

**Ilana Ben-Ezra**

## **Merlin: The Medieval Embodiment of Overcoming the Devil**

Merlin, child of a demon and pious woman, first appears in late twelfth century literature and develops uncanny prophetic abilities and unnatural powers rooted in his supernatural heritage, transforming him into a mysterious figure empowered by knowledge and cloaked in dichotomies resulting from his mixed parentage. The *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, a mid-thirteenth century Iberian collection of exemplum honoring Holy Mary reportedly composed by Alfonso X of Castile, emphasize Merlin's complex nature relating how Merlin – referenced as “Satan's son” – retaliated against a Jew who insulted Holy Mary by appealing to God to cause the Jew's child to be born with a backwards head. In *Cantiga* 108, Merlin is dually associated with Satan and God while defending Christian faith by contorting nature highlighting his multifaceted and contrasting characteristics and abilities.<sup>1</sup> In *Metamorphosis and Identity*, Caroline Walker Bynum argues that identity was one aspect of medievals' fascination with change.<sup>2</sup> She suggests that particularly by the turn of the thirteenth century, people began focusing on identities and change as represented by hybrids –paradoxical mixtures – or as metamorphosis. According to Bynum, hybrids and metamorphosis reveal the true nature of something.<sup>3</sup> Thus, Merlin is hybrid human-demon – a paradoxical mixture – who demonstrates that human nature's intrinsic good and evil facets constantly conflict. Consequently, he symbolizes the everyday struggle people experience in overcoming moral challenges presented by demons.

Historian James Charles Wall explains that the Church used the story of Lucifer and the rebel angels' fall from heaven to teach people the importance of recognizing Jesus as Christ by equating those who did not actively believe with outright deniers.<sup>4</sup> Medievals thus employed demons to impart moral and religious lessons: Merlin is an example. Twelfth and thirteenth century authors depicted Merlin as a hybrid human-demon who overcame his demonic half to demonstrate that defeating demonic temptations was possible. In twelfth-and-thirteenth century romances, Merlin imparted a moral lesson by epitomizing how humans could defeat challenges presented by demons. Though this was not Merlin's sole purpose in any work, his portrayal as a human-demon hybrid – physically and characteristically – carries these undertones.

Merlin's birth and conception are critical narrative moments in establishing Merlin as a hybrid human-demon. French romance writer Robert de Boron, writing in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries for an aristocratic audience relates the story of Merlin's birth and conception in *Merlin*, the second book in his Holy Grail trilogy. He describes how God angered the demons when he freed Adam and Eve from their grasp in hell, leading them to conclude that prophets preaching repentance are the source of their woes. Consequently, the demons devise a plan to

---

<sup>1</sup> Kathleen Kulp-Hill, trans., *Songs of Holy Mary of Alfonso X, The Wise* (Tempe, AZ., 2000), p. 135.

<sup>2</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity* (New York, 2001), p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 21-30.

<sup>4</sup> James Charles Walls, *Devils* (Detroit, 1968), p. 38.

create a prophet who will “converse with the people on Earth and help [demons] greatly to deceive men and women alike, just as the prophets worked against [demons] when [demons] had them here.”<sup>5</sup> In contrast to most prophets, who work to strengthen belief in God and religious practice, the demons made Merlin as an aid to help induce sin.<sup>6</sup> Robert explicitly states that “the demons plotted to conceive a man who would work to deceive others.”<sup>7</sup> Merlin’s conception was the result of this plan.

According to Robert, the demon assigned to conceive a demonic prophet labored deviously for years, deceiving and tormenting a family in pursuit of one of its pious, virginal daughters. Eventually, the daughter’s devotion lapses for a night after “her heart was filled with the deepest anger,” so “the demon, knowing anger had erased all else, was overjoyed that she had forgotten the good man’s lesson [her confessor], and said ‘Now I can do whatever I want with her! She’s outside her teacher’s protection and her Lord’s grace. Now we can put our man in her!’”<sup>8</sup> Because of her momentary lapse in religious practice, the girl fell into the demon’s grasp. Merlin’s challenge then, is not only to overcome his heritage, but also to rectify his mother’s mistake, which empowered the demon. This also firmly establishes demons as challengers to Christian faith in Merlin stories, which is significant given Merlin’s role in the larger quest for the Holy Grail – a religious object. Merlin’s choice to pursue good, not evil, is critical because his diabolical parentage offered him the opportunity to be the ultimate challenger to Christian faith, but he rejects that path, instead pursuing religious service.

