we could accompany Merlin forward through time, as he has been imagined by Ariosto, by Tennyson, by Edwin Arlington Robinson, by Charles Williams and C. S. Lewis, by T. H. White, by Harold Morland. There would surely be much to learn from such an exploration; but I am not at all qualified to serve as a guide in the regions that we would traverse. I am more at home further back, and I propose that we try to follow Merlin into the past.

The obvious person with whom to begin is Geoffrey of Monmouth: the twelfth-century author who held Europe enthralled for centuries, in a bewilderment of mingled doubt and credulity, with his audacious claim to have translated the whole early history of Britain, from its first beginnings down to the seventh century, out of an ancient Welsh manuscript. It is Geoffrey who appears first to have given us the name 'Merlin', which he adapted from the Welsh *Myrddin*. Find Geoffrey's source, and we shall surely have found our answer.

But in fact the road forks when we have barely set out upon the way: for Geoffrey tells us two stories of Merlin. The first is in his purported translation from Old Welsh, the *History of the Kings of Britain*. Here we are told that Vortigern, the wicked and incompetent king who invited the ancestors of the English into Britain, sought toward the end of his reign to build a fortress for himself, high in the fastnesses of

the north Welsh mountains, in which he could be safe from his many enemies. But every day, whatever had been built was swallowed by the earth, and no progress was being made. Vortigern's magicians told him that the only solution was to find a boy who did not have a father, to kill him, and to mix his blood with the mortar. If this were done, the walls would stand firm.

Messengers were sent all over Britain in search of such a child. Near Carmarthen, in the west of Wales, the messengers overheard two boys quarrelling, one of them chiding the other for not having a father. The boy was Merlin, also called Ambrosius; he and his mother were brought before the king. On being questioned, she at first said that she had never been with a man, but then described having been seduced by a mysterious entity. The boy Merlin proceeded to confute the magicians, and to save his own life, by demonstrating that he knew what they did not know: the true reason for the failure of the work upon the fortress. Two dragons, red and white, were the cause, as they struggled with one another in a pool beneath the foundations. The dragons were dug up, and Merlin explained that their fighting symbolised the wars between the Britons and the invaders: the red dragon represented the former, and it is for this reason that a red dragon has become the emblem of Wales. Merlin went on to utter a lengthy series of prophecies, which exercised great influence throughout the Middle Ages and beyond—it is this influence which Shakespeare mocks, when he has Lear's Fool say, 'This prophecy Merlin shall make, for I live before his time'. Merlin performed further wonders, most notable among them his magical contriving of the conception of Arthur himself; but with Arthur's birth he vanishes from Geoffrey's narrative. In all of this, we can recognise some of the outlines of the figure who was to emerge as the great wizard of Arthurian romance.

But this was not all that Geoffrey had to tell of Merlin: toward the end of his life he wrote a lengthy narrative poem, *The Life of Merlin*, in which the prophet appears very differently. Here Merlin is a minor Welsh prince who, taking part in a disastrous battle in the north of Britain, was overcome by such horror at the carnage that he fled into the forest, to live only among animals. His condition, regarded as madness, brought with it the gift of prophetic insight, a gift which Merlin was able to demonstrate when he was captured and temporarily restored to courtly society. Eventually he regained his sanity, but chose to remain in the forest: here he studied the stars, prophesied, and discussed the wonders of the cosmos with his sister and with the poet Taliesin.

Geoffrey himself asserted that the Merlin of the *Life* was the same as the Merlin of the *History*; but more than a century divides the time of Vortigern from that of the northern battle, and the two portrayals have almost nothing in common. Within a few years, other writers began to assert that there had in reality been two Merlins: Merlin Ambrosius, who revealed the dragons; and Merlin Silvester, who fled to the forest. Whether we think in terms of two Merlins or of one, we certainly have two stories to deal with, and in what follows I shall consider each in turn. I shall begin with Merlin Silvester, the wild prophet of the woods.

