Early Reactions to Geoffrey's Work

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Although the 12th century was blessed with a profusion of elegant and idiosyncratic works of erudition, its literary horizon offers no more spectacular or unforeseen comet than the pan-European fascination with Geoffrey of Monmouth's *De gestis Britonum* and *Vita Merlini*. The scale of popularity and influence of Geoffrey's work is made more remarkable by its apparently unpropitious subject matter. Geoffrey adapted (or, some have claimed, invented) the historical triumphs and travails of a barely remembered people living on what was perceived to be the furthest outcrop of civilization:¹

While my mind was often pondering many things in many ways, my thoughts turned to the history of the kings of Britain, and I was surprised that, among the references to them in the fine works of Gildas and Bede, I had found nothing concerning the kings who lived here before Christ's Incarnation, and nothing about Arthur and the many others who succeeded after it, even though their deeds were worthy of eternal praise and are proclaimed by many people as if they had been entertainingly and memorably written.²

Geoffrey presents his aim modestly, as an act of repair on the historical tradition, but his work immediately and indelibly changed the trajectory of that narrative, while at the same creating a hunger for his subject which crossed geographical and cultural boundaries, and which is by no means spent even

- 1 J. O'Reilly, "The Art of Authority", in T. Charles-Edwards (ed.), *After Rome* (Short Oxford History of the British Isles), Oxford, 2003, pp. 141–90, at p. 141: "The utter remoteness of the islands at the north-westerly limits of the Ocean and the barbarian nature of their inhabitants was a commonplace or topos in the works of Roman poets and historians. They therefore regarded the partial conquest of Britain, the largest in the skein of islands at the furthest end of the inhabited world, as a symbol of Rome's universal dominion and civilizing role."
- 2 *DGB*, Prologus 1.1–7: "Cum mecum multa et de multis saepius reuoluens in hystoriam regum Britannie inciderem, in mirum contuli quod infra mentionem quam de eis Gildas et Beda luculento tractatu fecerant nichil de regibus qui ante incarnationem Christi inhabitauerant, nichil etiam de Arturo ceterisque compluribus qui post incarnationem successerunt reperissem, cum et gesta eorum digna aeternitate laudis constarent et a multis populis quasi inscripta iocunde et memoriter praedicarentur."

now. For Geoffrey's work to have become so widely sought after and then assimilated as a source and the setter of precedents, the texts must have expressed some quality, or qualities, which spoke eloquently to the preoccupations of contemporary as well as subsequent audiences. Geoffrey's texts, figuratively, had revealed to Europe a nostalgia for an experience of loss which had not previously been recognized.

Geoffrey's ability to speak to issues not addressed by existing literary tradition or writers of his age resulted in the rapid circulation of his work. Within two generations of the completion of the *DGB*, the figure of a probably mythical British king was being depicted in the mosaic of a cathedral ceilings in Otranto in southern Italy,³ and the themes of Arthurian literature were embedded in literature in French, German, Spanish, and Welsh, as well as Latin.⁴ The copious survival of medieval manuscripts of Geoffrey's texts provides further evidence of the scale of the popularity of his work. In her survey, Crick noted around 215 manuscripts of the *DGB* which have survived, at least in part, a figure which has continued to rise.⁵ Nor was the copying of the texts confined to Britain or the territories allied to the Angevin throne.⁶ Crick singles out the Low Countries, for example, as an important center of Galfridian manuscript production.⁷ But Geoffrey's importance was not limited to these Latin manuscripts for long. His original texts were swiftly translated into vernacular versions. In Wales, for example, there were at least three distinct translation traditions into Welsh which scribes could copy, amalgamate or extend.⁸ The third, and perhaps broadest, sphere of Geoffrey's decisive influence was exercised through the immense number of texts which were, factually or stylistically, indebted to his works and their distinctive ethical climate(s). In this category must be included most of the genre of romance, as well as a great

3 Loomis argues for a pre-Galfridian inspiration for the mosaic at Otranto, but offers no explanation how "the renown of the British hero" had reached Italy by this time: R.S. Loomis, *Arthurian Tradition and Chrétien de Troyes*, New York, 1949, p. 20.

4 For more on Geoffrey's reception in these languages, see the reception chapters at the end of this volume and Siân Echard's contribution to this volume.

5 Crick, *DR*. See Jaakko Tahkokallio's contribution to this volume, p. 155.

6 The early circulation of the work in Britain and on the Continent is considered by Tahkokallio in his contribution to this volume, pp. 155–80.

7 Crick, *DR*, pp. 210–11; see also David Johnson's contribution to this volume.

8 Patrick Sims-Williams has recently argued for a fourth: *Rhai Addasiadau Cymraeg Canol o Sieffre o Fynwy* [Some Middle Welsh adaptations of Geoffrey of Monmouth], Aberystwyth, 2011; id., "The Welsh Versions of Geoffrey of Monmouth's 'History of the Kings of Britain'", in A. Harlos and N. Harlos (eds.), *Adapting Texts and Styles in a Celtic Context: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Processes of Literary Transfer in the Middle Ages. Studies in Honour of Erich Poppe*, Münster, 2016, pp. 53–74.

range of medieval historical, political, and moral writings, not excluding those which were written to challenge, contradict, or "correct" Geoffrey's work.

The unprecedented circulation of texts by an otherwise obscure ecclesiastical writing on a previously ignored topic draws us to the central paradox of Geoffrey's reception history.⁹ The speed and extent of his influence might seem to suggest that his texts were received without reservation or challenge, whereas the survival of admittedly a small number of hostile written comments seems to demonstrate the reverse. Furthermore, the presumption that Geoffrey "remains, however, often misjudged if not condemned, and as controversial as ever" makes it harder to determine how far such comments should be read, not as specks of isolated criticisms but as representative expressions of contemporary reservation about his standing.¹⁰

There can be no denying Geoffrey's influence in establishing *la matere de Bretagne*, "the matter of Britain", as one of the most productive foundations of medieval literature.¹¹ It was swiftly accepted into the narrative capital of European vernaculars, undergoing expansion and hybridization, adding new characters and situations (like Lancelot's affair with the queen) that drew the attention of readers across Europe, with a speed and a geographical coverage which was signified, for example, in the excitable but clearly impressed testimony of Alan of Lille:

What place is there within the bounds of the empire of Christianity, to which has not extended the winged praise of the Arthur of the Britons? Who is there I ask who does not speak of the Britannic Arthur, who is but little less known to the peoples of Asia than to the Britons, as we are informed by our pilgrims who return from the countries of the east. The Easterns speak of him, as also do the Westerns, though the breadth of the whole earth lies between them. Egypt speaks of his name, and the Bosphorus is not silent; Rome, the Queen of the cities sings his deeds, and his wars are not unknown to her former competitor Carthage. His

9 Geoffrey's career has been traced by J.E. Lloyd, "Geoffrey of Monmouth", *EHR* 57 (1942), 460–68. See also Introduction, pp. 6–28.

10 R.W. Hanning, *The Vision of History in Early Britain: From Gildas to Geoffrey of Monmouth*, New York, 1966, p. 122.

11 Jehan Bodel's celebrated classification of the three "matters" of romance at the end of the 12th century must itself be considered proof of the widespread influence of Geoffrey's text: "N'en sont que trois materes a nul home vivant / De France, et de Bretaigne, et de Romme la grant", "There are only three matters no living man should be ignorant of; the matter of France, the matter of Britain, and the matter of glorious Rome": Jehan Bodel, *La chanson des Saisnes*, ed. A. Brasseur, *La chanson des Saisnes* (Textes littéraires français, 369), 2 vols., Geneva, 1989, vol. 1, p. 2.

exploits are praised in Antioch, Armenia, and Palestine. He will be celebrated in the mouths of the people, and his acts shall be food to those who relate them.¹²

So extensive was the vogue for Geoffrey's work that, even if Alan's praise was intended to be sarcastic, the joke was undercut. Nonetheless, it is inevitable that such success would cause disquiet, as well as some professional jealousy, rendering Geoffrey's work contentious for some of his readers. The difficulty for modern critics, then, is to try to determine how far the surviving contemporary attacks on Geoffrey should be considered minor correctives to a generally positive contemporary reception history, which have been allowed undue prominence due to the ideological (or even historiographical) priorities of later critics. Immediately, it is important to enter a caveat. It would be wrong to presume that the political sensitivity of the implications of Geoffrey's work is long spent. In his view of Britain as an ancient and indivisible polity, Geoffrey offered a coherent, but not necessarily welcome, projection of the inevitable and beneficial closeness of the relationship of Wales and Scotland (and, more tangentially, Ireland) to the English crown, in his own day and subsequently. It was a justification that was to be worked hard by those contemptuous of ideas of "British" identities, such as Edward I, formulating the English claim to Scotland and Wales. The ability of Geoffrey's texts to serve and support political and cultural campaigns and to draw attention to issues of identity and rightful authority helps to provide one explanation for the vehemence with which some commentators have sought to discredit his work.