While the girl was sleeping, the demon “came to her chamber, lay with her, and conceived.”<sup>9</sup> Awaking, the girl realizes she is no longer a virgin and cries out to God “keep [me] from peril and protect my soul from the Enemy.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, Merlin’s parents – the demon and pious virgin – represent extreme examples of good and evil. Merlin’s lineage establishes him as a hybrid human-demon forced to reconcile competing parental influences. Robert describes the turmoil surrounding Merlin following his birth:

And when he was born, he had the power and intelligence of the Devil – he was bound to, being conceived by him. But the Enemy had made a foolish mistake, for Our Lord redeemed by His death all who truly repent, and the Enemy had worked upon the child’s mother through sheer trickery while she slept, and as soon as she was aware of the deception she had begged for forgiveness and submitted to the mercy and commandment of Holy Church and of God, and had obeyed all her confessor’s instruction. God had no wish to deprive the Devil of what was rightfully his, and since the Devil wanted the child to inherit his power to know all things said and done in the past, he did indeed acquire that knowledge; but, in view of the mother’s penitence and true confession and repentant heart, and of her unwillingness in the fatal deed, and of the power of her cleansing baptism in the font, Our Lord, who knows all things, did not wish to punish the child for his mother’s sin, but gave him the power to know the future. And so it was that the child inherited knowledge of things past from the Enemy, and, in addition, knowledge of things to come was bequeathed to him by God. It was up to him which way he inclined.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Nigel Bryant, trans., *Merlin*. (Cambridge: 2001), p. 46.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* pg. 45-46.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* pg. 51.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Braynt, *Merlin*, pg. 54-55.

Merlin would have to choose whether to follow his father's demonic path, or his mother's righteous model, framing him as a moral example. Dyan Elliott relates how demons' intellectual capabilities deprive them of free will, which sharply contrasts with Merlin's God given ability to choose between good and evil highlighting Merlin's dichotomous nature.<sup>12</sup> According to Robert, Merlin's nature was demonic, but his mother nurtured him religiously demonstrating how Merlin's hybrid human-demon status results in a debate on nature versus. By stating that God gave Merlin free will enabling him to overcome his demonic nature, Robert made Merlin relatable to people experiencing internal religious conflicts and encouraged them to continue striving for piety by highlighting how Merlin's mother's religious devotion nurtured Merlin and corrected his nature.

Further, Robert's description of Merlin's conception draws parallels between Merlin's and Jesus's births. Merlin's mother describes how she was impregnated without knowingly having had intercourse, similar to – but not exactly like – Mary's Immaculate Conception which allowed Mary to be born free of sin, consequently enabling her to give birth to Jesus. Merlin mirrors Jesus, whose father was also a spiritual being – God – and functions as a fictional counter weight to Jesus, because both resulted from the union of spiritual creatures and humans. Jeffrey Burton Russell supports this analysis by explaining that in later medieval thought, “Mary [became] Satan's most vigorous opponent.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, as a demon's and pious woman's son, Merlin embodied medieval fears of demons challenging religious life and success. Unlike Jesus, whose divine heritage predisposed him to good, Merlin's demon father should have impeded Merlin's ability to act piously. Helmut Hundsbichler further elaborates on the oppositional link between Jesus and Merlin, positing, “we may define the devil as a symbol of anything ill and evil in explicit contrast to and in explicit conflict with the good principle, which is represented by the Lord and his salvific and charitable ideas.”<sup>14</sup> Merlin thus played a part in the demons' larger goal to challenge God by creating a demonic parallel explicitly contrasting Jesus. Essentially, Merlin develops as a potential Antichrist – the ultimate challenger to Christianity and God. As a result, Merlin becomes the paradigm of repentance and returning to God by later associating himself with the Divine while renouncing relations with demons.

In *The True History of Merlin the Magician*, Anne Mathers traces Merlin's historical development from the twelfth century – using *History of the Kings of Britain* – through the seventeenth century, looking at *Faerie Queene*, *Proof of Arthur*, and *Historia Anglica* challenging the idea that Merlin derived his powers from his demonic heritage. She posits that Merlin's capabilities stemmed from his connection to God instead. Mathers asserts that Merlin was “at the cutting edge between what was acceptable and what was to be condemned.”<sup>15</sup> However, she ultimately concludes that Merlin's magic was devoid of the most diabolical traits such as demonic knowledge, rituals, talismans, or pagan sacrifices, despite obvious demonic connections.<sup>16</sup> Even though she recognizes Merlin's heritage, Mathers fails to account for how characters surrounding Merlin – and even Merlin himself – understand his demon father's

<sup>12</sup> Dyan Elliot, *Fallen Bodies: Pollution, Sexuality, and Demonology in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, 1999), p. 134-135.

<sup>13</sup> Jeffery Burton Russell, *Lucifer: The Devil in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, 1984), pg. 161.

<sup>14</sup> Helmut Hundsbichler, “Devils in Visual Proximity,” In *Angels, Devils – The Supernatural and its Visual Representation*, ed. by Gerhard Jaritz (Budapest, 2011), p. 55.

<sup>15</sup> Anne Lawrence-Mathers, *The True History of Merlin the Magician* (New Haven, 2012), pg. 119-120.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* pg. 157.

influence as a power source. She downplays his demonic characteristics to argue that his power was natural – connected to the environment and reminiscent of natural philosophy – not black.<sup>17</sup> However, her examples of Merlin’s connection to nature only strengthen the argument for his hybridity.

