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“Who Now Shall Believe That Liar, Merlin?": The Prophecies of Merlin in History

Abstract

This research article examines Merlin's prophecies and how their political use has shifted from one of belief and of direct political significance, to general disbelief. It examines how the use of prophecy exploited the prestige of King Arthur and Merlin. Tactics used to take advantage of this prestige ranged from rulers claiming blood relation to King Arthur to learned men interpreting existing prophecies. Sources, such as Wace, Geoffrey of Monmouth, and modern day novelists, are used to illustrate the prophecies' evolution from the twelfth to the twentieth century and what it means.

Keywords

Merlin, prophecies

In the 1130s, Orderic Vitalis, a Benedictine monk, happened upon the *Prophetiae Merlini*. He wrote:

“Men well read in histories can easily apply his
predictions, if they know the
lives of Hengist and Katigern, Pascent and Arthur,
Aethelberht and Edwin,
Oswald and Oswy, Caedwalla and Alred,
and other rulers of the Angles and
Britons up to the times of Henry and Gruffudd, who still,
uncertain of their lot,
await the future events that are ordained for them.”¹

In writing this, Vitalis was participating in what would become a long tradition of dealing with and interpreting prophecies attributed to Merlin.² To judge from his above-cited statement, Vitalis seems to have believed wholeheartedly in the credibility of such prophecies, supported as they were by his own historical knowledge. However, in spite of the remarkable cultural endurance of the prophecies of Merlin, they were destined to enjoy a complicated relationship with popular belief in the centuries after their rise to popularity. The prophecies moved from an era in which they enjoyed widespread belief, to an era in which, though belief was still common, the prophecies were met with ambivalence. This ambivalence means the prophecies no longer retain the same political significance, but their legacy continues.

Many scholarly men had turned their attentions to prophecy and one often finds names like Merlin, Bede and Geoffrey of Monmouth referred to as authorities on the subject.³ Major examples of this include “The Prophecy of Six Kings to Follow King John,” the prophecy of Thomas Becket, the prophecy of John of Bridlington and the prophecy of Thomas of Erceldoune.⁴ The tradition of interpreting Merlin’s prophecies arguably began with the work of Geoffrey of Monmouth. Geoffrey of Monmouth, an Anglo-Norman bishop and early historian, wrote the prophecies of Merlin in the 1130s.⁵ This was ostensibly done at the behest of Alexander, Bishop of Lincoln, who commissioned Geoffrey’s translation of the prophecies of Merlin.⁶ Geoffrey wrote them originally as a work to be appended to his *History of the Kings of Britain*, but the prophecies’ popularity

superseded that of his historical work and continued to circulate independently of the *History of the Kings of Britain*.⁷ Geoffrey played a considerable role in developing the idea of political prophecy, and particularly Merlin's role as a prophet therein.⁸ He also pioneered the technique of using animal imagery to make his prophecies more amenable to interpretation. It is true that, because it was often assumed that God preferred to communicate by means of opaque images that would provoke thought, previous prophecies were also obscurely written.⁹ However, the specific use of animal imagery did not become dominant until Geoffrey of Monmouth had published his translations of Merlin's prophecies.¹⁰ A veritable laundry list of animals featured in his prophecies.¹¹ Geoffrey's deliberate vagueness of the prophecies did not prevent him from mentioning regions by name. In fact, regions are identified with relative frequency in names such as the "Boar of Cornwall," perhaps to create the illusion of specificity or simply to ground the prophecies in the real world. Human identities, on the other hand, are cloaked in vague animal terms.¹² This balance of specificity and deliberate vagueness and ambiguity served to make readers feel more connected to the prophecy as they attempted to divine its meaning. With the right balance of detail and vagueness, which Geoffrey seems to have struck, readers would instinctually try to discern meaning in any apparently prophetic text.¹³ Therefore people interpreted the prophecies as they pleased, to fit with their own agendas and worldviews. Within two generations, the Welsh ecclesiastical historian Gerald of Wales, the French abbot Suger of St. Denis, the Anglo-Norman monk and historian Orderic Vitalis, the French theologian Alain de Lille, and others had all contributed interpretations of Merlin's prophecies.¹⁴ As late as the eighteenth century, the Welsh antiquarian Thomas Pennant claimed that Owain invoked Merlin's prophecy that the eagle would muster a great army of Welsh to defeat the enemy at this place. The number of interpreters who believed that Merlin had written about events in their own era shows that prophecy is an extremely malleable genre.¹⁵