12 Text and translation from T. Stephens, *The Literature of the Kymry: being a critical essay on the history of the language and literature of Wales during the twelfth and two succeeding centuries*, Llandovery, 1849, pp. 421–22: "Quo enim Arturi Britonis nomen fama Volans non pertulit et vulgavit: quousque Christianum pertingit imperium? Quis, inquam, Arturum Britonum non loquatur, cum pene notior habeatur Asiaticis gentibus, quam Britannis; sicut nobis referunt Palmigeri nostri de orientis partibus redeuntes? Loquuntur illum orientales, loquuntur occidui, toto terrarum orbe divisi. Loquitur illum Ægyptus; Bosforus exclusa non tacet. Cantat gestae ejus domina civitatum Roma, nec emulam quondam ejus Carthaginem, Arturi praelia latent. Celebrat actus ejus Antiochia, Armenia, Palaestina. [In ore populorum celebrabitur, et actus ejus cibus erit narrantibus]." Loomis makes some adjustments to the translation, e.g. he replaces Stephens' "Easterns" with "Eastern People", but his translation retains a slightly archaic sound; Loomis, *Arthurian Tradition*, p. 3. Alan of Lille's Latin appears as part of a commentary on the *PM: Interpretation of the Prophecy of Merlin*, printed by Ioachim Bratheringii, *Prophetia anglicana: Merlini Ambrosii britanni ... vaticinia et praedictiones a Galfredo Monemutensi latine conversae una cum septem libris explanationum in eandem prophetiam ...*, Frankfurt, 1603 and 1608, Book I at pp. 22–23.

At the heart of much of this dismissal lies the issue of Geoffrey's status as a "historian", but it is important to recall that, as Alan of Lille's remark makes clear, Geoffrey was equally celebrated for his presentation of the *PM* and (presumably) the *VM*. Geoffrey's fame as the broadcaster of prophecy was established almost immediately, as witnessed in comments by Orderic Vitalis, but this element of his achievement remains a phenomenon that skeptical modern critics prefer not to consider. It is important, also, to recognize that the prophecies would demand distinct Insular and Continental readings. In Britain, the prophecies were primarily read as predictions for British history. It is striking how, during the Lancastrian textual campaign to undermine the legitimacy of Richard II's rule, frequent recourse is made to "convenient" interpretations of Merlin's prophecies.¹³ It is a tactic which remains potent throughout the Wars of the Roses (and later), in English as well as Welsh prophetic and political poetry.¹⁴ For those unconcerned by who occupied the English throne, or the political condition of the Welsh, the prophecies offered compelling (and reassuring) proof of God's occasional willingness to intervene directly in human affairs. There is no evidence that Geoffrey's authorship of the *PM* and the *VM* was used as a means of discrediting his account of British history, though William of Newburgh perhaps allows his distrust of Geoffrey as a historian to check his respect for the prophecies.

Few modern critics place any credence in Geoffrey's claim to be translating from a *Britannici sermonis liber vetustissimus*, "a very old book written in the British language".¹⁵ Instead it has been assumed that the *DGB* is an exercise of imagination, that is, primarily or exclusively of Geoffrey's imagination. Laura Ashe admits some minimal qualification, before concluding that although "Geoffrey is likely to have drawn on earlier oral as well as written traditions ... his book as a whole is a vast product of the imagination."¹⁶ Yet the implications of such a view have not yet been fully developed. To have created such a prolific cast of characters and such a memorable and affecting sequence of situations would have required a prodigious exercise of imagination. Though

13 This process is traced in D.R. Carlson, *John Gower, Poetry and Propaganda in Fourteenth-Century England*, Cambridge, 2012.

14 V. Flood, *Prophecy, Politics and Place in Medieval England: From Geoffrey of Monmouth to Thomas of Erceldoune*, Cambridge, 2016.

15 Interestingly, Southern is a significant exception: R.W. Southern, "Aspects of the European Tradition of Historical Writing, 1: The Classical Tradition from Einhard to Geoffrey of Monmouth", *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, fifth series, 20 (1970), 173–96 (repr. in R.J. Bartlett (ed.), *History and Historians: Selected Papers of R.W. Southern*, Oxford, 2004, 11–29). For the claim, see *DGB*, Prologus 2.10.

16 L. Ashe, *Early Fiction in England from Geoffrey of Monmouth to Chaucer*, London, 2015, p. 4.

generally denied the laurels as a historian, Geoffrey has yet to be duly recognized for his accomplishments as an imaginative author. Burrow is one of the few critics to begin to acknowledge the enormity of Geoffrey's achievement:

The consensus seems to be that, though there may be traces of Welsh legend and genealogy, partly from oral tradition, in Geoffrey's work, it is essentially his creation.... remarkable not only for the important gap it purports to fill in historical knowledge of Britain, but also for the accomplished and assured manner of Geoffrey's narration.¹⁷

What remains clear is that much about Geoffrey's achievement remains uncertain. It is impossible to recover with any certainty how he viewed his own work, if we doubt the evidence preserved in his introductions. This uncertainty can be refined into three questions:

1. What was Geoffrey's understanding of "history"?
2. From where did he derive his source material – assuming he did not invent almost all of it?
3. What were his motivations in writing this work?

In answer to all three heads of query, critics have been eager to interpret early references to Geoffrey's work to buttress their conclusions. Yet careful analysis of the early witnesses shows how much care is needed in interpreting these early witnesses without prejudice.

Perhaps the most controversial of these topics concerns Geoffrey's understanding of historical method. Hanning distinguishes Geoffrey's writing from the tradition of historical writing as "pseudohistory rather than history" though at the same time he notes that "it is still representative in many ways of the historiographical developments of its day."¹⁸ He interprets Geoffrey's method as being influenced by secular and classical models, as distinguished from the tradition of Bede's salvation history, yet it is Geoffrey's method that is presumed to be pseudo-history. A similar ambivalence can be detected in Burrow, who distinguishes between the (disputed) factual bases of Geoffrey's work and his ability to fulfill a contemporary audience's expectations of a historian:

The interest of Geoffrey's work is not exhausted by consideration of whether it has any factual basis. Geoffrey clearly knew what his

17 J.W. Burrow, *A History of Histories: Epics, Chronicles, Romances and Inquiries from Herodotus and Thucydides to the Twentieth Century*, London, 2008, p. 234.

18 Hanning, *Vision*, p. 4.

contemporaries expected a history to be like, and was talented enough, free apparently from any danger of allowing his narrative to be dominated by its sources, amply to give it to them.¹⁹

This does not resolve the problem raised by Crick, namely that "Geoffrey's work can be classed as parody, fraud, or history" since "Geoffrey's intentions remain buried in his work and in its relationship to its sources."²⁰ Though she notes cautiously that "the reaction of the immediate audience for which it was intended is unknown", other critics have been swifter to attempt to enlist medieval references to Geoffrey as proof of his intentions – that is, of an intention to deceive.

Of course, the absence of alternative surviving sources makes it impossible to determine how far Geoffrey had access to unrecorded sources (whether written or oral) and, if so, whether he analyzed them with due rigor. It is important to bear in mind how sparse the survival of early Welsh manuscripts has proved. Daniel Huws suggests that they may have been written in Insular scripts which were becoming obsolete,²¹ while Sims-Williams offers additional explanations for their scarcity:

For some reason such as poor storage conditions, early codices, whether Latin or vernacular, survived badly in Wales, Ireland and Scotland, and most of the famous early Celtic manuscripts are extant because at an early stage they were taken to the Continent or, as in the case of the *Juvencus* and other surviving manuscripts from Wales, to England. Such manuscripts were preserved abroad for the sake of their Latin contents, rather than for any incidental vernacular glosses and marginalia; and completely vernacular manuscripts would not have warranted preservation.²²

To these accounts should be added the reminder that medieval Wales was regularly a war zone, from before the Norman Conquest at least until the completion of the Edwardian annexation in 1284, beset by invading English armies which had no incentive to respect documents which might support the legitimacy of Welsh claims to the land. In such a context, Hanning's repeated and pointed references to Geoffrey's powers of imagination offer a judgement

19 Burrow, *History of Histories*, p. 234.

20 Crick, *DR*, p. 2.

21 D. Huws, *Medieval Welsh Manuscripts*, Aberystwyth, 2000, p. 212.

22 P. Sims-Williams, "The Early Welsh Arthurian Poems", in R. Bromwich, A.O.H. Jarman, and B.F. Roberts (eds.), *The Arthur of the Welsh: The Arthurian Legend in Medieval Welsh Literature* (Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages, 1), Cardiff, 1991, pp. 33–61, at p. 35.

which, however plausible, are incapable of proof, but which must inevitably color any readings of contemporary accounts.²³