To understand fully how Merlin functioned as a human-demon hybrid, medieval demonic conceptions should be examined. Medievals grounded their understanding of demons in the Christian version of the story of how Lucifer – a former angel who became Satan – led a group of angels in rebellion against God. After failing, they suffered eternal punishment as fallen angels. Saint Thomas Aquinas, an early thirteenth-century Dominican theologian, elaborates explaining that Lucifer and the rebel angels sinned by aspiring to be like God by seeking to function independently of God’s grace. As fallen angels, they could never regain the status and privilege they enjoyed as angels in God’s heavenly host; instead, they suffer perpetually in Hell’s flames.<sup>18</sup>

Caesarius of Heisterbach, a German monk writing contemporaneously with many Arthurian authors, elaborates on demons’ behavior in *The Dialogue of Miracles* – a work that recorded contemporary miracles. In his stories, he portrays demons as schemers working to lure humans to sin. Common motifs that emerge in his work are the connections between demons nature, horror, intellectual capabilities, and death. Caesarius begins Book V, which deals exclusively with demons, by stating that “Demons are called tempters, because they are either the authors or provokers of all the temptations that draw men to sin.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, he establishes demons as “the first to ally [themselves] with wicked men” concretizing the connection between demons, evil, and sin.<sup>20</sup> Russell expounds on this arguing, “the Devil is perceived as the personification of real evil” and active inflictor of pain and suffering in medieval thought.<sup>21</sup>

According to medieval scholars, devils primarily utilize deceit to tempt humans to sin. A common theme in Caesarius’s work is demonic deception through the assumption of an alternate form. In Chapter IV, demons appear as soldiers and dancing girls, embodying the connection between femininity, evil, and temptation. In this episode, the demons trick a scholar and bring him to Hell; after his return, “the face of him thus brought back was so haggard, and so ghastly pale with a fixed and deathlike pallor, that he seemed only now to have returned from the tomb.”<sup>22</sup> Caesarius links demons to trauma and death by highlighting the victim’s post-Hell state. His intention is to scare people into leading a religious life style by impressing the dread of Hell onto them and warning them about the negative repercussions associated with succumbing to demonic temptations. This story successfully conveys how demons were associated with deception, transformed their physical appearance, and inspired horror in people.

A second story in Chapter LI recounts how a monk shirked his responsibility to garden, angrily leaving the monastery, only to fall prey to a demon disguised as a nun in the woods. The demon

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. pg. 126.

<sup>18</sup> Fathers of the English Dominican Province, trans., *Summa Theologica* (London, U.K.: Burns Oates & Washbourne LTD., 1922), pp. 150-152.

<sup>19</sup> H. Von E. Scott and C.C. Swinton Bland, trans., *The Dialogue of Miracles* (London: George Routledge & Sons, LTD., 1929), p. 313.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. pg. 314.

<sup>21</sup> Russell, *Lucifer*, pg. 20.

<sup>22</sup> Scott and Bland, *Dialogue of Miracles*, pp. 318-320.

convinces him that her prior sent her to speak with him and lead him home. Demonic trickery causes him to break his silence and follow a woman. He eventually realizes that the demon is deceiving him, causing the demon to flee and inflict him with storms. This story implies that anger, the same trait that gave Merlin's father access to Merlin's mother, empowers demons by relating how his initial anger enabled the demon to trick him.

Nancy Caciola argues that medieval work feminized demons, and demonized females, connecting them as evil sexual lures to delegitimize female political and religious influence.<sup>23</sup> Caesarius connects demons with femininity – a trait that Merlin also displays – in the story by explicitly stating that the demon disguised itself as a supposedly pious female nun. Elliott supports this adding that medieval church leaders connected women and demons sexually to legitimize their suppression of female autonomy.<sup>24</sup> Thus, demons and women function as linked sexual tempters opposing male piety and bodily control. More broadly, medieval theologians portrayed them as jointly challenging church supremacy and Christian doctrine. Caesarius' story epitomizes this by establishing the demon, disguised as a seemingly devout nun, as the reason a monk sinned.

This story also links nature and demons by describing how the demon hid in the woods, and controlled the weather by summoning a storm to harass the priest. Caciola cites several instances of demonically induced environmental harm supporting the link between demons and nature.<sup>25</sup> Church doctrine connected demons and nature because both represented forces beyond human control that challenged and affected human actions. In line with Caciola's argument that the Church sought to repress female influence and empower clergy by demonizing women, Christian theologians demonized nature depicting the wilderness as an effeminate and tempting force. Merlin combines these characteristics – dwelling in and controlling nature, and displaying female attributes – which are already intimately connected, embodying the male-divine-knowledgeable and female-demonic-usurper dichotomy.

Merlin's actions throughout twelfth-and-thirteenth century literature resemble demons' deeds, reflecting the fact that he is a human-demon hybrid delicately balancing the dichotomies associated with his paradoxical composition. Common motifs in Merlin literature include nature, deception, situational irony, feminine portrayal, destruction and gloom, and wisdom and knowledge. Many Merlin stories contain some combination, or all, of these themes in narrating Merlin's actions.

