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“The Anger of Saturn shall fall”: Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia regum Britannie* and the limits of history

The first text to be examined here is in some ways atypical of the works in this study. Unlike the largely unknown and uninfluential works in the chapters to follow, Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia regum Britannie* was one of the most widely read of medieval Arthurian texts.¹ I have chosen to begin with it, then, because its familiarity to medieval and modern audiences alike helps to prepare the way for the discussion of those characteristics which it shares with the other works to be discussed later. The *Historia* is arguably the most influential product of British Latin writing in the twelfth century. Its author is a *magister* who was part of the circle of some of the most important men of his day, one who ended his life with the title, if not the possession, of a bishopric, suggesting the sort of recognition to which such educated clerical writers aspired.² Most important from my perspective is the posterity of the *Historia*. The arguments about the literary and historical values of the work which began almost immediately after its appearance and which continue to this day, provide a dramatic example of the delight and perplexity provoked by many of the works in this study.

Part of the problem in discussing Geoffrey’s *Historia* lies in the

¹ Julia Crick’s *The Historia regum Britannie of Geoffrey of Monmouth III: A Summary Catalogue of the Manuscripts* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1989), records 215 manuscripts. Two more have recently been added; see Julia Crick, “Two Newly Located Manuscripts of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia regum Britannie*,” *Arthurian Literature* 13 (1995), 151–56.

² Geoffrey’s name appears on seven charters from the area of Oxford between 1129 and 1151, and in 1139 appears with the title *magister*; it has been suggested that he was a secular canon of the Augustinian Saint George’s College in the city. He seems to have been associated with Alexander, bishop of Lincoln, and Walter, archdeacon of Oxford; the *Historia* is dedicated to Robert, earl of Gloucester and Waleran, count of Mallent. By 1150, Geoffrey is signing himself as “bishop-elect” of St. Asaph, a Welsh see which the turmoil of the time apparently prevented him from ever assuming. He died in 1155. For a concise summary of the evidence for Geoffrey’s life, see Michael J. Curley, *Geoffrey of Monmouth* (New York: Twayne, 1994), pp. 1–6.

generic terms available to us for that purpose. It is often treated as a history with literary features, or as literature masquerading as history. This implied separation between history and fiction is in part a modern one. While it was recognized in the Middle Ages that the process of narrating history involved the imposing of "the formal organization of stories,"³ no contradiction between this literary process and the achieving of historical truth was perceived because history was understood as a branch of eloquence.⁴ Historical truth, then, was not necessarily a matter of fact, and we have already seen as sober a writer as John of Salisbury defending the notion that the truth of a thing lies more in its moral utility than in its actual relation to "reality." In the Arthurian world, Wace will later defend his own translation of Geoffrey in words which echo John; what he writes is "ne tut mençunge, ne tut veir"; Gabrielle Spiegel understands the phrase to mean that Wace's work "purports to tell the truth about past facts, and thus is a fiction implying that its fiction is not simply a fiction"; she christens the poetic response of the *roman* to the past "fictional factuality."⁵ But Spiegel is talking about the shift from Latin to vernacular, and from verse to prose. Geoffrey, writing what appears to be Latin prose history, seems to be carving out a different narrative space for himself, and indeed in chapter 2 we shall see that some of the outraged response to his work derives precisely from his use of Latin, the language of authority, for his "fantasies." If Latin is indeed the language of textuality, the language that establishes "*prima facie* its own authority,"⁶ then Geoffrey's use of it for what we would call fictional or literary narrative may be part of his subversive intent. However, understood in the context of the practices of court writing, Geoffrey's use of Latin language and historical form may be seen as an unusually well-developed illustration of the duplicitous possibilities of this, or any, language. Spiegel sees the vernacular Arthurian romance as a break from the demands of textual truth: "No longer at the service of historical or religious truth, Arthurian romance inscribes itself as a

³ Suzanne Fleischman, "On the Representation of History and Fiction in the Middle Ages," *History and Theory* 22 (1983), 280.

⁴ For a discussion of this rhetorical understanding of history, see Ruth Morse, "This Vague Relation: Historical Fiction and Historical Veracity in the Later Middle Ages," *Leeds Studies in English* 13 (1982), 85–103; and Nancy F. Partner, "The New Cornificius: Medieval History and the Artifice of Words," in *Classical Rhetoric and Medieval Historiography*, ed. Ernst Breisach (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Medieval Institute, 1985), pp. 5–59.

⁵ Gabrielle M. Spiegel, *Romancing the Past: The Rise of Vernacular Prose Historiography in Thirteenth-Century France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 62.

⁶ Spiegel, *Romancing the Past*, p. 69.

literary game in which the playful artifice of the writer produces in the reader that pleasure in the text which is at the same time the sign of its literary autonomy."⁷ I will argue that it is precisely this ludic employment of language which characterizes the practice of both Geoffrey and many of the other writers in this study. If vernacular romance found this narrative space for itself then perhaps it did so because that space was already present or implicit in its origins.

Yet while we may create a new category for Geoffrey's work – *historia fantastica*, perhaps – the question of whether to evaluate Geoffrey according to some vague but "felt" criteria of "literature" or "history" remains, in part because of Geoffrey's apparent determination to be considered an academic historian. He begins and ends his *Historia regum Britannie* with a claim to special knowledge which has been, ever since, a focus for much debate:

... Walter, archdeacon of Oxford, ... [gave me] a certain very ancient book in the British language, which continually and in order, in most beautiful language, displays the deeds of all these men, from Brutus, the first king of the Britons, up to Cadwallader, the son of Cadwallo. Thus at Walter's request, I have taken the trouble to translate the book into Latin ...

The writing of the material concerning their kings, who succeeded from that time in Wales, I concede to my contemporary Caradoc of Llancarfan, while the kings of the Saxons I leave to William of Malmesbury and Henry of Huntingdon. I order these men to keep silent about the kings of the Britons, because they do not have the book in the British language which Walter, archdeacon of Oxford, brought from Wales, which I have made the effort to translate into Latin in this way, for it was composed truly concerning the history of the aforementioned princes and in their honor.⁸

⁷ Spiegel, *Romancing the Past*, p. 63.

⁸ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The Historia regum Britannie of Geoffrey of Monmouth I*, Bern, Burgerbibliothek, MS. 568, ed. Neil Wright (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1985), cc. 2, 208:

... Walterus Oxinefordensis archidiaconus ... quendam Britannici sermonis librum uetustissimum qui a Bruto primo rege Britonum usque ad Cadualadrum filium Caduallonis actus omnium continet et ex ordine perpulcris orationibus proponebat. Rogatu itaque illius ductus, ... codicem illum in Latinum sermonem transferre curauit.

Reges autem eorum qui ab illo tempore in Gualis successerunt Karadoco Lancarbaniensi contemporaneo meo in materia scribendi permitto, reges uero Saxonum Willelmo Malmesberiensi et Henrico Huntendonensi; quos de regibus Britonum tacere iubeo cum non habeant librum istum Britannici sermonis quem Gualterus Oxenefordensis archidiaconus ex Britannia aduexit, quem de hystoria eorum ueraciter editum in honore predictorum principum hoc modo in Latinum sermonem tranferre curauit.

In both of these passages, Geoffrey claims to be little more than a translator; the *incipit* also includes the usual apologies for a rude style. This last disclaimer is a *topos*, to be understood in the same way as the similar claims made by John of Salisbury and Walter Map. Geoffrey's own particular touch is the audacious claim to possess a "very ancient book," although here as well Geoffrey can be aligned with the common practice of creating or forging authorities, a practice which Clanchy argues is the source for much of the mistrust of writing in this period.⁹ This book is, accordingly, usually assumed to be a fiction.¹⁰ The purpose of this fiction, however, is a question which has yet to be settled.

The ancient book is, first of all, a legitimizing device, a way of giving the *Historia* authority as history. Through an insistence on his role as translator, Geoffrey makes of himself a simple conduit for historical lore, rather than a creator of the kinds of fantasies decried by contemporary historians like William of Malmesbury.¹¹ The book also provides an explanation for the sudden influx of information in the *Historia* about a past which up until the appearance of that work had been described only fitfully. Geoffrey is careful, too, to insert this new information into the existing *lacunae* in insular history, making accommodation with existing authorities whenever their accounts

⁹ Clanchy points out that "throughout twelfth-century Europe charters and title-deeds were frequently forged by monks, the experts in writing"; *From Memory to Written Record*, p. 193. Even John of Salisbury invented an authority, the *Instruction of Trajan*, which he claimed had been authored by Plutarch and which he named as a source for his *Policraticus*.

¹⁰ But Geoffrey Ashe defends the book as the source for Arthur's Gallic campaigns; "A Certain Very Ancient Book: Traces of an Arthurian Source in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History*," *Speculum* 56 (1981), 301-23. A more modest claim is made by Brynley F. Roberts, "Geoffrey of Monmouth and Welsh Historical Tradition," *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 20 (1976), 29-40, who believes it likely that Geoffrey may have had access to written Welsh genealogies (38). Roberts also notes that the learned classes of Wales had developed a coherent historiography of the Britons, which may have provided a pattern for Geoffrey's work: "Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia regum Britanniae*, and *Brut y Brenhinedd*," in Rachel Bromwich, A.O.H. Jarman, Brynley F. Roberts, and Daniel Huws, eds., *The Arthur of the Welsh: The Arthurian Legend in Medieval Welsh Literature* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1991), p. 101. The response of Welsh historians to Geoffrey's version of British history is discussed briefly in chapter 2.

The Variant version of the *Historia* has itself been suggested as Geoffrey's source. But Neil Wright, in his edition of the Variant version, concludes that the Variant was not Geoffrey's source, nor was it written by Geoffrey; it is rather a redaction of the Vulgate version, to be dated to between 1138 and the early 1150s (*The Historia regum Britanniae of Geoffrey of Monmouth II, The First Variant Version: a critical edition* [Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1988], p. lxx).

¹¹ William's doubts, along with those of Gerald of Wales and William of Newburgh, are discussed in chapter 2.

impinge on his own.¹² It is often assumed that Geoffrey's purpose is that a work which has been described as "essentially literary"¹³ should be read as history. Nevertheless, there seems to be little doubt that Geoffrey is seeking to give his work some kind of particular authority through his insistence on its origins. For J.S.P. Tatlock, Geoffrey wants to be taken seriously because he has a serious message; he writes to hold up a mirror to events of his day, and, out of a sense of "racial patriotism," to exalt the Britons.¹⁴ Martin Shichtman and Laurie Finke make the same argument, substituting merely the focus of the propaganda, when they argue that Geoffrey's goal was to allow the Norman overlords of Britain to refigure themselves as British kings, in the interest of consolidating their hold on the island.¹⁵ I will argue that Geoffrey does indeed show a marked interest in national history and in the role of kingship in that history. There are clear stylistic and thematic affinities between the *Historia regum Britannie* and the mirror for princes, and this concern with kingship may be a defining quality of much Latin Arthurian writing. But the *Historia* is also marked by that other characteristic of court writing, *facetia*, in all its guises. It is this stance, as well as its content, which marks the *Historia* as different from other historical writing of the period.