This difficulty underlines and potentially threatens to undermine the interpretation of evidence from another leading Anglo-Norman historian, Henry of Huntingdon. In a letter, Henry tells how he was concerned that Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* seemed to lack information about the British past. Seeking help in "filling out the great unrecorded gaps in the British past",²⁴ Henry expresses delight at being introduced to Geoffrey's work by Robert of Torigni: "But this year, on my way to Rome, I discovered, to my amazement, a history of the above reigns at the abbey of Le Bec."²⁵ There would, initially, seem to be no reservation in Henry's enthusiasm for Geoffrey's work. But this acknowledgement is not inscribed into the text of Henry's own historical work, but is separately recorded in a letter designed to be circulated with Henry's discrete *History of the English*. It is easy though not inevitable to read this as a sign of Henry's skepticism about Geoffrey's reliability, but perhaps Wright is closer in suggesting that this provides an elegant means to pass over the delicate task of reconciling inconsistencies between Geoffrey and Bede's "authoritative" text.²⁶

For those set on prosecuting Geoffrey on the charge of willfully misleading his readers, the prize exhibit in the case is a colorful and celebrated episode recounted in Gerald of Wales's revision of his *Journey Through Wales* in 1197. Gerald recounts the experiences of Meilyr of Caerleon, whose affliction by demons is cured by the touch of the Gospels, but made much more grievous when he touches the *DGB*. Gerald paints a lively and memorable scene which has been interpreted as an iconic proof of how Geoffrey's history was dismissed as a tissue of lies in the generations following its composition. But even here the evidence is less clear than it might appear. First, the passage appears as an addition to a single manuscript, suggesting that it might have been

23 It is a dilemma which leads Brynley Roberts to attempt to argue for both possibilities. See B.F. Roberts, "Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia regum Britanniae*, and *Brut y Brenhinedd*", in Bromwich et al. (eds.), *The Arthur of the Welsh*, pp. 97–116, at p. 108: "The Arthurian section is Geoffrey's literary creation and it owes nothing to a prior narrative, but elements here as throughout the book appear to be drawn from Welsh – or British – sources."

24 Hanning, *Vision*, p. 124.

25 N. Wright, "The Place of Henry of Huntingdon's *Epistola ad Warinum* in the Text-History of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae*: a Preliminary Investigation", in G. Jondorf and D.N. Dumville (eds.), *France and the British Isles in the Middle Ages and Renaissance: Essays by Members of Girton College, Cambridge, in Memory of Ruth Morgan*, Woodbridge, 1991, 71–113, text at p. 93, translation at p. 106: "Hoc tamen anno, cum Romam proficiscerer, apud Beccensem abbatiam, scripta rerum predictarum stupens inueni."

26 Wright, "The Place of Henry of Huntingdon's *Epistola ad Warinum*", pp. 88, 90–91.

added to meet the approval of a particular patron or audience.²⁷ Then, though Gerald is scarcely famed for the consistency of his judgements, it is worth noting that, throughout his career, he was, at the very least, inconsistent in his estimation of how much weight might be placed on Geoffrey as a supporting witness. Gerald did, on occasion, reuse material from Geoffrey, in particular in his two works on Wales, though, as Crick notes, such reliance was never acknowledged.²⁸ Moreover, he draws on some of the most sensitive areas of contention, such as Geoffrey's account of the Trojan origins of the Britons which are presented without skepticism. Similarly, the essential reliability of Geoffrey's account is presumed in Gerald's closing depiction of the Welsh:

For the perpetual remembrance of their former greatness, the recollection of their Trojan descent, and the high and continued majesty of the kingdom of Britain, may draw forth many a latent spark of animosity, and encourage the daring spirit of rebellion.²⁹

In this unresolved ambivalence, Gerald might be seen as no more and no less than a man of his time, pragmatic or cynical enough to be willing to make use of whatever might support his chosen causes (for example, the metropolitan status of St Davids) just as Richard I exploited the Arthurian myth of Excalibur/Caliburn, and the monks of Glastonbury cashed in on the "fortuitous" discovery of the grave of Arthur and Guinevere, an occasion chronicled and publicized by Gerald himself.³⁰ This pragmatism led Crick to question why "few commentators have stopped to question whether Gerald's hostility was

27 Dimock identifies three "editions" of the *Itinerary*. This passage is not found in the first edition of 1191. It does appear in what Dimock conjectures to be a second version of 1197, though it survives in a 16th-century witness, London, British Library, Harley 359: Gerald of Wales, *The Description of Wales*, ed. J.F. Dimock, *Giraldi Cambrensis Opera*, 8 vols., London, 1861–91, vol. 6, pp. 153–228, at pp. x–xxi.

28 J. Crick, "The British Past and the Welsh Future: Gerald of Wales, Geoffrey of Monmouth and Arthur of Britain", *Celtica* 23 (1999), 60–75, at pp. 64–65.

29 Gerald of Wales, *The Description of Wales* ii.10, ed. Dimock, p. 227: "Plurimam quippe animositatis scintillam exprimere, plurimam rebellionis audaciam imprimere potest continua pristinae nobilitatis memoria; et non solum Trojanae generositatis, verum etiam regni Britannici tantae et tam diuturnae regiae majestatis recordatio", translation in Gerald of Wales, *The Journey Through Wales and The Description of Wales*, trans. W.L. Williams, *The Itinerary Through Wales and the Description of Wales*, London, 1908, p. 205. See also J.P. Carley, "Arthur in English History", in W.R.J. Barron (ed.), *The Arthur of the English: The Arthurian Legend in Medieval English Life and Literature* (Arthurian Literature of the Middle Ages, 2), Cardiff, 1999, pp. 47–57.

30 Gerald recounts the discovery in the *Mirror of the Church* and *The Instruction of Princes*. See also Carley, "Arthur in English History", p. 44.

occasioned by anything more than his affronted historical sense".³¹ Admittedly, in the *Description of Wales*, Gerald upbraided Geoffrey for error in terms which are a little ambiguous as to Geoffrey's intention to deceive, as opposed to mere ignorance: "The name of Wales was not derived from Wallo, a general, or Wandolena, the queen, as the fabulous history of Geoffrey Arthurius falsely maintains."³² A characteristically Giraldian need to establish his superiority over Geoffrey's reliability seems to be signified in the prominent use of the passive voice in a (politically significant) Arthurian reference in the *Topography of Ireland*: "It can be read that Arthur, the fabled king of the Britons, received tribute from the kings of Ireland and that some of them attended his great court at Caerleon [the City of the Legions]."³³ But the much-repeated presumption of Gerald's hostility, or even contempt, for Geoffrey expressed in the tale of Meilyr cannot survive a more careful reading of the episode. It is striking that when the passage has been referred to by critics, it is generally presented in a heavily abridged form – it appears thus, for example, in Crick's article on Gerald's attitude to Geoffrey. In this abbreviated form it might appear that Gerald has "launched a devastating rhetorical attack on a compatriot and fellow writer".³⁴ When the passage is read in full, however, it becomes clearer that Geoffrey was not Gerald's primary inspiration or target in writing this scene. The passage presents an extended account of the difficulties and discomforts of consorting with demons which appear to have great powers to reveal deceit. Gerald is fascinated to consider the apparent paradox that, despite their ability to uncover human deception, demons are themselves unable to avoid error, or misleading their familiars:

31 Crick, "British Past", p. 60.

32 Gerald of Wales, *The Description of Wales* i.2, ed. Dimock, p. 179: "Wallia vero non a Walone duce, vel Wendolena regina, sicut fabulosisa Galfridi Arthuri mentitur historia", Gerald of Wales, *The Journey Through Wales and The Description of Wales*, trans. Williams, p. 165. See also Ben Guy's contribution to this volume, pp. 31–66.

33 Gerald of Wales, *The Topography of Ireland* iii.8, ed. J.F. Dimock, *Giraldi Cambrensis Opera*, 8 vols., London, 1861–91, vol. 5, pp. 3–204, at p. 148: "Legitur quoque famosum illum Britonum regem Arturum Hiberniae reges tributarios habuisse; et ad magnam etiam urbis Legonium curiam quosdam eorum accessisse." The effect is difficult to reproduce in English, so Wright, for example, loses the nuance: "we read also that Arthur, the famous king of the Britons, had the kings of Ireland tributary to him, and that some of them came to his court at the great city of Caerleon", Gerald of Wales, *The Journey Through Wales and The Description of Wales*, rev. T. Wright, trans. R.C. Hoare, *The Itinerary through Wales, and the Description of Wales, translated by Sir Richard Colt Hoare, Bart.*, London, 1863, p. 121.