Merlin first appears in medieval literature in Geoffrey of Monmouth's mid-twelfth-century *History of the Kings of Britain* – a glorified record of Britain's past influenced by contemporary political strife – as a prophet with supreme knowledge and ability to recognize the hidden. King Vortigern summons Merlin as a child, because his wizards believe that stabilizing the king's perpetually collapsing tower requires blood from a fatherless boy. Merlin answers the king's summons, but, after hearing why he was brought, announces to the king that he “will convict [the wizards] of having devised a lie.”<sup>26</sup> He continues to act in a characteristically brazen manner,

<sup>23</sup> Nancy Caciola. *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press., 2006), pp. 161-167.

<sup>24</sup> Elliott, *Fallen Bodies*, p. 35-60.

<sup>25</sup> Caciola, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages*, p. 50.

<sup>26</sup> Charles Dunn, trans., *History of the Kings of Britain*. (U.S.A: E.P. Dutton & CO., 1958 ) p. 135.

commanding the king to instruct his workers to build the tower according to his instructions. When Merlin's advice succeeds, "All they that stood by were no less astonished at such wisdom being found in him, deeming that he was possessed of some spirit of God."<sup>27</sup> From the outset, authority figures and respected leaders recognized Merlin as supremely capable, with suggestions that his abilities were supernaturally rooted. He is deemed wise – a positive term connoting age and experience – as a young child, exposing his knowledge as unnatural. Caciola points out that demonic possession sometimes resulted in outstanding intellectual capabilities, because demons were supremely intellectual beings.<sup>28</sup> Unsurprisingly, Merlin's intellectual abilities result in suspicion that he is a demon, or associated with them.<sup>29</sup> When Merlin solves the problem that Vortigern's wizards failed to resolve, he establishes himself as intellectually gifted, on par with demons. Just as Lucifer was the greatest angel, so too was Merlin the wisest man.<sup>30</sup> This first story thus distinguishes Merlin as superior to wizards and highlights his unnatural wisdom as supernaturally inherited. The fact that authors reference his knowledge as wisdom is noteworthy because of the term's positive association with pious sages. They do not portray him as the heir to demonically inherited information. The story also illustrates the first example of Merlin – even as a child – advising a king and appearing unnaturally superior, representing the paradoxical relationship between his youth and wisdom stemming from his dichotomous hybrid nature.

After Merlin proves his intellectual abilities, Vortigern asks him to prophesy and explain the significance of the predicted red and white dragons that Merlin says will emerge from the hill where Vortigern is attempting to build his tower. Upon being asked, Merlin "straightway burst into tears, and drawing in the breath of prophecy," revealed the symbolism behind the dragons.<sup>31</sup> Merlin's pre-prophesy tears are a significant reoccurring motif throughout romances, demonstrating demonic influence through feminine association. Merlin's tears are a feminine characteristic inherited from his demon father considered unnatural for a medieval male. Caciola contends that "demonic bodies were hybrid and unstable," in the sense that male and female traits were ascribed to them.<sup>32</sup> Merlin embodied a similar dichotomous nature inherited from his father by balancing the human and demon, male and female, subject and advisor, and natural and supernatural, as will become more evident later.

Merlin's consistent foreboding and fear-inspiring prophecies also allude to his diabolical heritage. Following his introduction to Vortigern, Merlin delivers a lengthy and detailed prophecy concerning Britain's future riddled with symbols, double meanings, mythology, and animals. Beneath the surface, these prophecies allude to the apocalypse, reflecting the potential for Merlin to have emerged as the Antichrist. Gloom and destruction pervade the prophecies, which predicts, among other things, how "Children will perish in the wombs of their mothers, and dread shall be the torments of men."<sup>33</sup> Sin and gluttony – deadly sins with diabolical associations – feature with descriptions of how "Every soil shall riot in luxury, neither shall

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. pg. 136.

<sup>28</sup> Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*, pg. 48.

<sup>29</sup> See *Merlin*, pp. 59, 86, 92.

<sup>30</sup> Russell, *Lucifer*, pg. 224.

<sup>31</sup> Dunn, *History of the Kings of Britain*. pg. 139.

<sup>32</sup> Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*, pp. 162-163.

<sup>33</sup> Dunn, *History of the Kings of Britain*, pg. 139.

mankind cease to follow after lust.”<sup>34</sup> This prophecy exhibits multiple apocalyptic and nightmarish themes that pervade Merlin’s prophecies. Significantly, this prophecy articulates how turmoil and destruction will pervade Britain’s near future. This is noteworthy because Merlin routinely delivers prophecies foretelling of gloom reminiscent of Hell and havoc wrecked by demons. Russell’s chapter devoted to Hell elaborates on the various horrific details commonly ascribed to Hell including fire and brimstone, chained demons, Lucifer, and tortured souls.<sup>35</sup> Additionally, here, as in other Merlin stories, the king calls on Merlin for advice regarding Britain’s wellbeing, highlighting how Merlin repeatedly appears, due to his greater knowledge, in an advisory role to those who should be superior to him. He unnaturally usurps established social hierarchy by directing kings. This mirrors how Lucifer endeavored to act independently of God, but Merlin is different because he never attempts to assume complete control. Merlin’s hybrid status is affirmed by his willingness to challenge authority, but his devotion to the same leaders he challenges highlights how he channeled potentially malignant influences for noble causes.