For some readers, Geoffrey is aping the form of history in order to parody the writing of history. Christopher Brooke argues that Geoffrey displays this tendency in the misuse he makes of authorities, as well as in the reiteration of the translation *topos*; William and Henry cannot have access to the book because it does not exist.¹⁶ Brooke also identifies a specific target for Geoffrey's wit, arguing that the description of Arthur's court at Caerleon is directed at contemporary quarrels over episcopal supremacy.¹⁷ We might note

¹² See R. William Leckie, Jr., *The Passage of Dominion: Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Periodization of Insular History in the Twelfth Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981).

¹³ Christopher N.L. Brooke, "Geoffrey of Monmouth as a Historian," in *Church and Government in the Middle Ages: Essays Presented to C.R. Cheney on his 70th Birthday*, ed. C.N.L. Brooke et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 78.

¹⁴ J.S.P. Tatlock, *The Legendary History of Britain: Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia regum Britanniae and its Early Vernacular Versions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1950), pp. 425-27. Leckie and Roberts agree Geoffrey is seeking to teach a lesson; for both, the lesson has to do with the importance of strong central rule, a theme discussed below as a manifestation of the specific concerns of court writing.

¹⁵ Martin B. Shichtman and Laurie A. Finke, "Profiting from the Past: History as Symbolic Capital in the *Historia Regum Britanniae*," *Arthurian Literature* 12 (1993), 4.

¹⁶ Brooke, "Geoffrey of Monmouth," p. 83.

¹⁷ He argues Geoffrey is striking impartially at the claims of Canterbury, St. David's, Llandaff,

here that there seems to be a similar reference to episcopal quarrels in the *Vera historia de morte Arthuri*, discussed in chapter 3. That work seems to function as an alternate ending to the Arthuriad of the *Historia*; its author's inclusion of the episcopal strife may support the notion that Geoffrey had a specific contemporary target for at least some of his work.

Valerie Flint has also explored the idea of Geoffrey as a parodist, arguing that the misuse of sources, and the direct mention of William and Henry, are indications that the targets are monastic historians and monastic values, and she describes his tone as one of "teasing abuse."¹⁸ But what is most striking for me is not Geoffrey's wit, delightful though that is. Instead, I am interested in his subversion of the writing of history through the application of its conventions to material which has been created and arranged towards a completely unconventional final assertion. It is not Geoffrey's creation of (fictive) stories which is subversive, although he does create incident rather more gleefully and thoroughly than do his contemporaries. It is the implication of his stories, what Hayden White would call their underlying mythoi,¹⁹ which sets Geoffrey apart. White has suggested that historical narrative "tells us in what direction to think about the events and charges our thoughts about the events with different emotional valences";²⁰ I will argue that Geoffrey sets his audience's thoughts in unaccustomed and alarming directions. Behind the portraits of rulers which may have links to the mirror for princes and to the tumultuous events of Geoffrey's own time; behind the facetious use of Latin for anecdote and amusement as well as for instruction; lies a thoroughgoing subversion of conventional historiography, a subversion which has far more serious implications than either Flint or Brooke allow. Geoffrey's manipulation of the traditional form and material of history points to an underlying concern with the traditional message of history. Spiegel describes the ubiquity of anachronism in medieval treatments of the past as the symptom of "an intellectual attitude that refused to acknowledge the past as either irretrievably lost or ethically

York and London: "Thus he declared a pox on all their houses, and can have intended nothing but mockery and mischief"; "Geoffrey of Monmouth," p. 82.

¹⁸ See Valerie I.J. Flint, "The *Historia regum Britanniae* of Geoffrey of Monmouth: Parody and its Purpose. A Suggestion," *Speculum* 54 (1979), 463, 454.

¹⁹ For White's discussion of the process by which historical fact is turned into narrative, see his *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins, 1978); especially "Interpretation in History," pp. 51-80; and "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact," pp. 81-100.

²⁰ White, "The Historical Text," p. 91.

irrelevant."²¹ Geoffrey is, I think, far less certain of the status of the past than many of his contemporaries, and consequently, the playfulness of the narrative space he creates gives way to a destruction of narrative and historical certainties which approaches the nihilistic. The *Historia*, however fantastic, however ludic, is indeed what Nancy Partner has called a "serious entertainment."²²

Chapter 6 of this study discusses the appearance of both formal and sporadic parody in Celtic-inspired Arthurian narrative; these stylistic parodies are usually aligned with less than sympathetic portraits of a ruler, both in Arthurian and non-Arthurian narrative alike. If Geoffrey did make use of Welsh material, he might well have absorbed some of these attitudes. A suggestive resemblance is that between the endings of the *Historia* and the parodic Welsh Arthurian text, *Breudwyt Rhonabwy*. Geoffrey advises Caradoc, William, and Henry not to stray beyond the boundaries he has set for them, because they do not have access to his book. In the *explicit* to the *Breudwyt Rhonabwy*, a *tour de force* demolition of Welsh storytelling technique is followed by these words: "This story is called the Dream of Rhonabwy, and here is the reason: no man, neither bard nor storyteller, knows the dream without a book, because there were so many colors on the horses, and such strange colors of arms and equipment and precious cloaks and powerful stones."²³ This author is flaunting his creative skill; Geoffrey's "book" allows him to flaunt his skill while hiding it, yet the taunt at other, presumably lesser, artists is the same.²⁴

The *Historia* is not, of course, simply an account of the reign of Arthur, yet I will restrict discussion to the Arthurian portion of the work, that section which was most influential for the developing

²¹ Spiegel, *Romancing the Past*, p. 102.

²² Nancy F. Partner, *Serious Entertainments: The Writing of History in Twelfth-Century England* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1977). Partner does not discuss Geoffrey at length, but her recognition that the writing of history in England was often a literary endeavor with the twin goals of the entertainment and education of an audience is important in the understanding of Geoffrey's more radical procedure.

²³ *Breudwyt Rhonabwy, allan o'r Llyfr Coch o Hergest*, ed. Melville Richards (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1948), p. 21: "A'r ystoria honn a elwir Breidwyt Ronabwy. (A llyma yr achaws na wyr neb y breidwyt, na bard na chyfarwyd, heb lyuyr, o achaws y geniuier lliw a oed ar y me[is]r[ch], a hynny o amrauel liw odidawc ac ar yr aruev ac eu kyweirdebeu, ac ar y llenneu gwerthuawr a'r mein rinwedawl)."

²⁴ *Breudwyt Rhonabwy* is a later text than the *Historia*, but I see here an attitude in Welsh literature which parallels Geoffrey's own. Briton or Breton, Geoffrey seems to have had enough Welsh to make use of Welsh traditions; see T.D. Crawford, "On the Linguistic Competence of Geoffrey of Monmouth," *Medium Aevum* 51 (1982), 152-62. Roberts supports the view that Geoffrey was of Breton origin; see "Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia regum Britannie*, and *Brut y Brenhinedd*," p. 98.

romance genre. This influence, in the vernacular realm, appears to be largely a matter of narrative, of incident. The Latin texts in this study, however, share with the *Historia* a characteristic approach to that raw material. Geoffrey's *Vita Merlini*, like the *Historia*, shows moments of broad comedy alternating with moments of despair. The *Vita*, the *De Ortu Waluuanii*, and the *Historia Meriadoci* all mingle serious themes about the importance of strong rule and the difficulty of maintaining it, with narrative experimentation and generic subversion. Such experimentation reaches its full flower as Arthurian parody in *Arthur and Gorlagon*, and Arthur is the specific focus of negative comment in the *Draco Normannicus* and the Welsh saints' lives too. I make no argument here for direct influence of the *Historia*, either on the other Latin works in this study or on those texts of the vernacular tradition whose retelling of Arthurian story focuses particularly on issues of kingship and the rule of law. I would suggest, however, that the complexities of the *Historia* are no isolated phenomenon, but rather a particularly original manifestation of a strain of Latin writing in the Angevin period which had its origins in the concerns and discourse of school and court.

Despite the signals which the opening of the *Historia* may be sending about the unexpected or unpredictable nature of what is to follow, the work is structured around an important and appropriate central theme; that is, the need for strong and legitimate central rule. The *Historia* is, however, pessimistic as to the likelihood of such rule existing and persisting. There may be a contemporary context for such pessimism, for Geoffrey was writing around the time of the Anarchy. The rather bleak view of British history is constant throughout the work, but it is most striking in the Arthuriad, because that period represents one still point when it appears that Britain might achieve peace and stability. The Arthurian story clearly held a particular fascination for Geoffrey; in it we may find expressed all of the major concerns and strategies of the *Historia*. For all that, the Arthuriad cannot be excised from the rest of the *Historia*, and this dependence is in itself significant. The story of Arthur and his court is part of the seamless flow of British history – what the *Gawain*-poet memorably calls a history of “blyse and blunder.”²⁵

Somewhat arbitrarily, then, an examination of the theme of legit-

²⁵ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon, 2nd edn., rev. Norman Davis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), line 18.

imate rule in the Arthurian portion of the *Historia* may begin with the account of the three sons of King Constantine II, Constans, Aurelius Ambrosius, and Uther Pendragon. Constantine is a shadowy figure who receives little attention, and it is typical of Geoffrey's concern with the forces which inhibit peace that his entire career is granted only a few lines: “Afterwards, when ten years had passed, a certain Pict who had been in his service came to him and, acting as if he had to have a private meeting [with Constantine] in a thicket, killed him with his knife once all the king's men had left.”²⁶ There is no explanation given for the action of the Pict, although the fact that he is a Pict may imply that Vortigern is behind the assassination. There is no mourning described for the king whose ten years of rule were, one assumes, a time of peace. There is no narrative pause to respond to this situation either. Instead, the narrative moves on immediately to a picture of civil discord, as various factions supporting the three brothers quarrel over who is to receive the crown. This discord provides an opportunity for the schemer Vortigern to install Constans as his puppet.