34 Crick, "British Past", p. 60.

It is worthy of observation, that there lived in the neighborhood of this City of Legions, in our time, a Welshman named Melerius, who, under the following circumstances, acquired the knowledge of future and occult events. Having, on a certain night, namely that of Palm Sunday, met a damsel whom he had long loved, in a pleasant and convenient place, while he was indulging in her embraces, suddenly, instead of a beautiful girl, he found in his arms a hairy, rough, and hideous creature, the sight of which deprived him of his senses, and he became mad. After remaining many years in this condition, he was restored to health in the Church of St. David's, through the merits of its saints. But having always an extraordinary familiarity with unclean spirits, by seeing them, knowing them, talking with them, and calling each by his proper name, he was enabled, through their assistance, to foretell future events. He was, indeed, often deceived (as they are) with respect to circumstances at a great distance of time or place, but was less mistaken in affairs which were likely to happen nearer, or within the space of a year. The spirits appeared to him, usually on foot, equipped as hunters, with horns suspended from their necks, and truly as hunters, not of animals, but of souls. He particularly met them near monasteries and monastic cells; for where rebellion exists, there is the greatest need of armies and strength. He knew when any one spoke falsely in his presence, for he saw the devil, as it were, leaping and exulting upon the tongue of the liar. If he looked on a book faultily or falsely written, or containing a false passage, although wholly illiterate, he would point out the place with his finger. Being questioned how he could gain such knowledge, he said that he was directed by the demon's finger to the place. In the same manner, entering into the dormitory of a monastery, he indicated the bed of any monk not sincerely devoted to religion. He said, that the spirit of gluttony and surfeit was in every respect sordid; but that the spirit of luxury and lust was more beautiful than others in appearance, though in fact most foul. If the evil spirits oppressed him too much, the Gospel of St. John was placed on his bosom, when, like birds, they immediately vanished; but when that book was removed, and the History of the Britons, by Geoffrey Arthur, was substituted in its place, they instantly reappeared in greater numbers, and remained a longer time than usual on his body and on the book.³⁵

35 Gerald of Wales, *The Journey Through Wales* i.5, ed. J.F. Dimock, *Giraldi Cambrensis Opera*, 8 vols., London, 1861–91, vol. 6, pp. 3–152, at pp. 57–58: "Notandum autem quod in his Urbis Legionum partibus fuit diebus nostris vir quidam Kambrensis, cui nomen Meilerius, futurorum pariter et occultorum scientiam habens; cui talis hanc eventus

Gerald's willingness to countenance the existence of magical or paranormal occurrences, and his unquestioning loyalty to the institutions of the church, render his judgements suspect. In this exemplum, Gerald's purpose is to contrast the limited and misleading powers of demons with the absolute authority of the church, in whose name the demons are obliged to flee. In context, it becomes clear that the reference to Geoffrey is merely tangential, rather than the primary purpose of the episode. The Gospel here functions simultaneously as a physical object, and as a figure of synecdoche, representing the full powers of the church, through hierarchy, liturgy, and sacrament. To infuse the scene with maximum power, Gerald needs an image, preferably a textual image, to contrast with the universal power of the Gospel, and it is perhaps a perverse compliment that he finds such an image in Geoffrey's text, chosen as the most popular and most influential Insular text in Latin known to Gerald. It is scarcely surprising that as ambitious and insecure a writer as Gerald could not resist a passing kick on the shins of a man who had so comprehensively laid claim to

scientiam dedit. Nocte quadam, scilicet Ramis palmarum, puellam diu ante adamatam, sicut forma praeferebat, obviam habens loco amoeno, et ut videbatur opportuno, desideratis amplexibus atque deliciis cum indulsisset, statim, loco puellae formosae, formam quamdam villosam, hispidam et hirsutam, adeoque enormiter deformem invenit, quod in ipso ejusdem aspectu dementire coepit et insanire. Cumque pluribus id annis ei durasset, tandem in ecclesia Menevensi, meritis sanctorum loci ejusdem, optatam sanitatem recuperavit. Semper tamen cum spiritibus immundis magnam et mirandam familiaritatem habens, eosdem videndo, cognoscendo, colloquendo, propriisque nominibus singulos nominando, ipsorum ministerio plerumque futura praedicebat. In longe vero futuris atque remotis, sicut et ipsi, frequentius fallebatur: in propinquioribus autem, et quasi infra annum futuris, minus falli consueverat. Videbat autem eos fere semper pedites et expeditos, et quasi sub forma venatorum, cornu a collo suspensum habentes, et vere venatores, non ferarum tamen nec animalium sed animarum. Circa monasteria quoque, et loca religiosa, magis eos et in multitudine majori videre solebat. Ibi nimirum exercitu, ibi numerosis opus est viribus, ubi rebellio. Quoties autem falsum coram ipso ab aliquo dicebatur, id statim agnoscebat: videbat enim super linguam mentientis daemonum quasi salientem et exultantem, Librum quoque mendosum, et vel falso scriptum, vel falsum etiam in se continentem inspiciens, statim, licet illiteratus omnino fuisset, ad locum mendacii digitum ponebat. Interrogatus autem, qualiter hoc nosset, dicebat daemonum ad locum eundem digitum suum primo porrigere. Similiter et dormitorium monasterii cujuslibet intrando, lectum monachi falsi, et religionem habitu non animo praeferentis, eisdem indicii ostendebat. Dicebat autem spiritum gulositatis et crapulae supra et infra sordidum esse; spiritum vero libidinis et luxuriae pulchriorem aliis, sed foetidissimum. Contigit aliquando, spiritibus immundis nimis eidem insultantibus, ut Evangelium Johannis ejus in gremio poneretur: qui statim tanquam aves evolantes, omnes penitus evanuerunt. Quo sublato postmodum, et Historia Britonum a Galfrido Arthuro tractata, experiendi causa, loco ejusdem subrogata, non solum corpori ipsius toti, sed etiam libro superposito, longe solito crebrius et taediosius insederunt." Translation from Gerald of Wales, *The Journey Through Wales and The Description of Wales*, trans. Williams, pp. 52–53.

a body of literary material which he (and Walter Map) might otherwise have expected to claim as their own.

Gerald's balancing of Geoffrey against the Gospel reflects less a rejection of Geoffrey's historical method, and rather more a suspicion how far, in following the influence of classical writers, Geoffrey created a work which aspires to being, or could be characterized as, "secular". It is a term used by Hanning, interpreting Geoffrey's work as a development from the aesthetic of [pseudo] Nennius's *Historia Brittonum*.³⁶ A degree of caution is appropriate in using the term "secular", a term which requires nuanced differentiation of meaning in different historical contexts. But if, consciously or unconsciously, Gerald felt that, in comparison to the precedents set by Bede or Gildas, Geoffrey was engaged in a "systematic secularization of British history", then he would have found that direction of interpretation troubling, with its implicit challenge to the role of the church as the essential mediator of understanding.³⁷ The fear of secular or romance texts distracting monks and clerics from their vocation was frequently voiced in the Middle Ages.³⁸

Whether or not Gerald feared an emerging secular hermeneutic revealed in Geoffrey's *DGB*, this would not have been his most pressing source of concern about Geoffrey's work.³⁹ The tale of Meilyr deals with the powers of demons to reveal the truth, and presumably the *DGB* was called into Gerald's mind due to the prominent role played by Merlin, whose prophetic powers were inherited from his demonic sire. If the *DGB* is, finally, ambivalent about the reliability of Merlin's gifts, the circulation of the *VM* seems to depend on the reliability of his prophecies. It is clear that Gerald did not reject the role of Merlin as being "fabulous" or "unhistorical" any more than Alan of Lille had. Typically, Gerald's

36 Hanning, *Vision*, p. 123.

37 Hanning, *Vision*, p. 23, n. 11.

38 It has generally been assumed that Ailred of Rievaulx's complaint on this topic contains a veiled reference to the *DGB*. See, for example, Loomis, *Arthurian Tradition*, p. 17: "In 1141–2 Ailred, then master of the novices at the Yorkshire abbey of Rievaulx, composed his *Speculum Caritatis*, in which he represents a novice as reproaching himself because, though in his past life he had frequently been moved to tears by fables which were invented and disseminated concerning an unknown Arthur (*fabulis quae vulgo de nescio quo finguntur Arcturo*), it was almost a miracle if he could extract a tear at a pious reading or discourse." The question whether the Arthur reference concerns Geoffrey's history or other, perhaps oral, circulating material has been considered by J. Tahkokallio, "Fables of King Arthur. Ailred of Rievaulx and Secular Pastimes", *Mirator* 9:1 (2008), 19–35.

39 J. Gillingham, "The Context and Purposes of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*", *Anglo-Norman Studies* 13 (1990), 99–118 (repr. in id. (ed.), *The English in the Twelfth Century: Imperialism, National Identity and Political Values*, Woodbridge, 2000, pp. 19–39, at p. 21, n. 10): "That some readers were indeed disturbed by HRB's relatively secular and non-monastic tone is suggested by some early alterations to the text."

response to Merlin's prophecies is inconsistent. Southern notes Gerald's interest in the role of prophecy:

[He] went further than anyone else in seeking unknown prophecies and trying to fit them into his contemporary histories. He seems to have had the idea of making a complete fusion between contemporary history and ancient Celtic prophecy, writing what he called a *Historia Vaticinalis*.⁴⁰

On careful reading, Gerald's most vehement assault on Geoffrey proves to be based not on a criticism of his historical accuracy but rather on whether Geoffrey might have underestimated how far prophecies inspired by demons were to be relied on.