Merlin continues acting above nature and common societal practice in other stories. Later in the *History of the Kings of Britain*, Geoffrey describes how Merlin created the structure now known as Stonehenge. He relates how before completing this supernatural feat, Merlin burst out in unnatural feminine laughter. Like his tears, Merlin’s laughter is associated with disrupting the natural order – whether physical, metaphysical, or social – because they express lack of bodily control commonly linked with females. Because Merlin physically appears male, these manifestations of femininity are unnatural and reflect his hybridity and dichotomous composition. Many times Merlin’s laughter precedes displays of supernatural prophecy, usurpations of rigid social hierarchy, or revelations of situational irony.<sup>36</sup> Laughter as uncontrollable emotion becomes one of his displays of femininity, which physically manifests his dichotomous essence, contradictory to itself and established order. Lewis Thorpe suggests that Merlin’s laughter is a sardonic expression of situational irony.<sup>37</sup> Situational irony arises when natural order is interrupted, resulting in an unexpected outcome. Merlin recognizes disruptions of order, and is able to disrupt order, because he is essentially such a disturbance as his laughter exemplifies. By attributing Stonehenge – a still unexplained phenomenon – to Merlin and relating how “he laid the stones down so lightly as none would believe,” Geoffrey further concretizes Merlin’s status as a semi-supernatural dichotomous being whose supernatural influences manifest themselves in unnatural gender blending, and unnatural ability to challenge normal world order – physically and socially.<sup>38</sup> In addition, ascribing Stonehenge to Merlin strengthens the argument that Merlin’s heritage endowed him with unnatural powers over nature linked to his general defying of natural hierarchies and associations.

Geoffrey’s *Vita Merlin* (1136-1138) provides more evidence linking Merlin with nature and demons. Here, Geoffrey portrays Merlin as a fallen angel, clearly alluding to his demonic

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. pg. 143.

<sup>35</sup> Russell, *Devils*, p. 44-61.

<sup>36</sup> For specific examples see Bryant, *Merlin*, pgs. 71-73, 99.; Basil Clarke, trans., *Life of Merlin* (Cardiff, Wales, 1973), pgs. 67, 77, 79.; *Silence: a thirteenth-century French romance*. Translated by Sarah Roche-Mahdi (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1999), pgs 291-301.

<sup>37</sup> Lewis Thorpe. “Merlin’s Sardonic Laughter.” In *Studies in Medieval Literature and Languages*, Edited by W. Rothell and Fredrick Whitehead. (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 1973), pp. 323-340.

<sup>38</sup> Dunn, *History of the Kings of Britain*. p. 166.

parentage, by retelling how Merlin, as a king, abandoned his kingdom and secluded himself in the woods rejecting relatives and friends, until a pure stream healed his madness. His exile is reminiscent of the fallen angels' exile from Heaven, suggesting that they share commonalities. However, ultimately, Merlin triumphs over demonic influences and regains his original status as a king, emphasizing the possibility of returning to grace for the masses, and demonstrating that he is unlike the fallen angels because they can never return to Heaven. Merlin is introduced "as king and prophet," positions of power and influence.<sup>39</sup> However, after witnessing deaths in battle Merlin is overcome "with fast-running tears [and] he mourned amid the strife", again illustrating his unnatural feminine proclivity towards emotion and tears.<sup>40</sup> Geoffrey emphasizes this, describing how "his flooding tears had no end."<sup>41</sup> He became so devastated that "he crept away and fled to the woods" and "became a Man of the Woods, as if dedicated to the woods. So for a whole summer he stayed hidden in the woods, discovered by none, forgetful of himself and of his own, lurking like a wild thing."<sup>42</sup> This is his fall from grace. By abandoning his responsibilities, rebelling against social order, and hiding in nature, Merlin likens himself to the fallen angels who God exiles from heaven. However, unlike the fallen angels, Merlin's exile is self-induced, which allows him to return eventually, distinguishing Merlin from his demon heritage. Geoffrey openly states that Merlin disassociated himself from humans and attempted to integrate himself into nature. This links him with demons, who are commonly associated with woods and nature by theologians like Caesarius. Parallels in Merlin's actions and description clearly mirror the story of the fallen angels who became demons. However, subtle differences highlight how Merlin's hybridity enabled him to return ultimately to civilization – a metaphor for God's grace – unlike demons, emphasizing that humans are capable of repentance.

While in the woods, other characters relate to Merlin as a "madman," highlighting perceptions of Merlin as demonically influenced – akin to a diabolically possessed person – and forsaking civilization. He forgets humanity and lives "an animal life," eating vegetation and sequestering himself from relatives.<sup>43</sup> Every time a relative or king's agent captures him, he reiterates his desire to escape to the woods. Linking societal desertion and the woods highlights Merlin's demon father as the source of his attraction to nature. Additionally, he has powers over animals and nature that strengthen his connection with the environment. In *The Vita Merlin*, Merlin rides a stag like a horse, arranges deer into a straight line, and subsists on shrubbery. Just as demons command nature – as Caesarius's stories reveal – Merlin controls even the most fearful animals, stressing his supernaturally inherited unnatural ability to manipulate and influence the environment as a superior.