The account of Vortigern's machinations is peppered with references to the illegitimacy of the whole enterprise. Constans is crowned “hardly with the people consenting.”²⁷ In the *De Ortu* and the *Historia Meriadoci*, too, there is a strong concern for the role of consultation in government, a concern which may be understood in part by the fact that in the twelfth century the formalization of the giving of counsel to the king has not yet occurred. Kings certainly received counsel from their *familiares*, but custom was not law. The shifting allegiances of the magnates who swore to uphold Matilda and then turned to Stephen might be also reflected here; in any case, Geoffrey's Constans takes the throne without proper legal or moral authority. It is equally important for Geoffrey that Constans is not the right *kind* of person to rule, as he demonstrates when he hands power over to Vortigern:

Now it was the weakness of his character which made him do this; for in the cloister he had learned things other than how to govern a kingdom. When Vortigern noticed this, he began to plan to himself how he could be raised to the crown; for he had desired this above

²⁶ *Historia regum Britannie*, c. 93: “Postremo, cum .x. anni preterissent, uenit quidam Pictus qui in obsequium suum fuerat et quasi secretum colloquium habiturus in uirgulto quodam semotis cunctis eum cum cultro interfecit.”

²⁷ *Historia regum Britannie*, c. 94: “. . . atque uix annuente populo . . .”

all things from the first. Now it seemed that the time was right for him to be able to bring his desire to fruition easily, for the whole kingdom was committed to his control; nor was Constans, who was said to be king, anything but a shadow of a leader. There was neither severity nor justice in Constans, nor was he feared by his people or by the people of neighbouring areas.²⁸

This unflattering picture of Constans may indeed, on one level, represent the kind of antimonastic satire which Valerie Flint argues is the main thrust of the *Historia*. At the same time, it is hardly surprising that a monk would not have learned how to run a kingdom. At any rate, if this is satire, it is placed here in the service of the larger themes of the work. The crucial point is that Constans is a king unduly constituted, entirely inappropriate, and fundamentally unfit for rule; his weakness allows a tyrant to seize the crown. The character of the king is perhaps even more important to Geoffrey than is the issue of kingship, for it is the flaws of her rulers which subject Britain to much, if not all, of the cycle of misery which characterizes her history. The education of the ruler through exemplary history is, then, doubly important.

Vortigern, the paradigm in the *Arthuriad* of the bad king, receives treatment as full as or fuller than that accorded to the good kings. When, as in the case of Vortigern (or Arthur), Geoffrey lingers over a ruler's career, he often includes anecdotes, dialogue and incidents of a more clearly "literary" coloring, but these all tend to contribute to the central theme. In Vortigern's case, there is some direct characterization. His duplicitous reaction to Constans's death, which he had himself engineered, is described: "When Vortigern had seen this [Constans's head] he burst into tears as if he were terribly saddened, although in fact he had never before experienced such joy."²⁹ The conflict between appearance and reality is one which recurs in the

²⁸ *Historia regum Britannie*, c. 95:

Quippe debilitas sensus ipsius id faciebat; nam infra claustra aliud quam regnum tractare didicerat. Quod cum calluisset Uortigernus, cepit apud se deliberare qualiter sullimari potuisset in regem; nam id prius super omnia concupierat. Uidebat etenim congruum tempus instare quod desiderium suum leuiter ad effectum duci poterat. Totum nanque dispositioni eius regnum commissum fuerat; nec Constans qui rex dicebatur nisi pro umbra principis astabat. Nullius enim asperitatis, nullius iusticie fuerat nec a populo suo nec a uicinis gentibus timebatur.

²⁹ *Historia regum Britannie*, c. 96: "Quod cum inspexisset Uortegirrus, quasi contristatus in fletum erupit nec unquam prius ma<i>ori gaudio fluctuauerat." *Fluctuo*, which normally has the sense of "waver" or "fluctuate," is an odd choice of words here, and may be a further clue to Vortigern's hypocrisy.

Historia and which also appears in many of the other texts in this study.

Even more important than direct comment to the characterization of Vortigern, however, are his associates. Besides his alliance with the Picts who kill Constans – the Picts are a notoriously untrustworthy and bloodthirsty people – there is his association with the Saxons. It is a rebellion by the Picts which drives Vortigern into the arms of Hengist and Horsa, and it is the Saxons' shrewd manipulation of his weaknesses which provides Geoffrey's most cutting criticism of Vortigern's character. It is made clear from the outset that the Saxons are pagans, but while Vortigern pays lip-service to his religion by disapproving of theirs, he has no hesitation about accepting their aid. He rationalizes his acceptance in a most interesting way: "I grieve greatly about your belief, which I rather call unbelief, but I rejoice in your arrival, since either God or someone else has provided you in my need at a most opportune time."³⁰ Vortigern's belief that God or "someone else" has sent him aid shows him to be less than a perfect Christian himself. At the same time, the introduction here of some other power besides God has implications for the whole of the *Historia*. Historians like Gildas argued that it was, in fact, God who sent the Saxons, not to aid Vortigern, but to punish the Britons. Geoffrey, however, by emphasizing the alien nature of the Saxons and by introducing, through the use of *alius*, an ambiguity as to whose agents they are, raises an unsettling and radical possibility about God and His attitude towards His creation. Are malignant fates controlled by God and ultimately in the service of His providential (even when punitive) purpose, or are they either exempt from God's control or an expression of His own malignancy and inconstancy? The latter conclusion would seem remarkable for any medieval writer, but some sort of cooperation between human evil and fate does seem to be a central problem in the *Historia*; and if God is in charge of the process, He is nevertheless rarely mentioned in the text. It may be that Geoffrey is rewriting conventional history because his interpretation of that history is so much at variance with what had gone before.

The implications of the arrival of the Saxons may be radical or merely grim; in any case, their arrival gives Geoffrey an opportunity to craft a narrative episode which both underlines his central concerns

³⁰ *Historia regum Britannie*, c. 98: "De credulitate uestra – potius incredulitas dici potest – uehementer doleo. De aduentu autem uestro gaudeo quia in congruo tempore uos necessitati mee siue Deus siue alius obtulerit."

and functions in a literary context as something approaching comic relief. The passage concerns the meeting between Vortigern and Hengist's daughter Renwein:

When Vortigern had been replenished by the royal banquet, the girl came out of a chamber, carrying a golden goblet full of wine. Then, coming next to the king, she curtsied, and said, "Lauerd king, Wasseil!" And he, seeing the girl's face, admired her great beauty and grew hot for her. He asked his interpreter what the girl had said and how he ought to respond to her. The interpreter said to him, "She called you lord king, and honored you with a phrase of greeting. You ought to answer, 'Drincheil'." So Vortigern responded "Drincheil," and ordered the girl to drink, and took the goblet from her hand and kissed it and drank. From that day to this the custom endures in Britain that whoever drinks at a banquet says "Wasseil" to his fellow, who next receives the drink and responds "Drincheil."

Now Vortigern, drunk with a different kind of drink, and with Satan having entered his heart, fell in love with the girl, and sought her hand from her father. I say that Satan entered his heart because he, who was a Christian, desired to mate with a pagan.³¹

This passage is highly revealing of Geoffrey's methods. First, it is simply entertaining, and that on several levels. As pure comedy, it is an admirably deft characterization of the tipsy king who is suddenly swept off his feet by the beautiful girl introduced by her cunning father for precisely this purpose. The audience has little reason to admire Vortigern, and may enjoy seeing him made a fool of in this fashion. Second, there is entertainment of a more educational sort to

³¹ *Historia regum Britannie*, c. 100:

Ut ergo regis epulis refectus fuit, egressa est puella de thalamo aureum ciphum plenum uino ferens. Accedens deinde propius regi flexis genibus dixit: "Lauerd king, Wasseil!" At ille, uisa facie puellae, ammiratus est tantum eius decorem et incaluit. Denique interrogauit interpretem suum quid dixerat puella et quid ei respondere debeat. Cui interpres dixit: "Uocauit te dominum regem et uocabulo salutationis honorauit. Quod autem respondere debes, est 'Drincheil'." Respondens deinde Vortegirinus "Drincheil" iussit puellam potare cepitque ciphum de manu ipsius et osculatus est eam et potauit. Ab illo die usque in hodiernum mansit consuetudo illa in Britannia quia in conuiuuiis qui potat ad alium dicit "Wasseil." Qui uero post illum recipit potum, respondet "Drincheil." Vortegirinus autem diuerso genere potus inebriatus intrante Sathana in corde suo <amauit puellam et postulauit eam a patre suo. Intrauerat, inquam, Sathanas in corde suo> quia, cum Christianus esset, cum pagana coire desiderabat.

The phrase "diuerso genere potus inebriatus" may mean that Vortigern has been mixing his drinks, or that he has been given some kind of love potion, or that love is itself an intoxicant; in every case, the portrait of the king – or of love – is hardly a flattering one.

be had in the explanation of the drinking custom; Geoffrey shows that he understands the appeal of an interesting and instructive anecdote, and one thinks again of the characterization of Walter Map, who could have written such a scene, as a consummate after-dinner speaker. Finally, the passage is set off nicely from the flow of battles which surrounds it, providing a welcome resting-point, and the refreshment of the new. In this anecdote, then, Geoffrey the historian displays many of the powers and concerns of the storyteller.

Yet this passage is more than just a pleasant interlude from the usual concerns of the *Historia*. It is clearly meant to be seen as historically accurate; the references to Saxon customs, and to the use of translators, give the passage an air of verisimilitude. It was in fact permissible for an historian to create out of whole cloth, provided that the creation exemplify the truth; from one point of view, Geoffrey is simply better at creating such moments than most. Yet his deployment of these moments suggests the storyteller's manipulation of audience reaction. As soon as the audience is relaxed and enjoying the scene, the narrative voice makes a rare, first-person intrusion to note that Satan has entered Vortigern's heart.³² Immediately, the audience is reminded that the Saxons are pagan, while Vortigern is supposed to be a Christian king. The audience's enjoyment of the tyrant getting his comeuppance is soon replaced by concern for the fate of the country as a result of Vortigern's drunken foolishness; a king can never lose sight of the bigger picture and must never subordinate the interests of the country to his own personal desires. This is a recurring theme throughout the *Historia*; king after king forgets his national responsibilities in pursuit of his own desires, and disaster inevitably follows. From a structural point of view, this particular scene is crucial to an understanding of the start of Arthur's career, since it will be recapitulated in Uther's obsession with Igera. There is, then, a serious message behind the laughter, and if in passages like this one Geoffrey's storytelling seems to swamp the

³² Part of this passage (indicated by brackets) is omitted from the Bern MS, the basis for Wright's edition. It is possible that the bracketed passage is simply the result of an error in copying; Wright notes the recurrence of "in corde suo" (*Historia regum Britannie*, p. lvi). The absent passage, however, does occur in full in London, British Library, MS Arundel 237, whereas other instances of what seem to be a similar error are absent from the other manuscripts deriving from the Bern MS (*Historia regum Britannie*, ed. Wright, p. lvi, n. 103). The phrase occurs in "Nennius," *Historia Brittonum*, in *Nennius: British History and The Welsh Annals*, ed. and trans. John Morris (London: Phillimore, 1980), c. 37: "Illis autem bibentibus, intravit Sathanas in corde Guorthigirni, ut amaret puellam . . ."

apparently historical event contained therein, the lesson to which the event points is nevertheless clear.