Geoffrey has given us a vivid, paradoxical portrait: that of a man whose human feelings drive him to renounce his own humanity. Once Merlin has left society, despite the terrible hardships that he experiences in the winter, he has no desire to return: when King Rhydderch offers him rich robes, shining gems and precious goblets, hawks and hounds and horses, he replies:

*Let great lords have those things, they who are bewildered by their poverty: for they are not content with a little, but grab for as much as possible. To these I prefer the groves and the spreading oaks of the Caledonian forest, and the lofty mountains, with lush meadows below.*

Eventually, he makes the concession of requesting shelter—quite commodious shelter, it must be said—for the winter months. But the new arrangements, although elaborate, are better suited for contemplation than for luxury. Merlin says:

*Build houses in the woods, and provide servants who will attend to me, and prepare food when the earth denies its grain, and the tree its fruit. Prior to the other houses build one, far off, which will have seventy doors, and as many windows. Through these I will be able to see fire-spewing Phoebus together with Venus; and to examine the stars, moving in the sky by night, that will teach me what is to befall the folk of the realm. And let the same number of scribes be present, instructed to write what I say, and to study it, and to entrust the song to tablets.*

This Merlin of the forest, pacifist, nature-loving, and enlightened, is immediately congenial to many of us today. But what lies behind Geoffrey's story? Is there a larger, and older, context in which it can be situated?

As has long been recognised, Geoffrey's *Life of Merlin* is closely related to two other medieval sources: a collection of Welsh poems associated with a prophetic wild man *Myrddin* (whose name, as I have already mentioned, is clearly that on which Geoffrey based his own *Merlinus*); and two Latin anecdotes concerning a figure named *Lailoken* (also a madman, dwelling in the northern wilderness, and gifted with powers of foresight). All three lose their sanity because of a battle, and flee into the forest: there can be no doubt that Lailoken, Myrddin and Merlin are versions of one another. Since all of the stories locate the crucial battle, and the protagonist's subsequent forest existence, in the north of Britain, this was surely the setting of the original legend. The generally received view, which I believe to be correct, is that the wild prophet was at first named Lailoken; when the tale concerning him migrated to Wales, as did many of the traditions of the British regions known as the 'Old North', he came to be called Myrddin because this was already the name of a famous prophet there. I shall have more to say about this other Myrddin presently.

The poems name the conflict that drove Myrddin to madness as the battle of Arfderydd: in the *Annals of Wales*, this is said to have been fought in the year 573; and it is described in the Welsh *Triads* as one of the 'Three Futile Battles of the Island of Britain'. One of the Lailoken anecdotes evidently refers to Arfderydd when it describes the battle as having been fought on 'the plain between Liddel and Carwannock': this has been identified as Arthuret, north of Carlisle. The same text

gives a more vivid account than does Geoffrey of the experience that triggered the prophet's mental crisis:

*The sky began to split open above me. And I heard, like a mighty thunder, a voice from heaven saying to me: 'Lailoken, Lailoken! Because you alone are guilty of the blood of all these slain, you alone will pay for the crimes of all. For you are handed over to the angels of Satan until the day of your death; your companions will be the beasts of the forest.' And when I turned my gaze to the voice that I had heard, I saw an exceeding splendour, which human nature could not bear. For I saw the innumerable troops of an army in the air, resembling the brilliance of lightning, holding fiery lances and glittering javelins in their hands, which they brandished at me most savagely. As I was then beside myself, a malevolent spirit seized me, and doomed me to be among the wild beasts of the forest as you see.*

Gerald of Wales, who seems to have had access to yet another version of the tale at the end of the twelfth century, says merely that Merlin was driven mad by the sight of a 'terrifying portent', a *monstrum horribile*, in the air above the battle.

Lailoken/Myrddin was not the only wild man in British tradition. In the poems attributed to him, Myrddin is made to say that his wits have departed with 'the wild men of the mountain' (*gwyllion mynydd*), and to speak of 'wild men' as his companions—so there were many such beings. In one cryptic eulogy, horses are said to be 'as swift as the motion of wild men': a simile implying that such beings were possessed of great speed, just as Lailoken is at one point described as leaping with the alacrity of 'a goat escaped from a hunter's snare'.