Translators of prophecies often took advantage of this—a vague prophecy could never be proven wrong, and could remain relevant beyond the writer's lifetime, unlike a more specific prophecy, which could only be relevant to events the writer could know or suspect in his lifetime. This was useful in fostering the sort of widespread belief that Merlin's prophecies then enjoyed. The same sort of semi-ambiguity is used in the "Prophecy of Six," in which King Henry is identified and the rest of the animals mentioned in the prophecy are left up to readers' interpretation, according to how they saw Henry in relation to other prominent figures of the time.¹⁶

In this way, interpretations of this prophecy illustrate a great deal about interpreters' views of Henry and his role in politics. Countless other royals have also been assigned roles in other prophecies. For instance, an eagle who was prophesied to spread "his wings ouer all this realme [and] aftir that shall neuer bee king in [England] but all shalbe holden thempour" was later said to be Charles V.¹⁷ The longer a text survived, the more circumstances to which it could potentially be applied. The prophecy would then seem more prescient and would garner more prestige that would reflect on its author-translator.¹⁸ Thus, prophecies were assured of more widespread and longer-lasting relevance and therefore popularity. For example, any number of situations could potentially fall under the vagaries of passages such this:

"A detestable bird shall go to the valley of Galabes, and shall raise it to be a high mountain. Upon the top thereof it shall also plant an oak, and build its nest in its branches. Three eggs shall be produced in the nest, from whence shall come forth a fox, a wolf, and a bear."¹⁹

Not all animal references had to be so unclear, though. One prophecy describes a "lion of justice" whose "cubs will become fishes of the sea." Since King Henry I was known for his judicial reforms, contemporary readers, for whom the drowning death of Henry I's son William had been scarcely a decade previous, had no trouble making the connection between the prophecy and the events that had befallen English royalty.²⁰ Geoffrey likely described events he knew would be fresh in his public's mind to make other predictions in the text seem more credible. During the civil war for the English throne, which began fewer than ten years after Geoffrey's publication of Merlin's prophecies, some claimed Stephen de Blois, a contender for the throne, had in fact fathered Henry I, the child of his adversary, the Empress Matilda, and that this had been predicted by a prophecy of Merlin.²¹ Since the civil war between Matilda and Stephen, known as the English Anarchy, was by its nature a contentious matter, and since it was almost contemporary with the appearance of Geoffrey of Monmouth's prophecies of Merlin, other animals were also interpreted as figures in it. Prophecies could be used on either side of the conflict to further an agenda, by framing a contender's victory as either inevitable or morally desirable, as best befit the prophecy and circumstances. By capitalizing on knowledge of events that had already taken place, as Geoffrey did, scholars could add a further sense of legitimacy to their work, and thereby predispose

readers to look more favourably upon those prophecies that dealt with unknown, future events. An example of how well this strategy could work can be found in Suger of St. Denis, who praised Merlin for his accuracy in predicting the skill of King Henry I, a figure who was already well-established by the time Geoffrey of Monmouth had published his translation of Merlin's work.²²