*Silence*, a thirteenth-century French romance, develops this theme when Merlin appears, wild and beyond capture in the woods. He is introduced as the "son of the devil," demonstrating his hybridity.<sup>44</sup> According to the story, "he said that he would take to the woods/ and be so wild and hard to catch/ that he could never be taken," consciously disassociating himself from

<sup>39</sup> Basil Clarke, trans., *Life of Merlin* (Cardiff, Wales: University of Wales Press, 1973), p. 53.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 55.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. 57.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 73

<sup>44</sup> *Silence: a thirteenth-century French romance*. Translated by Sarah Roche-Mahdi (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1999). p. 271.



civilization.<sup>45</sup> He appears as “a man with long white hair flowing down his back” at the forest’s edge, residing in a “wasteland” – a transparent corollary to Hell, where demons reside.<sup>46</sup> *Cantiga* 85 of Alfonso X’s *Cantigas de Santa Maria* implies that Hell is a wasteland describing it as “a deep valley full of dragons and devils, blacker than coal.”<sup>47</sup> Comparing himself to animals, Merlin describes himself to Silence as “a man all covered with hair./ as hairy as bear./ He is as fleet as a woodland deer./ Herbs and roots are his food.”<sup>48</sup> He is unsure “if there is any human nature left in him.”<sup>49</sup> He thus concretizes himself as a man of dichotomies: bear and deer, human and beast – in addition to the dichotomies associated with his hybridity. He bluntly states that he is not fully human because he is torn between his demonic and human traits.

*Silence* elaborates in Nature and Nurture’s debate on how to understand Merlin as a human-demon hybrid by discussing whose influence on Merlin was greater. They conclude that Merlin’s nature is human, but his nurture is demonic. Nature – his human side – forces Merlin to give himself up to Silence for capture, hinting at Merlin’s ultimate decision to associate himself with God despite strong demonic tendencies.<sup>50</sup> In *Silence*, Nature’s and Nurture’s debate emphasizes to readers that humans’ intrinsic good qualities bar them from falling prey to demons. Notably, this is different from Robert de Baron’s understanding of Merlin as having a demonic nature and pious nurture, reflecting contemporary discourse on human nature. Regardless, both understandings yield the same message: that people can overcome demonic temptations drawing them to sin.

In *Silence*, Merlin is the ultimate deceiver and illuminator of deceptions. The plan he provides Silence with to trick and capture himself is his foremost ruse. Upon first appearing to Silence and learning of Silence’s mission to capture him, he instructs Silence on how to seize him.<sup>51</sup> Although he ultimately tricks himself, he initially deceives Silence by cloaking his identity physically and through deception. This is part of how Merlin’s Nature – his human traits in *Silence* – overpowers his Nurture – his demonic traits – concretely exemplifying how evil forces can be defeated. Deception through disguise is a common tool used by demons for trickery, and a reoccurring strategy Merlin employs in medieval literature, linking Merlin and demons. However, in *Silence* Merlin ultimately elevates this diabolically inherited proclivity by utilizing it to help Silence succeed in capturing him, illustrating how people can channel seemingly evil characteristics for good.

Merlin appears disguised in stories beyond *Silence* because, as demons do to misguide people, he masks his identity while advising or manipulating situations. Alexander Makhov posits that medieval illustrations portray demons as multi-faced because demons lack a definitive identity, thus appearing under multiple guises.<sup>52</sup> Elliott adds in her explanation of spiritual beings’

---

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. 273.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 275-277; For another example of Merlin appearing disguised in white see David E. Campbell, trans., *The Tale of Balain* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1972) p. 70.

<sup>47</sup> Hulp-Kill, *Songs of Holy Mary of Alfonso X*, p. 110.

<sup>48</sup> Roche-Mahdi, *Silence*, p. 279.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, p. 281-285.

<sup>51</sup> Roche-Mahdi, *Silence*, p. 277

<sup>52</sup> Alexander Makhov. “The Devil’s Image from the Viewpoint of Rhetoric,” In *Angels, Devils – The Supernatural and its Visual Representation*, ed. by Gerhard Jaritz (Budapest, 2011), p. 43.

disembodiment that they shape shift when interacting with humans, thereby deceiving through disguise.<sup>53</sup> Though Merlin often disguises himself, people eventually recognize him, or he reveals himself, and unlike demons, he supplies advice in people's interest because his literary role is to be a moral example of surpassing evil.<sup>54</sup>

In court, the king forces Merlin to reveal his reasons for laughing at the peasant who bought shoes, the beggar, and the funeral procession. Merlin again links his uncontrollable laughter with violations of nature by revealing the situational irony and lies that occurred in each situation. In the process, he challenges the king's authority – defying social order – by refusing to explain himself until threatened with death. This is akin to when the fallen angels challenged God. This also alludes to Caciola's argument that theologians demonized females because they challenged authority figures and usurped power for themselves.<sup>55</sup> *Silence* thus suggests that Merlin possessed diabolically induced femininity; however, he ultimately validates himself as a masculine, pious figure by exposing lies associated with females, or supposed females, that infiltrate the court, from Silence's gender, to the queen's sexual interests and the nun's sex. Merlin reveals his attraction to all deceit by involving himself in unmasking other's deceptions. Instead of only being influenced by his effeminate demonic half for evil, he overcomes it by channeling his demonically inherited attraction to trickery for good by unveiling female oriented lies, thus establishing himself as male and pious.