In the early Welsh Arthurian tale *How Culhwch Won Olwen* there is mention of another such figure, called Cynedyr or Cyledyr. We are told that he was 'nine times wilder than the wildest beast of the mountain', and that only he could control two exceptionally formidable hunting dogs—whether because of his swiftness, or his wildness, or both. The most memorable, and most troubling, account of him forms part of a narrative of hostilities in the north.

*Gwythyr son of Greiddawl assembled an army, and came to do battle with Gwynn son of Nudd. And he was defeated by Gwynn; and there were captured Greid son of Eri, and Glinneu son of Taran, and Gwrgwst Ledlwm, and Dyfnarth his son. And he captured Penn son of Nethawg, and Nwython, and Cyledyr the Wild his son. And Nwython was killed, and his heart was taken out, and Cyledyr was compelled to eat the heart of his father; and on account of that Cyledyr went mad. Arthur heard of that, and came into the North. And he summoned Gwynn to him, and released the noblemen that he had in prison, and made peace between Gwynn son of Nudd and Gwythyr son of Greiddawl.*

In this story too, then, a man is driven mad by the horror of war, and the context is a battle fought in the north of Britain: the tale of Cyledyr, and the tale of Lailoken/Myrddin/Merlin, are realisations of a single pattern. And, although it has left traces only in *Culhwch*, the indications are that this legend too had a wide currency: not only are there two versions of the protagonist's name (Cyledyr and Cynedyr), but his father too is given two names (Nwython and Hettwn), and to one of these names two different epithets are attached ('Leper' and 'Silver-brow'). Such a

range of variation surely reflects the dynamics of oral storytelling: the terrible fate of Cyledyr/Cynedyr must have been told and retold.

We have seen how, in Geoffrey's *Life of Merlin*, the atrocities of the battlefield lead to revulsion from humankind, and hence to withdrawal into the forest: trauma drives its victim to the wilderness. The same thing evidently happened to Cyledyr, who became 'nine times wilder than the wildest beast of the mountain'. The association has deep roots in the Welsh language: the word *gwyllt* means both 'wild' and 'mad'.

There is evidence that tales of the same sort were told in Ireland: that the story type was part of the traditions of the Celtic-speaking peoples of both islands suggests that it derives from very ancient times. But the Irish legend on which I will concentrate here is evidence of a different kind, as it appears to have been borrowed directly from that of Lailoken. This is the tale known as *The Madness of Suibne*—the basis of Seamus Heaney's *Sweeney Astray*, and one of the primary inspirations of Flann O'Brien's brilliant and bizarre novel *At Swim-Two-Birds*. Although the full narrative is known to us only in a version of the twelfth century—roughly contemporary with Geoffrey of Monmouth, in other words—the borrowing from Britain to Ireland must have taken place in the seventh or eighth century, meaning that the Lailoken story too must be at least that old.

Much has been written concerning the relationship between these Irish and British tales: for present purposes, I shall accept the consensus of current scholarship, and shall consider *The Madness of Suibne* simply as a sort of Irish counterpart of *The Life of Merlin*. Like Merlin, Suibne goes mad in a battle—in his case, the battle of Mag Roth, fought in the year 637 in what is now County Down. He too flees into the forest, but in a more fantastical fashion: where Lailoken and Cyledyr are merely said to be phenomenally swift, Suibne becomes so light that he can spring to the tops of trees, perch on the most delicate of twigs and, at one point, bound clear from Ireland to Scotland. His entire body is covered with a thick growth of fur, or (for the Irish word *clúmh* can mean either) perhaps of feathers. Suibne's madness does not come upon him as a consequence of the fighting itself, but is caused by the bellowing shouts of the armies as they approach one another:

*When Suibne heard those great cries, and their sounds and their echoes in the clouds of heaven and in the walls of the firmament, he looked up then, so that battle-horror filled him, and gloom and frenzy and flitting and distraction and flightiness and unsteadiness, instability and impatience, the hatred of every place in which he was and the love of every place that he had not yet reached. His fingers twitched and his feet trembled, his heart raced and his senses recoiled, his sight was distorted; his naked weapons fell from his hands, so that he went ... in wildness and in madness, like any bird of the air.*