Despite the inescapably memorable image of Meilyr beset by demons, Gerald should not be considered the primary source of the vehemence with which Geoffrey has been assaulted as a historian by 20th-century critics such as Gransden or Loomis, who dubbed the *DGB* "one of the world's most brazen and successful frauds".⁴¹ Central to Loomis's interpretation is the attribution to Geoffrey of a lack of belief in his own material which, it is then inferred, must prove that Geoffrey consciously misrepresented the evidence available to him in support of mendacious and misleading ideological objectives. In short, Geoffrey has been arraigned for the unforgivable sin of being a historian in bad faith.

It is both a more stringent and a more specific charge than Gerald's complaints about the *fabulosa* of Geoffrey's account, which might be the result of exaggeration or excess credulity, and it is a complaint that unmistakably bears the fingerprints of one writer who neither qualified nor concealed his scorn for Geoffrey's work, William of Newburgh. In launching his own historical account, William felt obliged to pour scorn on a thicket of Galfridian alternatives. He does so initially by criticizing the rigor of Geoffrey's literary procedure but, when aiming what is designed as the *coup de grâce*, he chooses to denounce Geoffrey's presumed political partiality:

The venerable priest and monk Bede has composed a history of our race the English.... But in our own day a writer of the opposite tendency has emerged. To atone for these faults of the Britons he weaves a laughable web of fiction about them, with shameless vainglory extolling them far above the virtues of the Macedonians and the Romans. This man is called

40 R.W. Southern, *Medieval Humanism and Other Studies*, Oxford, 1970, p. 107.

41 Loomis, *Arthurian Tradition*, p. 17.

Geoffrey and bears the soubriquet Arthur, because he has taken up the stories about Arthur from the old fictitious accounts of the Britons, has added to them himself, and by embellishing them in the Latin tongue he has cloaked them with the honourable title of history. More audaciously still he has taken the most deceitful predictions of a certain Merlin which he has very greatly augmented on his own account, and in translating them into Latin he has published them as though they were authentic prophecies resting on unshakeable truth.⁴²

However clumsily, in raising the question of Geoffrey's intentions, William draws attention to one of the most puzzling issues concerning Geoffrey's authorship. Modern critics have signally failed to determine what political agenda Geoffrey intended to promote, and there is little reason to suppose that his purposes would have seemed clearer in his own time. In so far as Geoffrey's history deviated from the "official" path of English self-aggrandizing history, it might seem obvious that the *DGB* would "please the Welsh". In fact, Welsh attitudes were, and have remained, ambivalent.⁴³ Geoffrey's importance was immediately recognized in the fulsome and continuing engagement with his works by Welsh commentators. For a few, Geoffrey's comments appeared supportive, a trend which reaches a highwater mark in Sir John Prise's *A Defense of the British History*, a mid-16th-century rejoinder to the skepticism of Polydore Vergil's *Anglica Historia*.⁴⁴

42 Text and translation from William of Newburgh, *The History of English Affairs* Proemium §§2–3, ed. and trans. P.G. Walsh and M.J. Kennedy, *William of Newburgh: The History of English Affairs, Book I (Edited with Translation and Commentary)*, Warminster, 1988, pp. 28–29: "Historiam gentis nostrae, id est Anglorum, venerabilis presbyter et monachus Beda conscripsit.... At contra quidam nostris temporibus pro expiandis his Britonum maculis scriptor emersit ridicula de eisdem figmenta contexens, eosque longe supra virtutem Macedonum et Romanorum impudenti vanitate attollens. Gaufridus hic dictus est agnomen habens Arturi, pro eo quod fabulas de Arturo ex priscis Britonum figmentis sumptas et ex proprio auctas per superductum Latini sermonis colorem honesto historiae nomine palliavit: qui etiam majori ausu cujusdam Merlini divinationes quam authenticas et immobili veritate subnixas prophetias vulgavit."

43 For how slowly Galfridian influence can be detected in Welsh Arthurian literature, see O.J. Padel, *Arthur in Medieval Welsh Literature*, Cardiff, 2000, pp. 54–55: "There are several unexpected features of the Arthurian allusions in the twelfth-century court poetry. One of these is their small number. Arthur himself is named seven times in the poetry down to 1200, but hardly any of his warriors receives more than a single mention.... A further unexpected feature is that most of the Arthurian references are found in the work of only two poets."

44 John Prise, *Historiae Britannicae Defensio*, ed. and trans. C. Davies, *Historiae Britannicae Defensio. A Defense of the British History*, Oxford and Toronto, 2015.

Often, though, Welsh responses to Geoffrey seem colored with an insecurity that it was not Geoffrey's intention to laud the Welsh, a misgiving which has solidified into a conviction in the comments of modern Welsh critics. Characteristic is Brynley Roberts' judgement that "the later history of the Welsh ... was held in scant respect by him [Geoffrey]."⁴⁵ Furthermore, a key element of this Welsh ambivalence toward Geoffrey derives from the implications of the Arthurian section of the work, which might seem the most positive epoch of British history dealt with. Despite its high moral striving, the story of Arthur is one of (glorious) defeat, which offers limited precedent for hopes of Welsh disengagement from the English crown. The name of Arthur never became popular as a personal name in Wales, and it seems unlikely that the myth of Arthur's return was ever much consolation for Welsh setbacks.⁴⁶ There is no evidence of Welsh leaders invoking the spirit of a returning Arthur, for example, during the "anarchy" during the reign of King Stephen which coincided with the work's composition. Yet, as John Davies notes, some elements of the history could not fail to be of interest:

His theme is Britain under Brythonic rule, and it was natural therefore that it should be of absorbing interest to the Welsh. It was frequently translated into Welsh; there are in existence about eighty manuscripts of *Brut y Brenhinedd* (The Chronicle of the Kings) – the name given to the Welsh version of Geoffrey's work – and *Brut y Tywysogion* was planned as its sequel.⁴⁷

It was perhaps the opening account of the arrival of exiles from Troy which guaranteed Geoffrey's importance in Wales, leading to the regular appearance together of *Brut y Brenhinedd* ("History of the Kings") and *Brut y Tywysogyon* ("History of the Princes"), often accompanied by *Ystorya Dared*, a translation of Dares Phrygius's purported eyewitness account of the fall of Troy.⁴⁸ The exhaustive account of Welsh origins to be synthesized from these texts

45 Roberts, "Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia regum Britanniae*, and *Brut y Brenhinedd*", p. 98. Similarly, R.R. Davies concludes that "Geoffrey's *History* shows scant sympathy for the Welsh"; *Conquest, Coexistence and Change: Wales, 1063–1415*, Oxford, 1987, p. 106.

46 The idea of Arthur's possible return does not appear in the *DGB*, though it is mentioned in the *VM*. Admittedly, the tendency to circulate the two texts together would have tended to blur this important distinction.

47 J. Davies, *A History of Wales*, Harmondsworth, 2007, pp. 119–20.

48 H. Fulton, "Troy Story: The Medieval Welsh *Ystorya Dared* and the *Brut* Tradition of British History", in J. Dresvina and N. Sparks (eds.), *The Medieval Chronicle VII*, Amsterdam, 2011, pp. 137–50.

in close proximity is found, for example, in the Red Book of Hergest.⁴⁹ If the myth of Arthur as *Rex futururus* ever cheered the Welsh, it was not until after the Edwardian full annexation of *pura Wallia* redrew the relationship between Wales and England. In the 15th century, maybe some of the supporters of Owain Glyn Dŵr saw King Arthur as an inspiration, but it was Henry Tudor's supporters who promoted their man as the *mab darogan* – the son of prophecy – whose forces fought under the banner of the red dragon.⁵⁰

It is clear that William of Newburgh protests too much. So why has William's display of petulance been treated with such respect for so long? There are two plausible explanations. The first is that his account offers welcome clarity in interpreting Geoffrey's purposes, even if it is a clarity that cannot withstand scrutiny.⁵¹ A survey of more recent critics shows few convinced that Geoffrey's work favors, or was intended to favor, the Welsh. Generally, it has been assumed that Geoffrey's goal was to serve the ideological purposes of the ruling elite, that is, the Normans, enabling them to appropriate material from the British past to use as a cultural weapon to subjugate both the English and the British. It is a view clearly articulated by Helen Fulton:

Geoffrey's method of seeking the origins of the present in the past worked very successfully to create an authentic British history for the Norman kings of his own time.... The myth of Arthur, then, supports the myths of Norman legitimacy in Britain. Carefully distinguished from the usurping and treacherous Saxons, the Normans are positioned by Geoffrey as the true heirs of Arthur's Britain – and his empire.⁵²

Gransden, always an implacable critic of Geoffrey, imputes reluctance to his dealing with the topic at all:

Undoubtedly ... Geoffrey chose to write about the ancient Britons because he wanted to demonstrate the cyclical view of history. However, he may also have chosen them by default, because, though wishing to provide the Anglo-Normans with glorious predecessors in Britain, he was

49 See Owain Wyn Jones's contribution to this volume, pp. 257–90.

50 See Maud Burnett McNerney's contribution to this volume, pp. 129–52.

51 In contrast, John Gillingham suggests that the *DGB* is "so full of material of different kinds that almost anyone who reads it with a particular interest in mind will be able to pick out passages which support their own interpretation"; "Context and Purposes", p. 19.