Vortigern is a British ruler, but one whose spurious claim can be supported only by foreign influence. There is a suggestive resemblance between Vortigern and John of Salisbury's characterization of Stephen:

... and a foreign man was allowed to rule the kingdom, a disdainer of goodness and equity, one whose counsel was foolish from the beginning, whose cause was founded on iniquity and perfidy, a man negligent with respect to discipline, so that all men were provoked to everything, and the clergy and the people were not so much ruled as beaten down and brought into conflict . . .³³

I am not suggesting that Geoffrey is betraying specific political allegiances here; the three main forms of the dedication in manuscripts of the *Historia* are to Matilda's stalwart supporter, Robert of Gloucester, to Robert and Waleran of Meulan, or to Stephen and Robert.³⁴ Instead, Geoffrey's weak usurper and John's undisciplined, alien king may both be seen as manifestations of the concern for rightful kingship in the period in which both men were writing. Geoffrey's good kings, too, suggest John's characterization of the king ruled by law, discussed above. The practices of Arthur and of his immediate, good predecessors contrast those of the *tyranni* of both Geoffrey and John.

When Vortigern is eventually replaced by the admirable Aurelius, the Arthuriad begins to take on an appearance familiar from the rest of the *Historia*; bad kings are often succeeded by good ones, but the good ones are often granted only too brief a tenure. Aurelius is a case in point. He is strong, honest, and pious: "... generous in giving, earnest in attending the divine services, modest in all things and above all unwilling to tell a lie. He was strong on foot and stronger on

³³ *Policraticus*, VI.xviii:

... et in regno alieno regnare hominem contemptorem boni et aequi, cujus consilium infatuatum est ab initio, cujus causa in iniquitate et perfidia fundata est, negligentem disciplinae, ut eo non tam regnante, quam concutiente et collidente clerum et populum, provocarentur omnes ad omnia.

³⁴ Exact parallels certainly have been drawn, however. Walter F. Schirmer, *Die frühen Darstellungen des Arthurstoffes* (Cologne: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1958), suggests that Geoffrey wished to write a political treatise about contemporary events, p. 28. More recently, in "Profiting from the Past," Shichtman and Finke note that the frequent appearances of women in Geoffrey's narrative may suggest that he is creating a context for the idea of legitimate female rule, 22-23.

horseback, and skilled in the leading of an army."³⁵ Aurelius triumphs, and proves his exemplary nature by restoring lost lands to the aristocracy, rebuilding the churches and the church hierarchy, and reestablishing the rule of law. These accomplishments had already been predicted by Merlin, but it is significant that the prediction linked Aurelius's accomplishments with his doom: "He will bring peace to the peoples and restore the churches, but he will die by poison."³⁶ The result is that it would be almost impossible for an alert reader to relax and appreciate these accomplishments once they are described: "His whole attention was turned to the restoration of the realm, the rebuilding of the churches, the renovation of peace and laws, and the ordering of justice."³⁷ In these two passages the author's voice is operating at two different levels, delivering two different messages. On the one hand, there is Aurelius's reign, presented in carefully balanced phrases which in their own order echo the order Aurelius is bringing to the realm. Style and content reinforce each other to create an impression of stability and order. On the other hand, there is the echo of the prophet's prediction, a prediction which uses the same events to point to the king's end. It is as if the organizing efforts of men and art are being placed against unknown forces whose mouthpiece, Merlin, functions in part as a bitter representation of an author who is at once omniscient and powerless, despite his foreknowledge and his art.

The reign of Uther, Arthur's father, will be discussed when we come to consider the structural parallels through which Geoffrey makes many of his thematic points. If we continue for a moment to focus, however, on the question of the nature of good rule, then Arthur is properly considered immediately after Aurelius. From the moment he appears on the scene, Arthur is portrayed as an ideal figure:

Now Arthur was a youth of fifteen years, of outstanding virtue and generosity. His innate goodness gave him such great grace that he was loved by almost all the people . . . Arthur, because his strength was linked with generosity, decided to harass the Saxons so that he

³⁵ *Historia regum Britannie*, c. 120: "... largus in dandis, sedulus in diuinis obsequiis, modestus in cunctis et super omnia mendatium uitans, fortis pede, fortior equo, et ad regendum exercitum doctus."

³⁶ *Historia regum Britannie*, c. 118: "Pacifabit nationes, restaurabit ecclesias, sed ueneno deficiet."

³⁷ *Historia regum Britannie*, c. 127: "Tota intentio ipsius uersabatur circa regni restitutionem, ecclesiarum reformationem, pacis ac legis renouationem, iusticie compositionem."

could enrich the household which served him with their wealth. Righteousness also moved him, for he ought by hereditary right to have the rule of the whole kingdom.³⁸

Like Aurelius, Arthur is shown to be both brave and concerned with what is right. He has other qualities, however, which have not been stressed in the "ideal" kings of the *Historia* discussed thus far; for example, he is eminently practical and shrewd. These qualities, allied with his innate goodness, suggest that he will be less likely to fall prey to the treachery which tends to overtake the good kings, as well as to the vice which tends to overtake the bad.

The Arthuriad is, as we will see, different in formal terms from what has gone before, but its protagonist, if described in greater detail than usual, is nevertheless familiar. Like other good kings before him, Arthur reestablishes the churches, restores the hereditary rights of the aristocracy, and brings the land under the rule of law again. His marriage to Guenevere occurs in a catalogue of such accomplishments, and is presented without embellishment, a deliberate contrast, perhaps, to the ill-considered unions of Vortigern (and Uther). Arthur's marriage is part of setting the realm in order, nothing more. Again there is a suggestive resemblance between Arthur's practice with respect to land rights and the eventual conclusion (after the writing of the *Historia*, but suggestive nevertheless) of the Anarchy. The terms set for peace at Winchester in 1153 included that "the disinherited should be restored to their own lands and enactments made binding on all as they used to be."³⁹ Arthur is the fulfillment of ideas of kingship which belong to both the political philosophy and even the later political reality of the twelfth century.

Arthur's military career, like his domestic policy, is considered and legitimate. Geoffrey is careful to provide Arthur with justifications for his desire "to bring all of Europe under his rule."⁴⁰ Arthur begins by aiding Loth, who should be king of Norway, against a usurper. Arthur's conquest in Gaul is followed by a court in which "he called

³⁸ *Historia regum Britannie*, c. 143:

Erat autem Arturus .xv. annorum iuuenis, inaudite uirtutis atque largitatis. In quo tantam gratiam innata bonitas prestiterat ut a cunctis fere populis amaretur . . . Arturus ergo, quia in illo probitas largitionem comitabatur, statuit Saxones inquietare ut eorum opibus quae ei famulabatur ditaret familiam. Commonebat etiam id rectitudo, cum totius insule monarchiam debuerat hereditario iure obtinere.

³⁹ Quoted in Warren, *Henry II*, p. 62.

⁴⁰ *Historia regum Britannie*, c. 154: ". . . totam Europam sibi subdere."

all the clergy and the people together, and strengthened the state of the kingdom peacefully and legally."⁴¹ The Roman wars, too, are presented as a just response to previous oppression and as an expression of Arthur's legitimate claim; it is also significant that, in a text which makes remarkably little reference to God or Providence, the victory of the Britons is assigned precisely to the divine plan: "This outcome was established by divine power, for as in former times the ancestors of those Romans had harassed the ancestors of the Britons with invidious iniquities, so now those Britons strove to defend the liberty which the others sought to take away from them, refusing to pay the tribute which had been unjustly demanded of them."⁴² Arthur's reign, like that of other British rulers, is marked by warfare, but Geoffrey continually emphasizes that this warfare is righteous, as are its results. For once Britain has a ruler who is strong, shrewd, and just, and the text continues to dwell on the golden results for some time.

Strong, legitimate rule and the difficulty of achieving it are, then, central themes in Geoffrey's history, themes so far presented through the king-portraits with which Geoffrey's narrative is studded. This method appears to be analogous to that of the mirror for princes, and Arthur has simply joined the ranks of David, Augustus, Charlemagne, and the rest. Bumke quotes a popular passage from pseudo-Cyprian which appeared in many works of political philosophy in the twelfth century, and which seems to describe Aurelius and Arthur, as well as to condemn men like Vortigern:

It is the justice of the king not to oppress anyone by unjust force; to judge people without regard for reputation of a person; to be a defender of strangers, orphans, and widows; to prevent theft; to punish adultery; not to elevate the unjust; not to support the unchaste and minstrels; to destroy the godless; not to permit murderers to live; to protect the churches and feed the poor with alms; to entrust the just with the business of royal government; to have experienced, wise, and prudent advisors; to pay no heed to the superstitious customs of magicians, soothsayers, and sorceresses; to

⁴¹ *Historia regum Britannie*, c. 155: ". . . ubi conuocato clero et populo statum regni pace et lege confirmauit."

⁴² *Historia regum Britannie*, c. 175: "Quod diuine potentie stabat loco cum et ueteres eorum priscis temporibus auos istorum inuicis inquietationibus infestassent; et isti tunc libertatem quam illi eisdem demere affectabant tueri instarent, abnegantes tributum quod ab ipsis iniuste exigebatur."

suppress rage; to defend the realm bravely and effectively against enemies, and to trust God in all things.⁴³

But the *Historia* is more than a string of exemplary portraits. It is in his attention to the overall structure of his work that Geoffrey most clearly distinguishes himself from his contemporaries. His careful manipulation of narrative momentum, his creation of anecdotes whose significance echoes beyond their immediate context and, above all, his radical disruption of the narrative flow with Merlin's *Prophetie*, have no match among twelfth-century historians. These features, as much as the invented story material, explain the modern critic's sense that Geoffrey is an artist who manages to "fuse and confuse historical truth and narrative truth."⁴⁴ The impact of these features on the central theme highlights Geoffrey's radical departure from the assumptions of contemporary historiography, even as he shares some of its interests.

The first structural aspect of note is the break which the Arthuriad represents in the overall rhythm of the piece. The *Historia regum Britannie* is composed of a series of king portraits of varying length, linked together by the material which recites how each king came to and lost power; we have already seen a part of this pattern at work in the Constantine/ Vortigern/ Aurelius sequence. The Arthuriad story receives disproportionate treatment, occupying about a third of the entire *Historia*. While it is impossible to disentangle the Arthuriad entirely from the narrative fabric into which it is woven, it is nevertheless the case that the sheer bulk of this portion of the text encourages the reader to forget, for a time, the normal pattern of the *Historia*. William of Rennes's thirteenth-century adaptation of the *Historia*, discussed in chapter 2, acknowledges the separateness of Geoffrey's Arthuriad by writing a new invocation for that part of the narrative. Geoffrey's treatment results in a suspension of the work's relentless chronology, a suspension which is heightened by stylistic aspects of the Arthuriad episode, and has thematic, as well as artistic, force.