While it vividly conveys the state into which Suibne is plunged, this description leaves the cause of his transformation rather mysterious: when Suibne 'looked up'—as Lailoken did, and as Merlin did in Gerald of Wales's account of him—what was it that he saw? We can get some idea of this from a passage later in the tale, which relates Suibne's relapse into madness after a brief interval of lucidity:

*There appeared to him a strange vision at midnight: bare red headless bodies, and heads without bodies, and five rough grey bristly heads, without a frame or a body between them, shrieking and bounding back and forth upon the road. When he came among them he heard them conversing, and this is what they were saying: 'He is a madman,' said the first head. 'A madman from Ulster,' said the second head. 'Follow him well,' said the third head. 'May the following be long,' said the fourth head. 'Until he reaches the sea,' said the fifth head. All at once they rose up against him. He arose before them across one bush after another; and although the valley was broad he did not linger there, but leaped from one side to the other, and from the top of one hill to the next.*

The heads ('heads of goats and heads of dogs, for it seemed to him that they were mingled with the other heads') pursue him, thrusting and dashing themselves against him, until he escapes 'into the light clouds of the air', a leaping madman once more. Here we have indeed a *monstrum horribile*, such as Gerald of Wales relates that Merlin saw in the air.

Like Lailoken and his counterparts, Suibne had powers of clairvoyance and foresight: as he said, 'Knowledge comes to me from the Lord every day, in the morning and at noon'. But his most celebrated utterances were poems describing the world of wild nature in which he spent his existence: lyrical praises of its beauty, but also evocations of its harrowing hardships. Similar accounts are to be found in the Myrddin poems, and in the speeches that Geoffrey of Monmouth places in the mouth of Merlin.

The figures of Merlin Silvester, of Myrddin the wild man, of Lailoken, of Suibne, reinforce and enrich one another. Contemplating their stories, we encounter ideas whose further implications open out almost endlessly. The relationship between humanity and nature is paradoxically reconfigured, transcending any sense of their duality: when humans become 'inhuman' in their behaviour toward one another, our own wounded humanity takes refuge in the nonhuman world. Who, in the end, is more 'human': the bellowing killers on the battlefield, or the traumatised poet in the forest? And there are other dualities that are transcended here as well: that of self and world, as the 'wildness' of the maddened mind is somehow identified with the 'wildness' of the untamed woods; that of folly and wisdom as, in the breaking of the mind, the way is opened to an inner vision to which the rest of us are blind.

What of Merlin Ambrosius, the child without a father? On first consideration, there does not appear to be much that is mysterious here. Geoffrey was closely following one of the stories in *Historia Brittonum*: a collection of lore composed in northern Wales some three centuries earlier, on which he drew repeatedly, but whose influence he never acknowledged. Here, Geoffrey departs from this source in three significant respects. In *Historia Brittonum*, the boy is said to be named Ambrosius (or, in Welsh, *Emrys Gwledig*), while Geoffrey calls him Merlin (or, at one point, 'Merlin who was also called Ambrosius'); and while the *Historia* states that he was found in Glywysing, in the east of Wales, Geoffrey places his discovery in Carmarthen, in the west. The account of the child's parentage is also different. In *Historia Brittonum* the mother insists: 'I do not know how he was conceived in my

womb, but one thing I do know: that I have never known a man.' Subsequently, however, the child states that his father was 'one of the consuls of the Roman race'—a contradiction which is never resolved. In Geoffrey's telling too, the mother begins by saying 'I know nobody who has begotten him in me', but then goes on to speak of having submitted to the advances of a being who often appeared to her as a beautiful youth, but who then disappeared again, and who sometimes spoke to her invisibly. Maugantius, one of the king's wise men, offers an explanation:

*I have found in the books of our philosophers, and in many histories, that many men have been begotten in this fashion. For as Apuleius says in On the God of Socrates, there dwell spirits between the moon and the earth whom we call incubus demons. These have in part the nature of men, in part however the nature of angels; and when they wish they take to themselves human forms and lie with women.*