Prophecies pertaining to events that had already taken place at the time of their writing were not the only prophecies to be fulfilled. Throughout the centuries, Merlin's prophecies have been "fulfilled" countless times, thus betraying a real belief in them, or at the very least a conviction that prophecies held weight with the general populace. James VI and I, for instance, took the title of "King of Great Britain" instead of keeping the separate titles of Scotland and England.²³ This allowed him to cast himself as the fulfilment of Merlin's prophecy that one would unite Scotland and England, particularly given the fact that he and his family claimed lineage that could be traced back to the legendary King Arthur himself.²⁴ James VI made these strategic claims to make his own actions seem more legitimate, thereby using the prophecies as a political tool to further his own ends. This kind of tactic was not particularly unusual and certainly did not originate with James. Henry VII, for instance, appointed a commission to chronicle his descent from British Kings and named his eldest son Arthur in order to strengthen the ties of legitimacy that Arthurian legend lent him.²⁵ Henry could also boast of having a letter written into the *Draco Normannicus*, ostensibly from King Arthur himself, bolstering Henry's own claim to the throne.²⁶ It was also not unusual for Merlin's prophecies to be used to justify events that had already happened and that were in the interpreter's favour. In this way, interpreters of prophecy hoped to make them more legitimate and acceptable in the eyes of potential dissenters. One example of this was the use of Merlin's prophecies to justify Anglo-Norman colonization.²⁷ Unlike Geoffrey of Monmouth, John of Cornwall, a twelfth-century theologian who also worked with prophecies of Merlin, emphasized in his use of prophecies not only the obscurantist tendencies of prophecy in general, but also the idea of prophecy as a tool that can directly and discernibly affect the present, particularly insofar as politics are concerned.²⁸ This sentiment is echoed by modern historians, notably the English medievalist Richard Southern, who states that "it is not too much to say that the whole structure [of historical writing] rested on the conviction that prophecy was the most certain of all sources of historical information, and that it could provide an assured framework for the whole course of history."²⁹ Thus, prophecy is "a catalyst for the creation of that future."³⁰

All of these early dealings with the prophecies of Merlin seem to be based in foundations of strong, relatively unquestioned beliefs. The tradition of working with Merlin's prophecies that Geoffrey of Monmouth had begun, had, up to this point, flourished in the political arena. Scholars continued to provide translations of Merlin's prophecies, and rulers, such as James VI and Henry VII, had interpreted their ambiguous prose in ways that justified their governmental decisions. The "translators" of these texts varied in the work that they actually did. Some produced actual translations of provably pre-existing works. For instance, in the thirteenth century, Monmouth's prophecies were translated into Icelandic by a Benedictine monk, and into French by an anonymous source, and in the fifteenth century another translation of Monmouth's work surfaced.³¹ However, other works, such as Geoffrey of Monmouth's own, would later come to be seen as fabrications that were merely passed off as genuine translations.³² The prophecies of Merlin and their credibility would increasingly be seen with ambivalence, thus changing their cultural significance. Increasingly common were examples of derision and scepticism towards the venerable prophecies of Merlin, such as in Jonathan Swift's poem, "A Famous Prediction of Merlin," which satirized interpretations of Merlin's prophecies with a made-up ditty and accompanying notes (provided by a fictitious character) explaining how the ditty's predictions supposedly corresponded to modern times.³³ As early as 1648, serious works of history dismissed the prophecies of Merlin as being nothing more than idle, superstitious tales, and in the following centuries, their dwindling credibility meant that they were increasingly viewed as little more than fanciful fabrications.³⁴ Even earlier than that, Shakespeare references them in Henry IV:

"Sometime he angers me
With telling me of the moldwarp and the ant,
Of the dreamer Merlin and his prophecies,
And of a dragon and a finless fish,
A clip-winged griffin and a moulted raven,
A couching lion and a ramping cat,
And such a deal of skimble-skamble stuff
As puts me from my faith."³⁵

Though any statement from an individual fictional character is not necessarily a symbol of the writer's own opinions, it does at least make clear that this body of thought—one that dismisses Merlinian prophecy and places it in opposition to virtuous faith—was prevalent enough to make it into one of Shakespeare's plays. Though a number of previous writers had considered prophecies direct communication from God, in this context, the very idea of them is seen as repellent to Christian faith. This highlights the complicated relationship between faith and prophecy in audiences' minds.

Even before this ambivalence came in vogue, there still existed nuance and complexity in people's belief in Merlin's prophecies. In his work *Expugnatio Hibernica*, Gerald of Wales recounted an episode in which Merlin has ostensibly made an absurdly specific prophecy, which Henry II then refutes, proclaiming, "Who now shall believe that liar, Merlin?"³⁶ On the face of it, this may seem to work against his own interests and aims, since he refers back to Merlin's prophecies, but Gerald of Wales draws an important distinction between what he terms "ficticio vulgari" and "historiarum gnari"—that is, accounts of prophecy that are passed around by the uneducated masses, and prophecies that have been studied, interpreted, and published by scholars such as himself.³⁷ In using this episode, Gerald of Wales suggests that believing any so-called prophecy of Merlin of dubious origin is a dangerous and misleading mistake, and that the people's trust should lie instead with a more officially sanctioned brand of prophecy. This differentiates between popular prophecy and scholarly prophecy, and indicates both that, in certain circles at least, there existed a discernment between which "prophecies" could be endorsed, and that prophecies were likely being consciously invented and then spread. In both cases, the belief in Merlin's prophecies, though at this point still quite widespread, is not unqualified. It is also worth noting that, as a scholar who worked with prophecy, this qualified disbelief worked to Gerald's advantage. By explaining away false prophecies as the product of the uneducated masses, he encouraged belief in his own, more official work, and in the political claims made therein.