For a long time, the *Historia* dwells on Arthur's successes. If the usual rhythm of the *Historia* encourages pessimism – good kings seem inevitably to be succeeded by bad – then this leisurely treatment of Arthur's reign seems designed to obviate or suspend that pessi-

mism. For pages, instead of paragraphs, we are allowed to dwell on the strengths of a king and the glory he brings to his people. In the end, however, the forces of history once more come into play. The effect is that much more devastating because it is delayed, and because the glowing picture of the age of Arthur has permitted, and in fact encouraged, us to forget the constant warnings in everything which leads up to this apparent golden age. Thus Geoffrey's manipulation of narrative momentum and audience reaction hammers home his grim vision of the nature of the historical process much more effectively than would direct statement.

It is immediately clear in the story of Arthur's attempts to gain firm control of his realm that we have moved towards a more detailed form of narrative than has hitherto been Geoffrey's practice. With the exception of the occasional description or anecdote, like that concerning Vortigern's infatuation with Renwein, the body of the *Historia* has been presented in a fairly straightforward fashion. This is not to say that the narrative has been plain; despite his protestations to the contrary, Geoffrey makes free use of various rhetorical techniques to lend interest to his battle sequences, and to the set speeches given to various characters. Nevertheless, all of these passages have a certain sameness about them; the description is that of battles in general rather than in particular, and the various speeches are of historical importance but normally have little in them to particularize the speaker. In the Arthuriad, detail suddenly becomes richer and more individual. It also broadens out beyond the focus on battles and historical set speeches. The treatment of Arthur is a case in point. When Arthur is first introduced in the passage cited above, there is much to recall the portraits of other kings like Aurelius. In this case, however, Geoffrey adds more detail:

Arthur himself was clothed in a breastplate worthy of so great a king, and he placed on his head a golden helmet sculpted in the likeness of a dragon. On his shoulders was his shield, called Pridwen, on which the image of the blessed Mary, mother of God, was depicted, so that she was continually called to his memory. He was girded with his sword Caliburn, the best of swords, made in the island of Avalon, and a spear called Ron adorned his right hand; this spear was long and broad, well-suited for battle.⁴⁵

⁴³ Quoted in Bumke, *Courtly Culture*, pp. 277–78.

⁴⁴ Shichtman and Finke, "Profiting from the Past," 13.

⁴⁵ *Historia regum Britannie*, c. 147:

Ipse uero Arturus lorica tanto regi digna indutus auream galeam simulachro draconis insculptam capiti adaptat: humeris quoque suis clipeum uocabulo Priduuen in quo

The arming of the hero is a familiar convention in epic and romance; Geoffrey's use of it here distinguishes Arthur from the kings who have gone before him. The naming of the weapons and the indications of their provenance also suggest the heroic world, perhaps derived from the semi-mythic early Welsh tradition which is so much in evidence in the early part of Geoffrey's other work, the *Vita Merlini*.⁴⁶ It is not surprising, with the expectations set up by the heroic overtones of the arming scene, that we should shortly be told that Arthur "killed four hundred and seventy men with his sword Caliburn alone."⁴⁷

The description of Arthur's plenary court at Caerleon at Whitsun is a further opportunity to emphasize the magnificence of the Arthurian court, and the success that such magnificence implies. Again, Geoffrey provides more detail in this passage than has been his custom in earlier parts of the *Historia*. A rhetorical set-piece, the description of the city, is followed by a lengthy list of those in attendance. The number of names emphasizes how far-reaching is Arthur's influence, as figures from all over Europe arrive to attend the court. In the summary of the activities at this gathering, Geoffrey sounds the familiar notes of later romance:

... whatever knight of that country was famous for prowess wore clothing and arms of one color. The women, too, fashionably attired in the same colors, would have nothing of the love of any man, unless he had been proven three times in battle. The women, then, were made chaste and more virtuous, and the soldiers more brave for the love of them.⁴⁸

imago sancte Marie Dei genetricis impicta ipsum in memoriam ipsius sepiissime reuocabat. Accinctus ergo Caliburno gladio optimo et in insula Auallonis fabricato lancea dextram suam decorat que nomine Ron uocabatur. Hec erat ardua lataque lancea, cladibus apta.

⁴⁶ Neil Wright notes that the last line of this description forms an internally rhymed hexameter line (*Historia regum Britannie*, p. 104, n. 1). It is extremely common for Welsh prose texts to make use of verse at significant moments; in the fourth branch of the *Mabinogi*, Gwydion sings a series of *englyn* to lure Lleu, in the form of an eagle, from a tree. In the Arthurian tale of *Culhwch ac Olwen*, Arthur mocks Cei with an *englyn*, an act so significant that from then on there is enmity between them. Geoffrey may be echoing a practice familiar to him from such sources.

⁴⁷ *Historia regum Britannie*, c. 147: "... quadringentos septuaginta uiros solo Caliburno gladio peremit."

⁴⁸ *Historia regum Britannie*, c. 157:

Quicumque ... famosis probitate miles in eadem erat unius coloris uestibus atque armis utebatur. Facete etiam mulieres consimilia indumenta habentes nullius amorem habere dignabantur nisi tertio in milicia probatus esset. Efficiebantur ergo caste et meliores et milites pro amore illarum probiores.

Jaeger argues that Geoffrey's references to *facete mulieres* and *facetia incolarum* demonstrate the existence of the cult of love two decades before the first vernacular romances were composed.⁴⁹ The passage could certainly be seen as the product of a court writer in his role as didactic civilizer of the aristocracy. But it is also important that the narrative pause for the description of this display of excellence. Elsewhere in the *Historia*, the narrative is halted for occasional informative anecdotes, important speeches, or comic moments of serious import. The leisurely description of peacetime activities here is part of the strategy of the whole Arthuriad, occupying as it does a disproportionate share of the work. It is true that Arthurian history was one of the *lacunae* which Geoffrey was at some liberty to fill. At the same time, the expansion of this section of the *Historia* has the effect of setting it off for a time from the flow of British history, and the static descriptions of the excellence of the Arthurian world contribute to the sense that this period is somehow apart from that flow. This "otherworldliness," the product not of fantastic detail as in later romance narrative but rather of a structural strategy, suggests a tendency common to many of the texts in this study, a tendency, that is, to play with the expectations of the audience. The audience is, through this strategy, encouraged to forget the ominous message of Britain's history of bliss and blunder, exemplified in the murder of both Aurelius and of Arthur's own father Uther. While the result of the (temporary) removal of the Arthuriad from the process of history is for a time simply entertaining, the final effect is quite devastating, as this best of worlds, apparently apart from the world, succumbs to the same forces which seem to lurk everywhere in British history. We are allowed to forget history in order that, ultimately, the lesson of history will be underlined that much more dramatically. This history teaches; but the courtly manners exemplified in the passage above are merely a surface lesson over a much deeper and more problematic one.

The suspension of the normal narrative flow in the Arthuriad tends, I have suggested, to encourage readers to give themselves over to the Arthurian world. Yet the alert audience has also been provided, by Geoffrey, with clues that the apparent immunity of the Arthurian world from the cycles of British history is and will be illusory. One structural strategy, the alteration of king portraits, has been tempora-

⁴⁹ Jaeger, *The Origins of Courtliness*, p. 166.

rily suspended, but another, the careful use of parallel episodes, is retained. I refer here to Geoffrey's account of Arthur's father Uther, an account which should fill the alert reader with unease for what is to follow.

Uther succeeds Aurelius, and like his brother strengthens and extends the rule of law throughout the land. When he calls his nobles to court at London at Easter, the stage is set for a festive celebration of what is shaping up to be another period of peace and law in Britain. Yet while Aurelius bears no fault for the treachery which cuts short his reign, Uther is about to do as many British kings have done before him; he is going to put his personal interests above those of his country, and the result this time, as well as the usual discord, will be the birth of Arthur.

If Geoffrey intends us to condemn Uther and see a stain on Arthur's birth, he first plays with us by introducing the problem in a scene which is on one level comic. At the banquet are Gorlois, duke of Cornwall, and his wife Igera. The presence of Igera throws Uther into confusion:

Among others, there came Gorlois, duke of Cornwall, and his wife Igera with him, whose beauty surpassed that of all the women of Britain. And when the king spotted her among the other women, he suddenly burned with love for her, to the extent that, leaving all other things aside, he turned his whole attention towards her. To her alone he directed dishes incessantly, to her he sent his servants with golden goblets. He smiled at her often, and exchanged joking words with her. When her husband took notice of this, he suddenly became angry and left the court without leave.⁵⁰

As was the case with the scene between Renwein and Vortigern, this piece is a lovely comic interlude, with the king-as-buffoon providing the humor. Yet Vortigern was a tyrant, and part of the pleasure of the former passage was in seeing the Saxons make a fool of him. It soon became clear, too, that the comic interlude between Vortigern and Renwein was to have extremely serious repercussions. If anything, the audience is allowed to laugh for even less time here. Uther has

⁵⁰ *Historia regum Britannie*, c. 137:

Aderat inter ceteros Gorlois dux Cornubie cum Ingerna coniuge sua, cuius pulchritudo omnes mulieres Britannie superabat. Cumque inter alias inspexisset eam rex, subito incaluit amore illius ita ut postpositis ceteris totam intencionem suam circa eam uerteret. Hec sola erat cui fercula incessanter dirigebat, cui aurea pocula familiaribus internuntiis mittebat. Arridebat ei multociens, iocosa uerba interserebat. Quod cum comperisset maritus, confestim iratus ex curia sine licencia recessit.

been shaping up to be a good king like his brother; an ominous note is sounded when we are told that his "whole attention" suddenly turned to Igera. Aurelius's "whole attention" had been directed to the restoration of religion and justice. Uther's is now directed to the winning of another man's wife, a man who has been presented to us as a loyal soldier. The passage from pseudo-Cyprian quoted above says that the good king does not tolerate adultery; here the king prepares to practice it. It is true that the cuckolded husband is a stock figure of comedy, but even had the positive presentation of Gorlois not undermined this comic possibility, then once Uther moves from seduction to the declaration of war the whole situation begins to take on such serious overtones that laughter becomes an inappropriate response. The echo of the Vortigern episode is troubling enough; the scene also suggests, although the association is never made explicit, David and Bathsheba. As in the *Vita*, the audience's laughter at a familiar situation soon gives way to an uneasy recognition that events are more serious than they seem. The way in which these events catch the audience unprepared is in itself a dramatization of the danger of relaxing one's vigilance, in the *Historia* or in this world, for even a moment.