In *Silence*, as in other Merlin stories, the supremacy of Merlin's knowledge illustrates its demonic origin. He accumulates renown for intellectual and prophetic abilities bequeathed to him by his demon father. Kings acknowledged him as intellectually superior, and wise, even after recognizing the source of his knowledge. In *The Tale of Balain*, another thirteenth-century French romance, Merlin functions largely as an advisor, prophesying for leaders and strongly suggesting courses of action. The text explicitly states that the king "believed Merlin in whatever he said," denoting complete deference to Merlin's knowledge.<sup>56</sup> Merlin asserts unnatural superiority over kings by refusing to answer their questions, even when disguised like a beggar.<sup>57</sup> Robert De Boron's *Merlin* relates how "Merlin had commanding influence over Pendragon and his brother Uther."<sup>58</sup> He does not fear rebuttal or punishment because he is above the rules of nature. Even though Caciola explains this as negatively associated with demonically labeled women, it is acceptable for Merlin because he distances himself from his diabolically inherited feminine traits, and uses them to benefit the authority figures he seemingly defies.

His disregard for kings' theoretical superiority also implies hubris, which is a diabolically inspired sin. Russell relates how Lucifer and the other fallen angels sinned through pride.<sup>59</sup> Like demons, Merlin avoids forced subservience by constantly asserting himself before authority figures.<sup>60</sup> Further proving his pride, he deems himself wiser and more memorable than one of

---

<sup>53</sup> Elliott, *Fallen Bodies*, 131.

<sup>54</sup> See Campbell, *Balain*, pgs 23- 27.; Bryant, *Merlin*, pgs 98-99.; Roche-Mahdi, *Silence*, pgs 275-281.

<sup>55</sup> Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*, pp. 298-309.

<sup>56</sup> Campbell, *Balain*. p. 16.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. pp. 20-21.

<sup>58</sup> Bryant, *Merlin*, p. 88

<sup>59</sup> Walls, *Lucifer*, p. 174.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, p. 201.

the greatest contemporary knights in *Balain*.<sup>61</sup> However, unlike the fallen angels, Merlin's hubris goes unpunished, because he utilizes his knowledge to profit Britain and the kings, not to usurp their power.

Even though he ultimately works to better Britain, many of his prophecies predict destruction and turmoil reminiscent of Hell. Wall explains that Hell is commonly depicted as a chaotic flaming den home to battling fallen angels and sinful souls.<sup>62</sup> In *The Vita Merlin*, as in other prophecies Geoffrey attributes to Merlin, he predicts havoc in Britain as "The nephews of the Cornish boar disrupt everything. They lay ambushes for each other and put one another death with their evil swords: they cannot wait to succeed lawfully, but seize the crown."<sup>63</sup> Consistent with the civil war Geoffrey experienced in Britain during the second half of the twelfth century when control was contested, he continually reiterates how Britain will experience mayhem as kings vie for power.<sup>64</sup> Geoffrey uses Merlin literarily to spectacularly forefront British history and make his work a 'best seller' furthering his own fame.<sup>65</sup> Consequently, Merlin's engaging and terrifying prophecies are not only a result of his demonic heritage, but also serve Geoffrey's own interests.

The story of King Arthur's conception referenced in *History of the Kings of Britain*, *Merlin*, and *Silence* synthesizes Merlin's demonic attributes and moral role. According to legend, Utherpendragon desires Igerne, the Duke Gorlois's wife. Merlin disguises Utherpendragon as Gorlois so he can be with Igerne. Together they conceive Arthur. This story is significant, because Merlin advises the king on how to manipulate the situation to achieve his illicit sexual goals. Elliott links demons with sexual sins, supporting the argument that Merlin's facilitation of royal adultery through deception was demonic. However, by ultimately producing Arthur – a morally positive result – the story reaffirms his hybrid status. This story also concretely exhibits how people can channel evil for good. Further, Merlin utilizes an herb – a natural tool – to transform Utherpendragon into Gorlois, concretizing the link between the act and his diabolical heritage.<sup>66</sup> Merlin's role in Arthur's conception highlights his demonic proclivity towards nature, deception, and power. Merlin's hybrid human-demon status is cemented by helping Utherpendragon fulfill his sinful desires.<sup>67</sup> However, Arthur's eventual status as Britain's savior precludes classifying Merlin's actions as demonic, implying that Merlin utilized abilities inherited from his demon father for a positive end. He becomes the paradigm of surpassing evil inclinations, and directing seemingly spiritually deleterious abilities and desires for morally upright ends by overcoming his potential to be Antichrist, instead orchestrating the conception of Britain's messianic Arthur.

---

<sup>61</sup> Campbell, *Balain*, p. 25.

<sup>62</sup> Walls, *Devils*, pp. 44-61.