It is exciting to find the Neoplatonist writer Apuleius, better known as the author of *The Golden Ass*, being quoted in Dark Age Britain. But in fact Maugantius (or rather Geoffrey) is not drawing on Apuleius here, but rather on the account of Apuleius' ideas that is given by Saint Augustine in *The City of God*. Nor does Apuleius, even as reported by Augustine, have anything to say concerning impregnation by spirits: for this, the source appears to be another passage, in which Augustine describes the procreative activities of 'demons whom the Gauls call *dusii*', citing the authority of 'so many people, and of such a sort, that to deny this would seem impudence'. And so, in a roundabout way, Geoffrey's account of Merlin's origins does appear to have its roots in pagan Celtic lore. But can we find less fanciful indications of its background?

Remarkable parallels are afforded by two brief tales from Ireland. The first of these relates the birth of Morand, one of the paradigmatic wise men of medieval Irish tradition. Morand's father was a usurping king named Cairpre of the Cat's Head, both of whose two previous sons had been born with their heads covered with a caul, and had been killed because it was thought that they were monsters. When Morand was born in the same condition, he was taken to the sea to be drowned. But the caul split open when a wave broke over his head: as his face was revealed, the newborn uttered a poem beginning with the words 'Worship, you people, God above the fortress of the world!'; and his life was spared.

The child who is the subject of the second story is a less well-known figure, named Noídiu of the Nine Judgements:

*Noídiu of the Nine Judgements was the son of Fingel, the daughter of Dáire son of Dedad, and of the phantom that came from the sea. Watch was kept over her, lest anyone make her pregnant, for his druids had told Dáire that the length of his life would be only until his daughter bore a son, and that was proved true.*

*Once, then, the girl was out playing with the daughter of Noíden son of Noímall, on the shore of the sea, when she saw the phantom. He had his will with her, and made her pregnant; and she carried that pregnancy, it was said, until the end of nine months and nine years. Then she gave birth to the boy, and Dáire died, and [the boy] gave nine judgements as soon as he was born.*



His mother was horrified by Noídiu's precocious speech, and wished to kill him, but through the wisdom of his words he prevailed upon her to grant him life.

Common to these two stories are elements that are also central to the tale of Merlin Ambrosius: both Morand and Noídiu are threatened with death at the outset of their lives, and both are saved by the uncanny eloquence of their words. It is also noteworthy that for Morand, as for Merlin, the threat comes from an unrightful king—Cairpre of the Cat's Head in one case, Vortigern in the other—and that Noídiu, like Merlin, is fathered by a spirit on a virgin. There are, moreover, hints that Morand too may have had supernatural parentage. In one version of his story, he is only conceived after all the men of Ireland have fasted and prayed to the gods in order that the queen should become pregnant; and on the night before the baby has been condemned to die, a 'man from the Otherworld' appears to his mother in a dream, and tells her that her child should be taken to the seashore, not drowned in mud as had at first been planned. It is not hard to surmise that this dream messenger was the child's real father; and that he, like the father of Noídiu, was a spirit of the sea.

These stories, like the stories of wild men that we were considering earlier, draw on traditions which belonged to the ancestors shared by the Irish and the Welsh, and hence must go back many centuries before Christianity. In this case, the evidence for such antiquity is afforded by the similarity between the tale of the birth of Morand, at which we have just been looking, and a Welsh legend that relates the origins of the supreme poet Taliesin, first attested in a manuscript of the sixteenth century.

This tells of a wise woman named Ceridwen, who set a boy named Gwion to watch a pot in which she was brewing a drink of magical knowledge. When three drops of scalding liquid flew out of the pot onto Gwion's finger, and he put the finger into his mouth to ease the pain, all of the potion's knowledge passed into him, leaving the rest of the liquid valueless. With his illuminated awareness, Gwion realised that Ceridwen would be furious at the loss: he fled from her, passing through the shapes of many creatures as she too transformed herself again and again to pursue him. At last he became a grain of wheat, and she became a hen and swallowed him; nine months later, she bore him as her child.