The ultimate outcome of Uther's infatuation will, of course, be the birth of Arthur; Geoffrey chooses to stress as well several more immediate consequences which underline the serious themes embedded in the episode. First, the language of the scene is unequivocal, stressing deception:

And thus the king spent the night with Igera and relieved himself through the sexual relations he desired. He deceived her through the false appearance which he had assumed. He also deceived her with the false words which he carefully composed, for he said that he had come secretly from the besieged camp so that he could see to the thing which was so dear to him, and also to his town. She, believing him, refused him nothing that he asked. Also that night was conceived that most famous of men, Arthur, who afterwards through his wonderful bravery won great renown.⁵¹

⁵¹ *Historia regum Britannie*, c. 137:

Commansit itaque rex ea nocte cum Ingerna et sese desiderata uenere refecit. Deceperat namque eam falsa specie quam assumpserat. Deceperat etiam ficticiis sermonibus quos ornate componebat. Dicebat enim se egressum esse furtim ab obsessio oppido ut sibi tam dilecte rei atque oppido suo disponderet. Unde ipsa credula nichil quod poscebatur abnegauit. Concepit quoque eadem nocte celeberrimum uirum illum A<C>rturum qui postmodum ut celebris foret mira probitate promeruit.

This is not love, but the same lust which motivated Vortigern to betray his people. Like Vortigern at the death of Constans, Uther puts on a false face – literally, in this case – and he is aided and abetted in his deception by Merlin, who is preparing the way for Arthur. It is important that Uther is said to deceive Igera with his lying words; Aurelius, it will be remembered, above all other things refused to tell a lie. There is no break between the deception and the conception, and so one must wonder if the means used to achieve the desired end are not also sabotaging that end from the first.

Throughout the *Historia*, the Britons are shown to be incapable of achieving a lasting peace; the story of Arthur, at once their greatest king and their most tragic, may indicate that the root of the problem is to be found somewhere in the Britons themselves, or in the fates which take a hand in their history, or in some less than happy alliance between the two. What happens while Uther is with Igera lays out the problem quite clearly.

Uther's army decides, in the absence of their commander, to attack the fortress where Gorlois is besieged. Gorlois is killed, and the army indulges in looting. Geoffrey makes it perfectly clear that this unacceptable behavior is possible because the leader who should control such excesses is nowhere to be found: "The camp which they had besieged was captured, and the treasure deposited there was divided in an unequal fashion, for each seized with greedy fist as much as fortune and strength permitted."⁵² Fortune may not be in control of human affairs all the time, but she certainly is when the attention of authority has been distracted. Here would seem to be the heart of the history of bliss and blunder in Britain; her leaders far too often allow their attention to wander, and this inattention opens the door for the malignant forces which are always waiting in the wings. A king must be ruled by law, and be ruler over his own desires, because if he is not, the forces of destruction will take advantage of his weakness, and his people will suffer.

Geoffrey also refuses to sanitize the union retroactively. Geoffrey is later quite clear as to Arthur's legitimacy; it is the nature of the marriage itself which is more ambiguous. With Gorlois dead, the way is clear for Uther to take Igera. He does so, but while the text says that he was relieved that she was free from her marital obligations, it

⁵² *Historia regum Britannie*, c. 138: "Captum est oppidum quod obsederant et opes introposite non equa sorte diuise. Nam ut cuique administrabat fortuna et fortitudo, capaci ungue rapiebat."

is not absolutely clear as to whether Uther and Igera were in fact married, or happily married: "From then on they lived together equally, joined by no love at all, and they brought forth a daughter and a son."⁵³ It is possible that this phrase – *cum minimo amore* – is simply an oversight on Geoffrey's part, or a scribal error, but it may also be another intentional ambiguity, further shadowing Arthur's future career.

As I have said, Geoffrey does not allow the stain of *illegitimacy* to affect Arthur's succession, and the curious account cited above of Uther and Igera's union has a single manuscript witness. The foolish conduct of a father need not necessarily affect his son's ability to rule; Vortigern, for example, has the wholly worthy Vortimer as his son, but Vortimer is murdered by the very Renwein who facilitated the Saxon arrival. Yet the unsettling echoes set up by the Vortigern/Uther parallel is not the only structural feature of the *Historia* which should signal caution before the account of Arthur's reign begins. Even more striking is the effect of the *Prophetie Merlini*. Their strange placement in the *Historia*, as well as the link they make between celestial and apocalyptic imagery, set up a disturbing matrix of associations which reverberates throughout the whole of the *Historia*.

It appears at first as if the story of Merlin will simply be woven into the fabric of the narration, in this case of Vortigern's flight from the Saxons. Yet the search for the blood of a fatherless boy soon gives way to Merlin's explanation of the red and white dragons, and at this point the *Prophetie* begin. These prophecies, which circulated separately from the *Historia*, are introduced almost as a text in their own right, and Geoffrey's prologue to this section sounds several notes we have heard before:

⁵³ *Historia regum Britannie*, c. 138: "Commanserunt deinde pariter cum minimo amore ligati progenueruntque filium et filiam." The phrase "cum minimo amore" seems to be unique to the Bern MS; the usual reading is "non minimo amore," or "by no little love." The First Variant reading omits the issue of love but is quite clear as to the legitimacy of the marriage: "The king and queen Igera celebrated their marriage legitimately and magnificently" ("Nuptiis igitur legitime atque magnifice celebratis commanserunt pariter rex et regina Igera" (Wright, c. 138)). It would of course be dangerous to build an interpretation on a single witness, however authoritative, but the Bern reading seems to be very much in accord with the negative attitude towards love, or lust, as it is expressed in the two "love" interludes which we have examined thus far. It will also be seen that the relationship between Arthur and Guenevere is portrayed solely in terms of its suitability, with no mention of love at all. Given Wright's assertion that the First Variant is a redaction of the Bern MS, it may be that a later reader took the phrase at face value and decided that this unsavory situation needed to be regularized.

Love of your nobility, Alexander, bishop of Lincoln, compelled me to translate from British into Latin the prophecies of Merlin, before I had finished the history of the deeds of the British kings which I had begun. I had intended first to complete that work, and then to write this one, lest while the labor of both pressed upon me, my sense might prove too weak for either.⁵⁴

As he did in the prologue to the whole work, Geoffrey is here minimizing his own role. He is a mere translator, and a rather feeble and limited one at that. The protestations of inadequacy are an expected *topos*, yet the disclaimers also allow Geoffrey to shirk responsibility for the content of the passage to come. This neutral position can be playful and even mischievous, as the references in the *explicit* to Henry of Huntingdon and William of Malmesbury may suggest, but it can also be part of the uncertainty generated by the *Historia*. The authorial voice admits no responsibility for the material which follows or even, it is implied, for the way in which it has been inserted, apparently rather haphazardly, into the fabric of the *Historia*; this latter oddity is the responsibility of Alexander, bishop of Lincoln. While it may indeed be unlikely, as Michael Curley argues, that Geoffrey would have gone so far as to lie about Alexander's initiation of the project – Geoffrey was, after all, closely associated with Lincoln and his comments were unlikely to escape the bishop of Lincoln's attention⁵⁵ – I would argue that we are at perfect liberty to consider the ways in which Geoffrey has chosen to deploy material apparently requested by his patron. The *Prophetie* contribute a great deal to the overall theme of the *Historia*, and their placement, too, can be shown to have great relevance for the subsequent unfolding of the text. Geoffrey's protestations, then, can be seen as an attempt to divert attention from what is in fact a clue to the interpretation of the whole *Historia*. This is a work with various levels of meaning, not all of them equally available to all in the audience; indeed, the author seems at pains to hide, as much as to suggest, the various possibilities. The ability of the *Historia* to

⁵⁴ *Historia regum Britannie*, c. 110:

Coegit me, Alexander Lincolinensis presul, nobilitatis tue dilectio prophetias Merlini de Britannico in Latinum transferre antequam historiam parassem quam de gestis regum Britannicorum inceperam. Proposueram enim <illam> prius perficere istudque opus subsequenter explicare ne, dum uterque labor incumberet, sensus meus ad singula minor fieret.

⁵⁵ Curley, *Geoffrey of Monmouth*, pp. 48–50; Curley remarks on the interest in prophecy among intellectuals of the day; see chapter 2.

support various levels of interpretation may explain its later popularity, even if that popularity suggests that most of Geoffrey's audience accepted the most superficial reading of the work, and that with the connivance of the author.

Chapter 6 will discuss Geoffrey's use of Merlin's prophetic ability in his *Vita Merlini*; as problematic as that text's reference to a "jocose Muse" might be, there is little doubt that laughter, however dark, is a dominant element in that work. The prophecies of the *Historia*, on the other hand, are revealed through tears rather than through laughter. The *Prophetie* are overwhelmingly concerned with the rise and fall of rulers, and with the social and religious dislocation that this cycle provokes. One senses again both the specific context of the Anarchy and the broader context of national and, ultimately, human history. Even when some of the prophecies may be tied with certainty to events in British history, broader references to disaster in almost biblical cadences are interspersed with them: "A bloody rain shall fall and a dire famine shall afflict mortals"; or "Death will seize the people and empty all the nations, and those who are left will desert the soil of their birth and will sow their seeds in foreign fields."⁵⁶ Images of civil and religious unrest predominate.

The last clearly identifiable prophecy states that "The lion's cubs shall be turned into fish of the sea."⁵⁷ The reference is to the sinking of the White Ship and the death of the children of Henry I in 1120, the event which ultimately precipitated the contest between Stephen and Matilda. This prophecy, however, occurs quite early on in the list, and what remains is tantalizing because one can never be sure if reference or irreverence is intended. There are several prophecies, for example, which sound like nonsense; "The feet of those that bark shall be cut off," for example, or "Thereafter, from the first to the fourth, from the fourth to the third, from the third to the second shall the thumb be rolled in oil."⁵⁸ R.W. Southern has noted that the ambiguity of

⁵⁶ *Historia regum Britannie*, c. 112, (3); (5): "Pluet sanguineus ymber et dira fames mortales afficiet." "Arripit mortalitas populum cunctasque nationes euacuabit. Residui natale solum deserent et exteris culturas seminabunt." Tatlock argues that this style bears "a marked resemblance to the Psalms" (*Legendary History*, p. 406).

⁵⁷ *Historia regum Britannie*, c. 113, (12): "Catuli leonis in equoreos pisces transformabuntur . . ."