The presence of Merlin's prophecies in literary canon continued for centuries after Gerald's work, but in later eras they lost their political power. In 1838 Irish poet George Darley wrote "Merlin's Last Prophecy," whose predictions were favourable for Queen Victoria. Later, in 1870, the Canadian poet John Reade wrote "The Prophecy of Merlin," in which Arthur says that Victoria and Albert will restore Arthur's glory.³⁸ American writer Joseph Leigh claimed that the inciting incident of the War of 1812 had been predicted by Merlin in his "Illustrations of the Fulfilment of

the Prediction of Merlin.”³⁹ Aaron Thompson, an English chaplain, translated the prophecies in 1718, as had the English antiquarian and politician Elias Ashmole some seventy years earlier.⁴⁰ Despite what appears to have been high esteem for Merlin’s prophecies, however, it is clear that these enjoyed very little prestige and respectability, as compared to similar prophecies of old. Writers such as Darley and Reade did deal with Merlin’s prophecies in a manner more political than purely academic. However, unlike many previous prophecies, they do so in a static, laudatory way, largely without statements that could be used as justifications for or exhortations toward any particular political move.

Still later, in the modern era, novelists Stewart, Woolley, McKenzie, Canning, Carmichael, Deeping, Taylor, Parke Godwin, Gil Kane and John Jakes have all contributed to characterizations of Merlin, and frequently his prophecies, in recent Arthuriana.⁴¹ Some of these novelists either explain away Merlin’s prophetic powers with more shrewd, mundane methods, or even dismiss or ignore his prophecy altogether, but many others do not. Narratively, giving Merlin legitimate powers of prophecy allows novelists to create a strong story with an undercurrent of destiny, and create a feeling of inevitability and justice. Significantly, imbuing events with meaning could also be seen as the motivations of those who dealt with Merlin’s prophecies in history. However, as in the instances of Gerald of Wales’ citation of “ficticio vulgari” and Hotspur’s lines in *Henry IV*, the prophecies are here clearly relegated to the realm of fiction, albeit fiction that deals with powerful cultural icons.

It is clear, then, that Merlin’s prophecies have enjoyed a long, complicated, ever-evolving relationship with popular belief. From Geoffrey of Monmouth’s creation/translation of the prophecies of Merlin, the prophecies have seen a first stage of earnest (if elastic) explanations and interpretations attributed to them, from the linking of William the Atheling with the lion’s cub to serious explanations proposed for how Merlin could produce prophecies over such an improbably long period of time. As they gained in popularity, the opportunity for a wider array of perspectives also grew, so that while unqualified belief in Merlin’s prophecies may have existed, it coexisted with the qualified belief proposed by figures such as Gerald of Wales.⁴² From the seventeenth century onwards, ambivalence and scepticism toward the prophecies only grew. In spite of this, prophecies still managed to keep a place in the public imagination and in the advancement of political agendas. Whether the method of doing so was by validation or by refutation of a prophetic interpretation, prophecies could still be used as propaganda. Even when the prophecies were

referred to in less scholarly and more artistic contexts, such as poems, they still retained their use in casting glory or justification on a given event or idea. In addition to this, invoking prophecies helped to lend meaning and impose a coherent narrative to what would otherwise be seen as chaos. Historical writing on prophecy illustrates agendas and beliefs of those interpreting it. It also provides a glimpse into which beliefs were popular enough that the interpreter felt the need to call on Merlin's writings to "refute" them. Prophecy also illustrates which arguments were thought to be convincing to people and the assignment of each animal to a pertinent political figure is a telling indicator of people's views on current events and the individuals involved. In this way, a prophecy is akin to a modern political cartoon, albeit with elements of fatalism and magic that portray the nuanced relationship previous societies had with these notions. Despite their fictional origins, legends of Arthur and Merlin remain important.