52 H. Fulton, "History and Myth: Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*", in ead. (ed.), *A Companion to Arthurian Literature*, Chichester, 2008, pp. 44–57, at p. 48.

unable to extoll the Anglo-Saxons, *personae non gratae* with the ruling class of his day.⁵³

Appearing to praise the “ancient” British seems to be the price to be paid for promoting the interests of the Anglo-Normans. It is perhaps surprising that Gillingham might seem to come closer to rehabilitating William of Newburgh’s view: “Geoffrey was a Welshman whose object was to secure cultural respectability for his own nation.”⁵⁴ But compared to William’s vehemence, Gillingham proposes a much more qualified conclusion. He does not choose to deny that “HRB contains strains which would have struck a chord with the ruling elite” since this is not incompatible with his conclusion that Geoffrey did not write to praise the Welsh.⁵⁵ Rather, Gillingham presents Geoffrey as writing in rejoinder to a rising discourse, which dismisses the Welsh as *barbari*, “barbarians”, and which he attributes to, or associates with, William of Malmesbury. Gillingham regards this characterization of the Welsh as being, in William of Malmesbury’s work, “a relatively new point of view, one that is becoming fashionable and powerful” while “by the second half of the twelfth century this view had become the standard one”.⁵⁶

This changing, and increasingly contemptuous, attitude to the Welsh and Irish is widely rehearsed in Anglo-Norman written sources of the 12th century and it seems certain that it must have exerted an influence on Geoffrey’s intention to write.⁵⁷ But it is harder to be sure of Geoffrey’s place within this discourse. Gillingham contests Tatlock’s famous claim that Geoffrey showed “contempt for the Welsh”, but concedes that “this view is widely held, especially, interestingly enough, among the leading Welsh scholars of Welsh medieval history.”⁵⁸ Nonetheless, it is still surprising to read Faletra’s claim that,

53 A. Gransden, review of R.W. Hanning, *The Vision of History in Early Britain: From Gildas to Geoffrey of Monmouth*, *Catholic Historical Review* 55 (1969), 272–73.

54 Gillingham, “Context and Purposes”, p. 20, quoting G. Barrow, “Wales and Scotland in the Middle Ages”, *WHR* 10 (1980–81), 303–19, at p. 305.

55 Gillingham, “Contexts and Purposes”, p. 21.

56 Gillingham, “Contexts and Purposes”, p. 28, p. 27.

57 So, for example, John of Salisbury, discussed in S. Meecham-Jones, “Where Was Wales? The Erasure of Wales in Medieval English Culture”, in R. Kennedy and S. Meecham-Jones (eds.), *Authority and Subjugation in Writing of Medieval Wales*, New York, 2008, pp. 27–55, at pp. 40–41.

58 Gillingham, “Context and Purposes”, p. 24; Tatlock, *LHB*, p. 443; J.E. Lloyd, *A History of Wales from the Earliest Times to the Edwardian Conquest*, 2 vols., 3rd ed., London, 1939, vol. 2, p. 528; R.R. Davies, *Conquest*, p. 106; *Trioedd Ynys Prydein: The Triads of the Island of Britain*, ed. and trans. R. Bromwich, 4th ed., Cardiff, 2014, p. 399.

far from combatting the rise of anti-Welsh discourse in 12th-century Norman (or English) culture, Geoffrey's work is close to being the *fons et origo* of the discourse Gillingham describes:

Geoffrey's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, one of the most popular and influential books of the European Middle Ages, almost single-handedly establishes the template with which Anglo-Norman and later English writers imagined and manipulated the relationship between England and its Welsh periphery.... Amid all (and, indeed, because of) its ambiguities and subterfuges, the *Historia* ultimately justifies the Normans and denigrates the Welsh.⁵⁹

I have argued elsewhere that the developing anti-Welsh discourse of the 12th century was comprised of four major elements, which might be characterized as the discourse of Britishness, the discourse of peripherality, the discourse of authority, and the discourse of racial inferiority.⁶⁰ Unquestionably, the discourse of Britishness is central to the *DGB* and Geoffrey must be considered a significant and innovative promoter of what was to prove an influential weapon in the justification of English involvement in Wales.

But Faletra makes the far broader claim that in "Geoffrey's *Historia* [as] in no other text of Anglo-Latin or Anglo-Norman provenance ... all four ... colonial discourses reinforce each other so effectively".⁶¹ An examination of the text makes this claim hard to substantiate. The discourse of peripherality is invoked from the beginning of the work, but it is the peripherality of Britain, rather than that of Wales, which is being asserted. Moreover, there is a certain defiance in Geoffrey's handling of the idea, paradoxically asserting the achievements of "peripheral" Britain, figured through repeated triumphs over

59 M.A. Faletra, *Wales and the Medieval Colonial Imagination: The Matters of Britain in the Twelfth Century*, New York, 2014, p. 16.

60 S. Meecham-Jones, "Introduction", in Kennedy and Meecham-Jones (eds.), *Authority and Subjugation*, pp. 1–11, at p. 2: "The cultural justification for the seizure of Wales was swiftly refined into four key concepts: the discourse of peripherality, the discourse of Britishness, the discourse of authority and discourse of racial inferiority. The discourse of peripherality drew attention to Wales's perceived status at the margins of European civilization. The discourse of Britishness proclaimed the 'natural' unity of the island(s) of Britain, inferring from physical continuity an inevitable political unity. The discourse of authority asserted the right of England to rule Wales by virtue of tradition, God's favor, and England's greater civilization. Allied to this myth was the myth of the racial inferiority of the Welsh (and Irish)."

61 Faletra, *Wales*, p. 34.

Rome, the city which, in its own estimation, represents the center of human civilization.

More contentious is Faletra's claim that the discourse of Welsh racial inferiority, an idea which Gillingham insists is a 12th-century development, is "fairly easy to detect throughout Geoffrey's *Historia Regum Britanniae*".⁶² If that were true, William of Newburgh's counter-claim would seem absurd. In fact, Faletra's certainty rests on what he perceives as Geoffrey's portrayal of "the barbarity that marks the final transformation of Britons into Welshmen".⁶³ But even at the end of the *DGB*, Geoffrey's attention is barely involved by the Welsh. It is far from clear, also, that William would have recognized any suggested distinction between the Welsh and the Britons, since his claim for Geoffrey's partiality to the Welsh rests on his ascription of glory to the Britons, rather than its denial to their relict, the Welsh. Geoffrey's restricted engagement with the Welsh permits his text to function, not, as Faletra suggests, as a "vehicle for ideology", but rather as a plausible vehicle for wholly opposed ideologies.⁶⁴ Far more sensitive to the daring idiosyncrasy of Geoffrey's style and intention is Monika Otter's reading: "While the *Historia* is in many ways deeply and consciously political, and has a number of strong political points to make, it is not ... directly in the service of a single institution or faction."⁶⁵ She acknowledges that Geoffrey's carefully managed distancing of himself from ideological capture should be read not as evidence of his incapacity as a writer, but rather as evidence of his thoughtful and mature understanding of the form he is working with, and, perhaps, of the nature of his audience. Whether or not Flint is correct in the presumption that "it was found difficult to interpret as soon as it appeared", there is, and has presumably always been, a disjuncture between what Geoffrey's text attempts to achieve, and the expectations of much of its readership, which have caused it to be misunderstood.⁶⁶ For those interested in British cultural and political history, from Gerald and William of Newburgh to (from their different perspectives) Gransden and Faletra, the *DGB* has generally been read as a commentary on the exercise of power over the Britons and/or Welsh by the English.⁶⁷ In the hands of English kings, lawyers, and historians, the text has often served as a means of furthering that process.

62 Faletra, *Wales*, p. 36.

63 Faletra, *Wales*, p. 35.

64 Faletra, *Wales*, p. 34.

65 M. Otter, *Inventiones: Fiction and Referentiality in Twelfth-Century Historical Writing*, Chapel Hill, 1996, p. 75.

66 V.I.J. Flint, "The *Historia Regum Britanniae* of Geoffrey of Monmouth: Parody and Its Purpose. A Suggestion", *Speculum* 54:3 (1979), 447–68, at p. 447.