⁵⁸ *Historia regum Britannie*, cc. 113, (11); 114 (16): "Pedes latrantum truncabuntur." "Exin de primo in quartum, de quarto in tertium, de tertio in secundum rotabitur pollex in oleo." Tatlock suggests that the first of these may refer to the practice of cutting off dogs' feet in punishment for hunting violations (*Legendary History*, p. 358); the thumb in oil remains a mystery.

prophetic language was often regarded as evidence of genuineness;⁵⁹ Geoffrey's ambiguous language may be another legitimating device, or it may be intended to parody prophetic utterance and hence to question the efficacy of prophecy as explanation, as "that which illuminated God's plan."⁶⁰ It should be noted that these prophecies were received as genuine by many medieval readers, as chapter 2 makes clear.

Other prophecies seem to belong to the strain of "marvels" literature; passages which focus on marvels occur also in the *Vita*, and in the *De Ortu Waluuanii*. The taste for the marvelous, discussed in the Introduction, seems to be characteristic of much writing associated with the court. The purpose of such passages may be entertainment, or mockery, or some mixture of these; the wit of the writer often seems to be the main focus. In the *Historia*, for example, there is this exotic description of the springs of Winchester:

Three springs will burst forth in the city of Winchester, whose streams will divide the island into three parts. Whoever drinks from the first will enjoy a long life and will never be oppressed by the coming of any illness. Whoever drinks from the second will die from insatiable hunger, and pallor and horror will sit on his face. Whoever drinks from the third will die a sudden death, nor will it be possible for his body to be buried.⁶¹

There are also many prophecies in the *Historia* which concern themselves with sexual practices, perhaps to parallel the sense of social disintegration which comes to dominate, or perhaps merely to provide titillation; for example, "The fetid breath from their nostrils will corrupt wives and make them available to all, and the father will not know his own son because all will copulate as cattle do."⁶² Chapter 3 discusses the possibility that Andreas Capellanus is deliberately titillating a clerical courtly audience with his accounts of sexual antics at court; perhaps Geoffrey is here feeding a similar taste.

⁵⁹ R.W. Southern, "Aspects of the European Tradition of Historical Writing: 3. History as Prophecy," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 22 (1972), 161.

⁶⁰ Southern, "Aspects of the European Tradition of Historical Writing: 3," 172.

⁶¹ *Historia regum Britannie*, c. 116, (31):

Tres fontes in urbe Guintonia erumpent quorum riuuli insulam in tres portiones secabunt. Qui bibet de uno diuturniori uita fruatur nec superuenienti languore grauabitur. Qui bibet de altero indeficienti fame peribit et in facie ipsius pallor et horror sedebit. Qui bibet de tertio subita morte periclitabitur nec corpus ipsius subire poterit sepulchrum.

⁶² Compare the section on rivers and lakes in the *Vita Merlini*, discussed in chapter 6.

⁶³ *Historia regum Britannie*, c. 116, (53): "Fetore narium multo ieres corrumpent et proprias communes facient. Nesciet pater filium proprium quia more pecudum lasciuient."

There may well be elements of facetious wit, of a peculiar kind of playfulness, in this section of the *Historia*, and these elements, combined with examples of prophecies whose cryptic quality seems exaggerated to the point of parody, may suggest that this section is not always to be taken seriously. On the other hand, there are constant, serious themes running through the *Prophetie*. The rise and fall of rulers is continually emphasized, and is always coupled with an awareness that the fates of these men have profound effects on the people of their realms. The animal imagery, imagery which grows more dense as the *Prophetie* approach their conclusion, underlines the bestial nature of internal warfare, and emphasizes how far such behavior is from the ideal which might be hoped for from humanity. The *Prophetie* seem designed to show, in fact, that man is a beast, and in this respect their message is much grimmer than that in the *Vita*.

The *Vita*'s prophecies close with a recognition that Christ is the only refuge from the turbulent fortunes of the world. The *Historia* certainly shows the same awareness of the vagaries of fortune, but the conclusion of its prophecies offers no explicit way off the wheel. Instead, the imagery changes once more, from the animal to the celestial, in a picture of a final apocalypse:

The splendor of the sun will languish in the amber of Mercury, and there will be horror among those who see this. Mercury of Arcady will change its shield, and the helmet of Mars will call to Venus. The helmet of Mars will cast a shadow, and the rage of Mercury will cross over its orbit. Iron Orion will bare its sword, and watery Phoebus will torment the clouds. Jupiter will leave its ordained paths and Venus will desert its appointed lines. The anger of the star Saturn will fall and kill mortals with a curved sickle.⁶³

The heavens are out of joint and are showing themselves to be the enemy of humanity. The world is in bondage to the vagaries of Fortune, to the stars, and the stars are both unreliable and ill-disposed. What, then, are we to make of the possibilities of mockery raised earlier in this discussion? If there is parody here, it seems to be tending towards nihilism rather than towards corrective laughter. Prophecy is mocked because of its inefficacy; Merlin can recite the

⁶³ *Historia regum Britannie*, c. 117, (73):

Splendor solis electro Mercurii languebit et erit horror insipientibus. Mutabit clipeum Stilbon Archadie, uocabit Uenerem galea Martis. Galea Martis umbram conficiet, transsibit terminos furor Mercurii. Nudabit ense Orion ferreus, uexabit nubes <Phebus> equoreus. Exibit Iupiter licitas semitas et Uenus deseret statutas lineas. Saturni syderis liuido corruet et falce recurua mortales perimet.

most horrible of futures and yet have no effect whatsoever on the course of fate. His impotence is a matter for bitterness, and if the prophetic voice is in some sense also the author's – the voice of the one who knows what is going to happen, even if his control of events is at best illusory – then the impact of the *Prophetie* may bring the whole endeavor of the *Historia* into question. Geoffrey, like Merlin, can warn, but he seems to have little confidence that he can effect any kind of change in his countrymen, their kings, or their future. Jan Ziolkowski has suggested that in the *Vita*, Merlin's early prophecies "evinces a hopelessness that any divine order governs events in the human world."⁶⁴ The Merlin of the *Historia* is fixed in such a hopelessness; to conclude the *Prophetie* with apocalypse without redemption suggests history cannot perform its usual medieval functions – to reveal God's plan and to teach good behavior – because human beings can neither understand nor learn. Brynley Roberts suggests that the *Prophetie* demonstrate "the moral principle that a nation reaps what is sown in past ages."⁶⁵ What distinguishes Geoffrey's exemplification of that principle from similar lessons in other Latin histories and in the mirror for princes is the pessimism with which he approaches the exemplary aspect of the historian's task.

The *Prophetie* have local as well as cosmic significance; they occur in the middle of the developments leading up to the coming of Arthur. If we do not take seriously Geoffrey's statement that he is simply putting them in here to please his patron, then we may consider the impact which this structure has on the material to follow. For Roberts, the placement of the *Prophetie* is a significant part of their message: "History stands still for a moment while we seek its significance."⁶⁶ History's significance is exemplified by the fate of Arthur. Arthur will be a very bright spot in an otherwise somber history, yet the forecasting of doom before he appears on the scene darkens the picture from the outset. The perversion of the stars, too, shadows Arthur's rise, since his coming has been presaged by celestial display; Merlin explains the phenomenon thus to Uther:

⁶⁴ Jan Ziolkowski, "The Nature of Prophecy in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini*," in *Poetry and Prophecy: The Beginnings of a Literary Tradition*, ed. James L. Kugel (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 160.

⁶⁵ Roberts, "Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia regum Britannie*, and *Brut y Brenhinedd*," p. 103.

⁶⁶ Roberts, "Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia regum Britannie*, and *Brut y Brenhinedd*," p. 103.

For that star signifies you, as does the fiery dragon beneath the star. The ray which stretches towards the shores of Gaul portends your future son, who will be most powerful, and whose power will extend over all the kingdoms which he will protect. And the other ray signifies your daughter, whose sons and grandsons will hold the kingship of Britain in turn.⁶⁷

There is no indication here that Uther will die of poison as did his brother, or that Arthur's rule will give way to more civil discord. Yet the celestial imagery has overwhelmingly negative implications because of the apocalyptic ending of the *Prophetie*, and Arthur's rule is thus both predicted and shadowed.

The negative implications of celestial portents continue to reverberate once Arthur has assumed his throne, for the dream which Arthur has on his way to his battle with Lucius suggests aspects of the *Prophetie*:

As he lay drowsing, in his sleep he saw a bear flying through the air, at whose growling all shores shook; there was also a terrible dragon, flying in from the west, which illuminated the country with the glow of its eyes. When the one met the other, a marvelous battle occurred. The aforementioned dragon attacked the bear over and over again, burning it with its fiery breath and casting it, entirely burned, down to the earth. Arthur, awaking, described what he had dreamed to those standing about. They, interpreting it, said that the dragon signified him, and the bear some giant with which he was to fight; their battle portended the war to come between them, and the victory of the dragon was that which would come to him. But Arthur, thinking otherwise, conjectured that the vision had come about because of himself and the emperor.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ *Historia regum Britannie*, c. 133:

Te etenim sydus istud significat et igneus draco sub sydere. Radius autem qui uersus Gallicanam plagam porrigitur portendit tibi futurum filium et potentissimum cuius potestas omnia regna que proteget habebit. Alter uero radius significat filiam, cuius filii et nepotes regnum Britannie succedenter habebunt.

⁶⁸ *Historia regum Britannie*, c. 164:

Sopitus etiam per somnum uidit ursum quendam in aere uolantem cuius murmure tota litora intremebant; terribilem quoque draconem ab occidenti aduolare, qui splendore oculorum suorum patriam illuminabat. Alterum uero alteri occurrentem miram pugnam committere. Sed prefatum draconem ursum sepius irruentem ignito anhelitu comburere combustumque in terram prosternere. Expergefactus ergo Arturus astantibus quod somniauerat indicauit. Qui exponentes dicebant draconem significare eum, ursum uero aliquem gigantem qui cum ipso congrederetur; pugnam autem eorum portendere bellum quod inter ipsos futurum erat; uictoriam uero draconis illam quae ei proueniret. At Arturus aliud conieciabat existimans ob se et imperatorem talem uisionem contigisse.

The beast imagery, the conflict, and the celestial display all recall the end of the *Prophetie*, and the dream, like the *Prophetie*, requires interpretation. The interpretation provided, however, is another feature which serves to undermine any real possibility of understanding, for both those who interpret the dream for Arthur, and Arthur himself, are correct as to its significance. Shortly after the dream, Arthur fights with and defeats the giant of Mont-St.-Michel. Later, after several battles, Lucius too is defeated. However, the dream continues to reverberate through the rest of the narrative. The campaign against the Romans is both the height of the Arthurian period, in which Arthur joins the ranks of Brutus and Belinus, and the beginning of the end, for it is while Arthur is absent on this campaign that Modred seizes the queen and power in Britain, provoking yet another internal war whose final result is the death of Arthur, along with the flower of Britain's warriors. The return to the animal and celestial imagery of the *Prophetie* in this dream points to the dream's negative implications. Arthur is the bear as well as the dragon, the victor and the vanquished in this dream. The dream which signifies his success simultaneously presages his fall; the grim implication is that the seeds of destruction are present even at the moment of victory. The wheel is about to turn again; where does Geoffrey lay the blame?