Although Ceridwen could not bring herself to harm him now that he was her own offspring, she still wished to be rid of him; so she put him into a leather bag, and threw it into the sea. The bag floated hither and thither for forty years, until at last it was caught in a weir. When it was cut open, the child's face appeared: he had grown no older, despite all the time that had passed. The name *Taliesin*, which means 'radiant brow', comes from the exclamation of his discoverers at their first sight of his countenance. Immediately he began to recite poetry, in which the supernatural reach of his knowledge was revealed.

Taliesin, then, is another all-knowing wonder child threatened with early death, like Merlin and Ambrosius and Morand and Noídiu. Ceridwen, moreover, conceives him without the participation of a man. There is a particularly striking parallel with the story of Morand: the image of a concealing skin or membrane being pierced at the shore of the sea, to disclose the face of a child who bursts into precocious

utterance. All of these stories evidently go back, through many variations, to a single age-old source.

If Merlin Silvester, and his cloud of witnesses, confronted us with profound and challenging spiritual possibilities, this is no less the case with Merlin Ambrosius. Here we are brought face to face with the mystery of consciousness itself: what it means for the thinking self to emerge into the riddle of existence. If the child, at its first coming into the world, already knows everything, then what is the source of knowledge? And what is knowledge? And who are we? In one early Irish text, an omniscient youth says to Saint Columba: 'Father and mother do not know what they bear'; and when the hero Cú Chulainn meets a diminutive entity, floating in a vessel that carries him upstream in defiance of earthly time and causality, the stranger expresses his unconditioned nature with the words:

*I am not a lad, I am not a man, I am not a child; God's secret knowledge has made me gifted.*

The knowledge that we spend our whole lives learning is only precious insofar as it has nothing to do with time. We are something else, because we come from somewhere else. Taliesin too, in one of the poems attributed to him, is made to say: 'It was not from mother and father, when I was made.'

There is a further aspect of the image to be reflected upon. In the cases of Morand, of Noídiu, and of Taliesin, the existence of the wise child is variously, but essentially, bound up with the sea. This powerful association is found elsewhere in Irish tradition as well, and there too in tales of uncanny knowledge. Mongán, a seventh-century prince who visited the Otherworld, passed through a multitude of forms, and remembered events from long before his birth, was the son of the sea-god Manannán. And there is the lad whom I have mentioned as speaking to Saint Columba, who despite his youth could remember the most distant past—and who also told of what is hidden beneath the sea.

All of this is, I think, of real interest and importance—but where is Merlin? Has he not slipped through our fingers yet again? We have found that Merlin Silvester is really just a version of Lailoken, the mad prophet of the Old North; and that Merlin Ambrosius is just a version of Ambrosius, the wise child from *Historia Brittonum*. But who then is the real Merlin? Is he anything more than a name, a mask that others wear? And if he is no more than that, then why use the name at all? For that matter, where did that name—or rather the name *Myrddin*, its Welsh forerunner—come from?

The received answer to this last question seems almost like another of the wizard's magical disguises: it is held that Myrddin's name comes from the name of the Welsh town of Carmarthen, or *Caerfyrddin* as it is known in Welsh. In ancient times this was *Moridūnon*, a Celtic name meaning 'Sea-fortress'. As ancient British changed into early Welsh, *Moridūnon* became *Myrddin*. This in turn was compounded with the word *caer*, for a fortified settlement: just as the older *Luguwalion* became *Caerleil*, or Carlisle; and *Eborakon* became *Caerefrawg*, or York; so *Caer* and *Myrddin* came together as *Caerfyrddin*. But such names beginning with *Caer-* can also have the names of persons as their second element: *Caer Arianrhod* is

named after the princess *Arianrhod*, and *Caergai* after the warrior *Cai*, the original of Sir Kay of the Round Table. And so *Caerfyrddin*, or ‘Stronghold of the Sea-fortress’, was reinterpreted as ‘Stronghold of Myrddin’. We can remember that, in Geoffrey’s telling of the story, it is in Carmarthen that the fatherless boy Merlin was discovered.