67 A. Gransden, *Historical Writing in England, c.550–c.1307*, London, 1974.

It would be wrong, though, to read the purpose of the work from the ways in which it has been used. William's fear of the text pleasing the Welsh reveals a fundamental misreading in its failure to recognize Geoffrey's reluctance to point the narrative with moralizing summaries (as Gerald, for example, would surely have done).

The Europe-wide popularity of the *DGB* reminds us that Geoffrey's work captured many different audiences. British critics and readers may have read the text as a commentary on the exercise of authority in Britain, but their concerns do not mark out the limits of Geoffrey's observation of the workings of history or the expressive potential of narrative. Furthermore, as the text traveled to readers in Spain, Germany, and Italy, specifically "British" references lost their immediacy and the centrality that William, like Gransden, presumed they demanded. Even in the work of Chrétien de Troyes, references to Wales or to place-names presumably derived from Welsh display no more engagement with Welsh topography than with the political condition of Wales and its people. There must have been great variation in the extent to which the *DGB* was read with any expectation of disinterest, a point obscured by William's comments. In considering the value of contemporary judgements of Geoffrey's style and his intended purpose it is important to recognize both that, from its composition, Geoffrey's text was often misunderstood, and that he must have anticipated that it would be. Less clear is how far he might have welcomed this interpretative distance between text and audience.

Such an idea seems to lie behind the theory, presented by Christopher Brooke and developed by Valerie Flint, of Geoffrey as an accomplished literary practitioner, taking a delight in writing against the expectations of his audience.⁶⁸ But Flint's admiration for Geoffrey as an "artist" lead her to two disappointingly limited conclusions – that Geoffrey is "a parodist of enormous skill" and that his "profound" purpose was to exaggerate "certain trends in historical writing ... to mock that literature and confound its authors" with the intention of "call[ing] into question the position held and hoped for in twelfth-century Anglo-Norman society by literate and celibate canons regular and monks".⁶⁹ There is a tension between Flint's belief that she has justified Geoffrey's status as a serious creative innovator – "The *Historia Regum Britanniae* emerged from this analysis as a heightened and artistic form of a developed historiographical

68 C.N.L. Brooke, "Geoffrey of Monmouth as a Historian", in C.N.L. Brooke, D. Luscombe, G. Martin, and D. Owen (eds.), *Church and Government in the Middle Ages: Essays Presented to C.R. Cheney on his 70th Birthday*, Cambridge, 1976, 77–91 (repr. in *The Church and the Welsh Border in the Central Middle Ages*, ed. D.N. Dumville (Studies in Celtic History, 8), Woodbridge, 1986, 95–107); Flint, "Parody and Purpose", pp. 448–50.

69 Flint, "Parody and Purpose", p. 449.

movement” – and the limitations inherent in the identification of his work as “parody”.⁷⁰ There are several problems with what seems at first an ingenious rehabilitation of Geoffrey’s work. The primary problem lies in Flint’s choice of the word “parody”, a word which has a longstanding history associated with satire and some deprecation of the text being parodied, and, in recent literary theory, a more restricted (but contested) meaning, initially derived from the Russian formalists, and developed by Jameson and others to describe post-modern practices of writing. This second meaning might be demonstrated by Hutcheon’s attempt to distinguish parody from more ideologically charged forms of imitation:

It will be clear by now that what I am calling parody here is not just that ridiculing imitation mentioned in the standard dictionary definitions.... Parody, therefore, is a form of imitation, but imitation characterized by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text.⁷¹

The definition is not ideally clear, partly since it defines parody by what it may not always be – not always at the expense of the parodied text – but it is not clear how much such a definition would add to a description of a text we know to be influenced by prior texts. Nor does it add much to a description of how the *DGB* differs from its models.

Since Flint does not establish that she intends the more restricted meaning of parody, it seems sensible to see if applying the more general meaning sheds more light, but that also raises problems. It must be admitted that the first, or lasting, impression of the *DGB* is not that it reads as a comic or playful work. Admittedly, such a tone would have been difficult to sustain in a work that the readers know in advance will end in defeat and conquest, but it cannot be argued that comedy is one of Geoffrey’s literary trademarks. Further, there is an irony in the disjunction between Flint’s contention that “Geoffrey’s desire to display his literary gifts is indeed the motive most in evidence in the *Historia*”, albeit with the qualification that Geoffrey “did not use history purely in the service of parody”, and her characterization of him as a parodist.⁷² Implicit in this definition is the presumption that, for whatever literary purpose, Geoffrey presented a version of events which he knew or believed to be misleading or untrue. It is a conclusion that allies her with those she describes as being

⁷⁰ Flint, “Parody and Purpose”, p. 448.

⁷¹ L. Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art*, London, 1985, p. 5.

⁷² Flint, “Parody and Purpose”, p. 449.

"inclined to be indulgent [who] saw Geoffrey's 'romanticism' as forgivable by reason of artistic license",⁷³ but in practice it does not mark out a great distance from Gransden's charge that "Geoffrey was a romance writer masquerading as a historian",⁷⁴ or, indeed, William of Newburgh's attacks on Geoffrey as a liar. Flint's reading does not undermine, though it presumably intended to, the damaging tradition that Geoffrey is a writer, or certainly a historian, in "bad faith".⁷⁵

Fortunately, William of Newburgh's other charges prove unexpectedly valuable in uncovering the sophistication and ambition of Geoffrey's work. William presents Geoffrey as dishonest partly because his account is not supported by the recognized authoritative source of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*:

Since these events accord with the historical truth as expounded by the Venerable Bede, it is clear that Geoffrey's entire narration about Arthur, his successors, and his predecessors after Vortigern, was invented partly by himself and partly by others. The motive was either an uncontrolled passion for lying, or secondly a desire to please the Britons, most of whom are ... said to be still awaiting the future coming of Arthur, being unwilling to entertain the fact of his death.⁷⁶

William's argument underestimates the skill with which Geoffrey makes his way around this leviathan of authority, acknowledging Bede's status and not directly challenging his account, while at the same time presenting a great body of narrative which Bede must be presumed to have omitted, if not suppressed. But it is interesting to see how William accepts Bede's text, although it deals with history rather than theology *per se* as an absolute authority which cannot be challenged, almost as if it were holy writ. It is an argument accepted

73 Flint, "Parody and Purpose", p. 448.

74 Gransden, *Historical Writing*, p. 202.

75 Again, we might contrast Southern's more generous conclusion in *History and Historians*, p. 25: "It is highly likely that in his treatment of his sources, whether literary or traditional, he used the freedom of invention that the literary tradition of historical writing allowed. But we may also think that like other writers in this tradition he used his freedom in the interests of some larger truth."

76 Text and translation from William of Newburgh, *The History of English Affairs* Proemium §9, ed. and trans. Walsh and Kennedy, pp. 32–33: "Haec cum juxta historicam veritatem a venerabili Beda expositam constet esse rata, cuncta quae homo ille de Arturo et ejus vel successoribus vel post Vortigirnum praedecessoribus scribere curavit partim ab ipso, partim et ab aliis constat esse conficta, sive effrenata mentiendi libidine sive etiam gratia placendi Britonibus, quorum plurimi tam bruti esse feruntur ut adhuc Arturum tanquam venturum expectate dicantur, eumque mortuum nec audire patiantur."

at face value by Peter Damian-Grint who similarly relies on the authority of Bede to describe William's account as "scrupulously scholarly":

William's attack on Geoffrey, which is nothing if not vitriolic, is at the same time scrupulously scholarly; his arguments are based on contemporary concepts of *auctoritas*. Geoffrey is a liar because he contradicts or at least disagrees with Bede, the *auctor auctorum* of early British history ... The fact that Geoffrey has had the impudence to cover his lies with the veil of Latin merely makes matters worse, as he is perverting the language of authority to give an appearance of truth to his deceptions.⁷⁷

William's attack on Geoffrey's use of Latin is revealing, again showing his belief in the binding power of "authoritative" texts. In this we might see William as a characteristic figure of his time. Brian Stock has identified a crucial change in the understanding of textual culture this period:

Before the year 1000 – an admittedly arbitrary point in time – there existed both oral and written traditions in medieval culture. But throughout the eleventh and twelfth centuries an important transformation began to take place. The written did not simply supersede the oral, although that happened in large measure: a new type of interdependence also arose between the two. In other words, oral discourse effectively began to function within a universe of communications governed by texts.⁷⁸

Stock describes a developing expectation in which "texts ... emerged as a reference system both for everyday activities and for giving shape to many larger vehicles of explanation", and this process can be seen at work in William's reasoning.⁷⁹ Latin had always played an important part in Brythonic and then Welsh textual history, from its Romano-British days, and we should not be expected to believe that William was unaware of this.⁸⁰ Rather, it was a fact which disrupted William's sense of what was appropriate in the "sacred" language.