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- ¹ Daniel Helbert, "'an Ardur sculde zete cum': The Prophetic Hope in Twelfth-Century Britain," *Arthuriana* 16, no. 1 (2016): 77.
- ² Julia Crick, "Geoffrey and the Prophetic Tradition," in *The Arthur of Medieval Latin Literature*, ed. Sian Echarad (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), 68.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 753.
- ⁴ Karen R. Moranski, "The 'Prophetic Merlini.' Animal Symbolism, and the Development of Political Prophecy in Late Medieval England and Scotland," *Arthuriana* 8, no.4 (1998): 59.
- ⁵ Jennifer Farrell, "History, Prophecy and the Arthur of the Normans: The Question of Audience and Motivation Behind Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*," in *Anglo-Norman Studies 37: Proceedings of the Battle Conference 2014*, ed. Elisabeth van Houts (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2015), 106.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.
- ⁷ Moranski, "The Prophetic Merlini," 61.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 59.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 62.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 59.
- ¹¹ These animals include the symbolic red and white dragons fighting underground (the only animals whose identities are explicitly stated rather than hinted at or left to the imagination), the Boar of Cornwall, the German Worm, the Lion of Justice, and the She-Lynx. Other animal figures, such as the Cock in the North, also figure into several prophecies.
- ¹² Moranski, "The Prophetic Merlini," 60.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 61.
- ¹⁴ Michael A. Faletra, "Merlin in Cornwall: The Source and Contexts of John of Cornwall's *Prophetia Merlini*." *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 111, no. 3 (2012): 307.
- ¹⁵ Juliette Wood, "Where Does Britain End? The Reception of Geoffrey of Monmouth in Scotland and Wales," in *The Scots and Medieval Arthurian Legend*, ed. Rhiannon Purdie and Nicola Royan (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2005), 19.
- ¹⁶ Moranski, "The Prophetic Merlini," 65.
- ¹⁷ Sharon L. Jansen, *Political Protest and Prophecy under Henry VIII* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1991), 67.
- ¹⁸ Moranski, "The Prophetic Merlini," 63.
- ¹⁹ Howard Dobin, *Merlin's Disciples: Prophecy, Poetry, and Power in Renaissance England* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 21.
- ²⁰ Farrell, "History, Prophecy and the Arthur of the Normans," 111.
- ²¹ Marjorie Chibnall, *The Empress Matilda* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1991), 198.
- ²² Jean Blacker, "Where Wace Feared to Tread: Latin Commentaries on Merlin's Prophecies in the Reign of Henry II," *Arthuriana* 6, no. 1 (1996): 38.
- ²³ Alan Lupack, *The Oxford Guide to Arthurian Literature and Legend* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 333.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*
- ²⁵ Wood, "Where Does Britain End?" 20.
- ²⁶ Blacker, "Where Wace Feared to Tread," 44.
- ²⁷ Helbert, "'an Ardur sculde zete cum'," 88.
- ²⁸ Faletra, "Merlin in Cornwall," 325.
- ²⁹ Helbert, "'an Ardur sculde zete cum'," 80.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 100.
- ³¹ Lupack, *The Oxford Guide to Arthurian Literature and Legend*, 333.
- ³² Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, (London: Penguin Books, 1971), 508.
- ³³ "A Famous Prediction of Merlin," University of Rochester, accessed September 5, 2018, <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/text/swift-famous-prediction-of-merlin>
- ³⁴ Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 508.
- ³⁵ William Shakespeare, *The First Part of the History Henry IV*, ed. John Dover Wilson (London: Cambridge University Press, 1946), 55-56.
- ³⁶ Blacker, "Where Wace Feared to Tread," 39.
- ³⁷ Helbert, "'an Ardur sculde zete cum'," 83.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 335.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 334.

⁴⁰ Moranski, "The Prophetie Merlini," 58.

⁴¹ Raymond H. Thompson, "Rationalizing the Irrational: Merlin and His Prophecies in the Modern Historical Novel," *Arthuriana* 10, no. 1 (2000): 120.

⁴² Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 484.

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