With this scenario, Merlin seems to have evaporated completely, dissolving into a misunderstood placename. Are we really left with no more than this? Was Merlin never there at all?

This question brings another question with it. If *Myrddin* is a name without substance, having no basis save a faulty analysis of the name of Carmarthen, then how did it (and Merlin) acquire such potent associations? How is it that Myrddin came to be imagined to have been the supreme prophet of the Welsh? Why was his name given to Lailoken, when the latter’s story came from the north? Why did Geoffrey change the Ambrosius of the *Historia Brittonum* to ‘Merlin who was also called Ambrosius’?

Let us recall, in this connection, that Noídiu of the Nine Judgements was the child of a spirit from the sea, and that Mongán’s father was the god of the sea. Taliesin came from the sea; and it was the sea that revealed the face of Morand, and thereby evoked his first utterance. Is it a coincidence that ‘Carmarthen’ derives from the ancient *Moridūnon*: a name whose first element, *mori*, is the Celtic word for the sea? If the personal name *Myrddin* is indeed based on the placename, then its first syllable originally meant ‘sea’ as well, and so did the first syllable of the name *Merlin*. And the same word is present in the names which the poems assign to Myrddin’s father—Morfryn—and to his three brothers—Morgenau, Morial or Mordaf, and Morien.

The story which Geoffrey of Monmouth adapted from *Historia Brittonum*, when he brought Merlin into the *History of the Kings of Britain*, does not connect the boy Ambrosius with the sea in any way; but, as we have seen, all of the tales with which that story can most closely be compared do involve such a connection. And so, apparently, does the name *Myrddin*, which Geoffrey transformed into *Merlinus*; and so do the names of Myrddin’s father and brothers. Perhaps, when the name of an imagined *Myrddin* was extrapolated from that of the ‘Sea-fortress’, it seemed natural to link such a figure with the sea, and hence with a tale of the all-knowing child of a sea-spirit. Geoffrey may have heard of such a tale; may have recognised its resemblance to the story of Ambrosius in *Historia Brittonum*; and may have borrowed Myrddin/Merlin’s name, and the Carmarthen connection, accordingly. This could help to explain why the theme of inhuman fatherhood is so much more pronounced in Geoffrey’s version than it is in the *Historia*.

Or it may all have happened in some other way. The temptation to retrace the chain of development is hard to resist, but this kind of detective work is ultimately not the most important thing. More valuable are the parallels that allow us to gain a deeper sense of the story’s symbolism, and of its meaning; and these parallels are there, whatever may have been the details of borrowing and reinterpretation.

There is a further aspect to all of this, which carries us even deeper into uncertainty. The name *Morand*—which is, indeed, teasingly half-similar to the names *Myrddin* and *Merlin*—also has *mor-* as its first syllable. Linguistically, however, this cannot represent *mori*, the old Celtic word for ‘sea’. Instead, it has

been argued that it comes from the rarer word *morā*: meaning ‘goblin’ or ‘horror’, and cognate with the second syllable of our word ‘nightmare’. Morand’s birth tale, as we have seen, takes him to the sea; but his name, although it seems to evoke the sea as well, associates him rather with sinister spirits. Might his story—and, by extension, the other stories of extraordinary children that we have been considering—reflect an ancient interplay of the connotations of Celtic *mori* and *morā*?

The best-known derivative of *morā* in Irish is *Morrígain* or ‘Horror-Queen’, the name of the goddess of war. This deity seems to personify, not the physical aspects of warfare, but the psychological: terror, confusion, frenzy and madness. When she and her sisters shriek above the battlefield, men lose their minds, or their lives, in the sheer extremity of fear. The Morrígain is, in fact, just such an airborne *monstrum horribile* as was the vision, whatever it may have been, which according to Gerald of Wales drove Merlin Silvester mad: one early text describes her as a *monstrum in feminae figura*.