In later chronicle treatments of the Arthurian story, like William of Rennes's *Gesta regum Britanniae*, blame is laid partly at Arthur's door. Arthur moves from just to unjust conquest, and suffers retribution accordingly. In the vernacular, too, Arthur may be figured as a conqueror in the negative sense. He is clearly called covetous in the *Awntyrs off Arthure*, discussed in chapter 5, and some readers argue that the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* also presents a king whose movement from just to unjust conquest is offered as the reason for his downfall.⁶⁹ Geoffrey does not allow this possibility. Wandering attention and self-centeredness on the part of British rulers have been shown to be responsible for some of the disasters of the past, but there is little evidence of these flaws in Arthur. It has already been noted that Geoffrey is at great pains to provide Arthur with legitimate

⁶⁹ William Matthews, in *The Tragedy of Arthur: A Study of the Alliterative "Morte Arthure"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960) argues that Arthur is modeled on Alexander and is guilty of lust for conquest. But Elizabeth Porter reads the *Morte* as celebratory: Arthur's actions are understandable in the context of medieval laws of war, and Arthur declares for the Crusade; "Chaucer's Knight, the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, and Medieval Laws of War: A Reconsideration," *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 27 (1983), 56-78.

reasons for his conquests. Arthur, like Aurelius, is one of the good kings who falls victim, not to his own vices, but rather to human treachery. Sin may indeed provide an explanation for the fall of Arthurian society, but because the sin is not Arthur's, it is that much more difficult to accept the fall as part of some benevolent final plan.

We have seen that providence, rarely referred to in the *Historia*, is made responsible for Arthur's victory over the Romans. It is almost immediately after this victory that Arthur receives word of Modred's treachery. Because divine intervention receives little mention elsewhere in the *Historia*, its introduction here seems particularly pointed. The juxtaposition of divine power in the battle and the treachery of Modred draws that treachery, and the lack of a providential explanation for it, to our attention. It is the central assumption of medieval history that there is a benevolent plan guiding the unrolling of human history. It would be astonishing were any medieval author to deny this assumption, but Geoffrey gives it precious little play, and concentrates instead on the fact of treachery rather than on anything which might reconcile us to its results. Instead, he offers only the cycles of history, cycles which by their very nature never benefit the Britons for long.

In this light, Geoffrey's treatment of Modred's treachery is striking:

Nor will Geoffrey of Monmouth, most noble consul, be silent about this. Instead he will, with his lowly pen and briefly, set forth the battles which that famous king fought with his nephew upon his return to Britain after his famous victory, as he found them in the aforementioned British book, and has also heard them from Walter of Oxford, a man most learned in many histories.⁷⁰

The return to the British book at this bleak moment may be an attempt on Geoffrey's part to evade the implications of his history. The fiction of the British book is a liberating device for Geoffrey throughout the *Historia*, allowing him to invent material and point it towards his desired ends with relative freedom. The reintroduction of the book at this point in the text certainly looks like an evasion of responsibility for the end of the story – a storyteller's apology that things must turn out badly, or a facetious covering of the truth – but

⁷⁰ *Historia regum Britannie*, c. 177:

Nec hoc quidem, consul auguste, Galfridus Monemutensis tacebit sed, ut in prefato Britannico sermone inuenit et a Gwaltero Oxenefordensi in multis historiis peritissimo uiro audiuit, uili licet stilo breuiter propalabit que prelia inclitus ille rex post uictoriam istam in Britanniam reuersus cum nepote suo commiserit.

it also allows Geoffrey to distance himself from the implications of the way in which he has chosen to present the story, for it does seem that he is doing something quite radical. Hayden White suggests that the desire to "narrativize" experience into history is connected to a desire to moralize that reality;⁷¹ what is astonishing about Geoffrey is that *his* moral – what White would call the underlying mythos to which he conforms his emplotment of events – is so much at odds with the assumptions of his contemporaries.

Several modern historians have understood Geoffrey's treatment of history as radical in terms of medieval historiography. Brooke notes that while his predecessors found divine judgment to be the main foundation for historical events, "... human causes, and impersonal Fate, played an increasing part in Geoffrey – partly because, though pretending to be a historian, he wrote fiction and therefore felt freer to play with new ideas."⁷² I have already suggested that "fiction" and "history" are rather blunt categories, but Brooke's remarks point to an important distinction between Geoffrey and conventional historians. Geoffrey and many of the other Latin writers in this study have seized the opportunity presented by the confluence of ironic writing, an interest in the marvelous, and the possibilities of Arthurian story, to engage in narrative experiment which in some cases leads to a reevaluation of traditional modes of understanding as well as telling. Antonia Gransden asserts that Geoffrey alone, among the historians of his age, "abandoned the Christian intention of historical writing."⁷³ Elsewhere she describes the contents of twelfth-century English historical prologues; it is significant that Geoffrey's prologues omit the standard *topoi* of history as revelatory of God's plan and as didactic in intent.⁷⁴ Robert Hanning, too, after detailing the development of medieval historical writing, in which history becomes the means by which God reveals His plan for the world, argues that Geoffrey deliberately removed Christian features from his material, in order to construct a narrative in which men have power over history,

⁷¹ Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," *Critical Inquiry* 7 (1980), 18.

⁷² Christopher N.L. Brooke, "Historical Writing in England between 850 and 1150," *La storiografia altomedievale*, 17, pt. 1 (Spoleto, 1970), 224.

⁷³ Antonia Gransden, *Historical Writing in England c. 550–c. 1307* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), p. 187.

⁷⁴ Antonia Gransden, "Prologues in the Historiography of Twelfth-Century England," in *England in the Twelfth Century*, ed. Daniel Williams (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell, 1990), pp. 64–65.

but history also has power over men.⁷⁵ Geoffrey's relationship to the romance genre may be located in part in his questioning of the meaning of history. Spiegel argues that "By situating itself between the vaguely demarcated boundaries of history and 'fable,' courtly romance had problematized, by inverting, the traditional relationship between the historical 'truth' of the past and the imaginative 'truth' of fiction, calling into question the moral utility of the former through its implicit validation of the latter."⁷⁶ Geoffrey certainly seems to be questioning the utility of historical truth, but what is the nature of his "truth"? Hanning comes closest to appreciating the full implications of Geoffrey's procedure when he writes that Merlin's apocalyptic vision is a statement about the absence of divine providence: "the impersonal universe which has presided over the rise and fall of kingdoms will lose control of itself and history will dissolve into nothingness."⁷⁷ This is hardly the vaunted twelfth-century optimism about human nature and human destiny, but one should remember that John of Salisbury and Peter of Blois, famous humanists both, painted a picture almost as grim, if more circumscribed in scope, in their denunciations of the court and its ability to corrupt all that it touched. Geoffrey may simply have extended the pessimism and occasional misanthropy of court satire to the world stage.

The final message of the *Historia*, then, is bleak indeed, and Geoffrey's handling of its dying moments underlines this bleakness. The final battle between Arthur and Modred receives a fair bit of description, but Arthur's death, although its famous ambiguity would generate a great deal in romances to come, is shockingly brief: "But that most famous king Arthur was mortally wounded; Arthur having been taken from there to the island of Avalon for the healing of his wounds, he handed over the crown of Britain to his cousin Constantine, son of Cador, duke of Cornwall, in the year 542 after the incarnation of our Lord. May his soul rest in peace."⁷⁸ The bald nature of this death, in contrast to the time spent on Arthur's life, pulls the audience up short. Arthur's reign is followed by a return to

⁷⁵ Robert W. Hanning, *The Vision of History in Early Britain: From Gildas to Geoffrey of Monmouth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), pp. 138–72.

⁷⁶ Spiegel, *Romancing the Past*, p. 64.

⁷⁷ Hanning, *The Vision of History in Early Britain*, pp. 171–72.

⁷⁸ *Historia regum Britannie*, c. 178: "Set et inclitus ille rex Arturus letaliter uulneratus est; qui illinc ad sananda uulnera sua in insulam Auallonis euectus Constantino cognato suo et filio Cadoris ducis Cornubie diadema Britannie concessit anno ab incarnatione Domini .dxlii.. Anima eius in pace quiescat."

the quick narration of a succession of rulers which characterized much of the earlier part of the *Historia*. This structure emphasizes that, although Arthur seemed to be holding the malignant forces of history at bay, in the end they have overwhelmed even him. The audience moves from the leisurely progression of the exploits of Britain's most famous king, to the shocked recognition that he is in fact no more immune to fate than were any of his predecessors. Geoffrey is certainly playing with history, but not simply, or even mainly, by inventing material and enlivening it with "literary" conventions. Indeed most of Geoffrey's literary moments, I have argued, are easily understood as the rhetorical embellishment expected of and routinely practiced by Latin writers in many genres. It is when Geoffrey removes this mask that he separates himself from traditional historians. His manipulation of traditional historical writing has as its target the central assumption of medieval historiography itself; that is, that history is the unfolding of a providential plan for mankind, whose benefit can be recognized by those with the right clues. Geoffrey, like Merlin the prophet, has all the clues but is powerless to bring about a satisfactory outcome to his *Historia*. This is not to say that the providential plan does not exist, but Geoffrey clearly lacks the confidence of many of his contemporaries that it is easy to discern. Perhaps this is a problem of hermeneutics rather than of faith; yet in the human realm such a problem remains acute. History and prophecy are not in the end revelatory, but rather another *speculum* through which we gaze *in aenigmate*, viewing little of what is on the other side.

Geoffrey's attack on medieval historiography does not seem to have impressed itself upon his contemporaries. Historians concerned themselves with worrying about his sources and the mass of new material which he introduced, while the burgeoning romance genre eagerly adopted and expanded his "stories." Yet we may see his legacy in more than merely the details of the Arthurian story. If later writers either failed to perceive or, perceiving, eschewed the nihilistic implications of the *Historia*, there are nevertheless many, Latin and vernacular alike, who digested and reflected in their own works the use of Arthur as an exemplary British king. In Geoffrey, Arthur is a hero; in some of the works to be examined in the chapters to follow, he is less praiseworthy. The thread of continuity lies in the use of a central, attractive or at least attracting royal figure to illustrate some concerns about kingship and rule. While Geoffrey's pessimism about

the end of history may not often recur, his cynical view of the all too human foibles of most kings is found again and again. Few writers will put Arthur in so frightening a cosmic context, but many will use him as their model for good or bad kingship. And there are some post-Galfridian Latin writers who seem to have been inspired to play with conventions and with their audiences, whether for education, entertainment, or some mixture of the two.