77 P. Damian-Grint, *The New Historians of the Twelfth-Century Renaissance: Inventing Vernacular Authority*, Woodbridge, 1999, p. 45.

78 B. Stock, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries*, Princeton, 1983, p. 3.

79 Stock, *The Implications of Literacy*, p. 3.

80 The use of Latin in Welsh manuscripts is considered by Huws, *Medieval Welsh Manuscripts* and G. Henley, "From 'The Matter of Britain' to 'The Matter of Rome': Latin literary culture and the reception of Geoffrey of Monmouth in Wales", *AL* 33 (2016), 1–28.

We might draw a parallel with William's apparently surprising approval of the violation of sanctuary enacted by Hubert Walter, archbishop of Canterbury, who ordered the burning of the Church of St Mary Arches in London in 1193. In considering William's response, Gillingham begins by repeating the praise of modern critics for William's perceived "even-handedness", a reputation dependent in part on his assault on Geoffrey of Monmouth.⁸¹ Having noted William's criticism of "Roger of Salisbury, Roger of Pont L'Eveque, archbishop of York, Hugh du Puiset, bishop of Durham, William Longchamp, bishop of Ely, Walter of Coutances, bishop of Lincoln and archbishop of Rouen, Geoffrey, archbishop of York and Robert, abbot of Caen",⁸² Gillingham (perhaps with his tongue in his cheek) struggles to explain why William "wrote about Hubert Walter in extraordinarily positive terms",⁸³ leading him to the conclusion that:

It can hardly be doubted that sources close to Philip of Poitou would have sympathized with the actions taken by Hubert Walter in April 1196, and it seems likely that it was from such government circles that William of Newburgh derived an interpretation of the events of that month so much at odds with his usual line on the morality of ecclesiastics meddling in secular politics. There can hardly be a better illustration of the efficiency with which Hubert Walter's administration dealt with protest than the way it used scandalous tales of sex and blasphemy in order to destroy an opponent's reputation and so persuade even as independent-minded and critical a historian as William of Newburgh.⁸⁴

We could read William's willingness to excuse Hubert Walter's conduct as a symptom of his highly developed respect for hierarchical authority. The re-assertion of this authority was to be a key struggle within the 12th century, and one which was caused in part by the changing understanding of the role of textual witnesses, in the transition between what Stock characterizes as "a nonliterate to a literate society".⁸⁵ Stock notes that, during such a process,

81 J. Gillingham, "The Historian as Judge: William of Newburgh and Hubert Walter", *EHR* 119:484 (2004), 1275–87, at pp. 1275–76.

82 Gillingham, "Historian as Judge", p. 1276.

83 Gillingham, "Historian as Judge", p. 1277. One might contrast this with Gerald of Wales, whose judgement of Hubert was so critical that he eventually felt obliged to write "*retractiones*" which acknowledge, though they do not wholly modify, the harshness of his criticism. Gerald of Wales, *Invectives* i.4, ed. W.S. Davies, "De Invectionibus", *Y Cymmrodor* 30 (1920), 1–248, at p. 97; Gerald of Wales, *Retractions*, ed. J.S. Brewer, *Giraldi Cambrensis Opera*, 8 vols., London, 1861–91, vol. 1, pp. 425–27, at pp. 426–27.

84 Gillingham, "Historian as Judge", pp. 1286–87.

85 Stock, *Implications of Literacy*, p. 9.

“as methods of interpretation were increasingly subjected to systematic scrutiny, the models employed to give meaning to otherwise unrelated disciplines more and more clustered around the concept of written language.”⁸⁶ William’s critique of Geoffrey might be seen as one exercise of systematic scrutiny.

Over time, the shift toward a text-based society would create a need for secular scribes, but in its early days, literacy was almost exclusively the preserve of the church, and this decisively influenced the nature of how ideas of the authority of the text developed. Clerical culture stressed the primacy of theology, and other disciplines were made subject to its predominance. This process involved not merely philosophy and rhetoric, but also history, a pattern of integration which is central to the design of Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History*, but not to Geoffrey’s.⁸⁷ In William’s use of Bede’s text as a measure to declare Geoffrey’s text dishonest, we see an exposition of the view that literary authority is absolute, disqualifying all other possibilities. It is a claim which derives from, parallels, and supports the church’s own claim to an absolute authority of understanding.

But William is a generation or more later than Geoffrey, and from a different regional tradition of the church in Britain. The 12th century saw the church set up increasingly systematic and harsh procedures to ensure that theological speculation did not overstep the bounds of propriety. These procedures were as much about maintaining hierarchical discipline as preventing the promulgation of error. As Peter Godman puts it, “authority rather than doctrine was the nub of the matter.”⁸⁸

In contrast, Geoffrey’s work is infused with a skepticism about authority, for which he has been given insufficient credit. From his opening reference to the gaps in Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History*, Geoffrey challenges the claim of literary authority to be absolute. Perhaps instinctively, or perhaps recognizing trends already gathering force in the church, Geoffrey seems to resist the ecclesiastical pressure to contain and censor what texts could be permitted to exist:

In the ample embrace of Ecclesia, there was room for intellectuals. They earned it by knowing their place. Cautious not to trespass into territory that the hierarchy had declared beyond bounds, they were free to enjoy that measure of liberty defined by their acceptance of *auctoritas*.⁸⁹

86 Stock, *Implications of Literacy*, p. 3.

87 Hanning cites the importance of Eusebius in annexing Roman history as an adjunct to the history of the church: *Vision*, pp. 20–28.

88 P. Godman, *The Silent Masters: Latin Literature and its Censors in the High Middle Ages*, Princeton, 2000, p. 12.

89 Godman, *Silent Masters*, p. 14.

Geoffrey's importance derives in large part from his refusal to "know his place". He may have been fortunate in the time he chose to write. Probably, the conflict between Stephen and Matilda caused some loosening of central supervision and authority in England. It is noticeable, also, that Geoffrey's text was composed and circulated a few years before the Council of Sens in 1141, which climaxed in the public denunciation and burning of Abelard's treatise on the Trinity.⁹⁰ Though not the first of its kind, the council proved a significant and much-noted proof of the church's concern to maintain full control of written culture. Abelard had been a very prominent teacher, fêted for his intellectual mastery, whereas Geoffrey's obscurity, in a province of the church regarded as isolated and obscure, might also have made it easier for Geoffrey to question the absolute nature of literary authority, but it seems William of Newburgh was perhaps the only commentator to have any recognition, however rudimentary, of the challenge Geoffrey was formulating.

In his *DGB*, Geoffrey expounded an alternative vision of literary authority, in which no one discourse could, by its presence, deny the possibility of other, perhaps not yet written, discourses. It was an idea which proved of central importance in the Europe-wide popularity of his work. At a time when the church was concerned to interpret the past through the overarching pattern of a universal history built on the foundations of Roman imperial history, Geoffrey declared both the possibility and the value of a myriad of national and local histories, not necessarily incompatible with, but certainly concealed by, this "authorized" structure. William had feared that Geoffrey was giving a voice to the Welsh, but his influence spread far wider than that, as Geoffrey implicitly licensed the preservation of previously untextualized histories in France, Germany, and beyond. Geoffrey set himself against the presumption that only the center of the "civilized" world (figured in his writings as "Rome") was worthy of textualization. His anti-hierarchical interpretation of literary authority provided a ledge for the obscured and the ignored to record their presence, even providing a narrative context for the Jews of central Europe to integrate their concerns within a resolutely European literary archetype.⁹¹ The influence of Geoffrey's ideas can be seen, also, in the cumulative, rather than hierarchical, growth of Arthurian literature(s). Often, as in Chrétien's contribution, new strands of narrative were added which adapted the material to distinctive local

90 The dating of the council to 1141, rather than 1140, has been confirmed by C.J. Mews, "The Council of Sens 1141: Abelard, Bernard and the Fear of Social Upheaval", *Speculum* 79:2 (2002), 342–83.

91 *King Artus*, ed. C. Leviant, *King Artus. A Hebrew Arthurian Romance of 1279*, Syracuse, 2003; J.C. Frakes, *Early Yiddish Epics*, Syracuse, 2014.

requirements but which (generally) did not disrupt the foundational structure of the Arthurian story, even if the additions inflected the mood and perhaps the meaning of the story.

Geoffrey's name has endured in literary histories due to his seminal influence in making the Arthurian *topos* available to many centuries of later writers, in a variety of languages, but ideological concerns about his presentation of the Britons still seems to hamper an appreciation of the innovation and significance of his literary practice. Writing at a time when the transition from an oral to a text-based society encouraged fantasies of excluding from textual expression any ideas not promoted by those at the top of the clerical hope, Geoffrey deserves overdue praise, both as a literary theorist and as a much-imitated practitioner, as a crucial figure who resisted the closing of the shutters of literary speculation and expression in the name of literary authority.