And so the two trails which parted long ago, one path following Merlin Silvester, the other Merlin Ambrosius, have come together in Ireland, and in the figure of Morand: an all-knowing infant, whose name resonates with the horror of battle. The two Merlins seem, on some level, to be one after all: the son of the sea-spirit and the victim of the war-demon, wisdom from beyond time on the lips of the child, wisdom from beyond reason in the prophecies of the madman. To find these congruences on both sides of the Irish Sea, revealed in part by ancient etymologies, suggests that we are dealing with something whose roots are deep. But I cannot see how to tie the various threads together into a coherent story, and I cannot deny the possibility that these last steps on our journey are held together by no more than what the world calls chance.

But, in the words of Kathleen Raine, ‘What difference? I have seen.’ Again, what matters most in all of this is not a linear sequence of evolving versions, or a pedigree of proliferating influences, but a vision. And if that vision cannot be wholly captured by our cleverness, this may be grounds for cherishing it all the more thoughtfully, for contemplating it with an even deeper attention. Merlin has escaped us after all. As he vanishes among the trees, however, he has not left us empty-handed.

### *Further Reading*

The scholarly literature concerning Merlin is vast, and I make no attempt to give any account of it here. In what follows, I limit myself to providing references for the main texts that have been discussed in this essay, together with a few other writings in which Merlin figures.

The *Estoire de Merlin* has been translated by R. T. Pickens, *The Story of Merlin*, Lancelot-Grail 2 (Cambridge, 2010). Another of the most important Old French narratives concerning Merlin is that of Robert de Boron: the prose version of this has been translated by N. Bryant in *Merlin and the Grail: Joseph of Arimathea, Merlin, Perceval* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008), pp. 45-114.

Geoffrey of Monmouth's two narrative works are both available in translation: *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. L. Thorpe (Harmondsworth, 1973); and *Life of Merlin: Geoffrey of Monmouth Vita Merlini*, trans. B. Clarke (Cardiff, 1973). Gerald's account of the two Merlins can be found in Gerald of Wales, *The Journey Through Wales/The Description of Wales*, trans. L. Thorpe (Harmondsworth, 1978), pp. 192-3.

Translations of all of the Myrddin poems by J. Bollard are included in *The Romance of Merlin*, ed. P. Goodrich (New York and London, 1990), pp. 16-52. The same book contains translations of the two Lailoken texts by A. Galyon and Z. P. Thundy, on pp. 3-11.

A fine translation of the story of *Culhwch* is given by S. Davies, *The Mabinogion* (Oxford, 2007), pp. 179-213. The most accurate translation of the story of Suibne is still that of J. G. O'Keefe, *Buile Suibhne: The Frenzy of Suibhne*, Irish Texts Society 12 (London, 1913); cf. S. Heaney, *Sweeney Astray: A Version from the Irish* (Derry and Dublin, 1983).

For a full translation of the *Historia Brittonum*, see J. Morris, *Nennius: British History and the Welsh Annals* (London, 1980). For several of the Irish tales mentioned, see: W. Stokes, 'The Irish Ordeals, Cormac's Adventure in the Land of Promise, and the Decision as to Cormac's Sword', *Irische Texte* 3:1 (1891) 183-221, at pp. 206-8; M. E. Dobbs, 'The Story of Noidhiu Nae-mbrethach', *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 19 (1933) 48-52; N. White, *Compert Mongáin and Three Other Early Mongán Tales* (Maynooth, 2006); J. Carey, 'The Lough Foyle Colloquy Texts', *Ériu* 52 (2002) 53-87, at p. 61; *idem*, 'Cú Chulainn and Senbecc', in *The Celtic Heroic Age: Literary Sources for Ancient Celtic Europe and Early Ireland and Wales*, ed. J. T. Koch and J. Carey, 1st ed. (Malden, 1994), pp. 53-4.

A translation of the earliest surviving version of the story of Taliesin is included in P. Ford, *The Mabinogi and Other Medieval Welsh Tales* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1977), pp. 159-81. For another version, see C. Guest, *The Mabinogion*, 3 vols (Llandoverly, 1859), iii.355-89.