<sup>63</sup> Clarke, *Vita Merlin*, p. 83.

<sup>64</sup> Clarke, *Vita Merlin*, pgs 6-7.; For more examples of destructive prophecies see Dunn, *History of the Kings of Britain*, pgs 138-154.; Clarke, *Vita Merlin*, pgs 103-113.; *Anglo-Norman Verse Prophecies of Merlin*. Translated by Jean Blacker (Dallas, TX: Scriptorium Press, 2005). pp 27-57.

<sup>65</sup> Lucy Allen Patton, introduction to *History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. By Charles Dunn (U.S.A.: E.P. Dutton & CO., Inc., 1958) pp. xv-xx.

<sup>66</sup> Bryant, *Merlin*, pgs 100-101.

<sup>67</sup> An additional account of Arthur's conception can be found in Dunn, *History of the Kings of Britain*, pgs 176-178.

Despite the fact that Merlin exhibits many demonic characteristics, he associates himself with God. In Robert de Boron's account, Merlin testifies "That [he has] knowledge of all things past, both word and deed, inherited from the Enemy. But Our Lord omnipotent gave me knowledge of things to come. Because of that the Enemy have lost me: I will never work on their behalf."<sup>68</sup> As a toddler, he even proclaims that he will "teach you to gain the love of Christ," demonstrating his allegiance.<sup>69</sup> He designates himself as Christian by referencing "Our Lord," while expressly distancing himself from "the Enemy" – Satan. Similarly, in *The Tale of Balain*, he announces that "God is [his] counselor," proving Merlin's association with God across texts.<sup>70</sup> In Geoffrey's tales about Merlin – most likely the source for other accounts on Merlin – he aligns with Christianity by derogatively describing how pagan invaders will sack Christian holy sites.<sup>71</sup> Merlin thus exemplifies how people can choose between good and evil, despite moral challenges. However, unlike in other stories, Geoffrey's Merlin does not actively identify himself with God: this developed later.

The later historical development linking Merlin to God and Christianity is significant because it demonstrates how Merlin's moral role evolved in medieval literature. Influential secular leaders patronized Geoffrey's work, resulting in a glorification of British history. Internal political turmoil between the Normans – who had only recently conquered Britain under William of Orange's leadership in 1066 – the Welsh, and the Saxons, contributed to producing a mythological work focused on history, not moral lessons.<sup>72</sup> Consequently, Geoffrey does not emphasize the ramifications of Merlin's status as a hybrid human-demon. However, as Arthurian literature spread in the early thirteenth century and the Holy Grail theme emerged, religious connections developed. Merlin's hybridity and its strong moral implications in later romantic works like *Silence*, *The Tale of Balain*, and *Merlin* reflect the growing prominence of Arthurian legends in medieval literature. As literature, these works aim to entertain the aristocracy, not to impart political lessons. Consequently, Merlin's character develops subtle moral overtones illustrating overcoming demonic challenges by portraying him as a hybrid human-demon whose internal dichotomies do not prevent him from ultimately rejecting demons in favor of God. By identifying as a Christian and employing his diabolically inherited powers for good, Merlin demonstrates that evil temptations can be surpassed and religious fulfillment attained.

---

<sup>68</sup> Bryant, *Merlin*, p. 92.

<sup>69</sup> Bryant, *Merlin*, p. 61.

<sup>70</sup> Campbell, *Balain*, p. 24.; Further connections can be found on pgs. 16, 37, 50, and 92.

<sup>71</sup> Clarke, *Vita Merlin*, pg. 87.; Dunn, *History of the Kings of Britain*, p. 139.

<sup>72</sup> Curley, Michael. *Geoffrey of Monmouth*. New York, NY: Twayne Publishers, 1994. pgs. 1-6.

## Bibliography

1. Bynum, Caroline Walker. *Metamorphosis and Identity*. New York, N.Y.: Zone Books, 2001.
2. Wall, James Charles. *Devils*. Detroit, M.I.: Singing Tree Press, Book Tower, 1968.
3. Robert de Boron. *Merlin*. Translated by Nigel Bryant. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001.
4. Russell, Jeffery Burton. *Lucifer: The Devil in the Middle Ages*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984.
5. Hundsbichler, Helmut. "Devils in Visual Proximity." In *Angels, Devils – The Supernatural and its Visual Representation*, Edited by Gerhard Jaritz, Budapest, Hungary: Central European University Department of Medieval Studies and Central European University Press, 2011.
6. Lawrence-Mathers, Anne. *The True History of Merlin the Magician*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press
7. Saint Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologica*. Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. London, U.K.: Burns Oates & Washbourne LTD., 1922
8. Caesarius of Heisterbach. *The Dialogue of Miracles*. Translated by H. Von E. Scott and C.C. Swinton Bland. London: George Routledge & Sons, LTD., 1929.
9. Caciola, Nancy. *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006.
10. Geoffrey of Monmouth. *History of the Kings of Britain*. Translated by Sebastian Evans. U.S.A.: E.P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1958.
11. Thrope, Lewis. "Merlin's Sardonic Laughter." In *Studies in Medieval Literature and Languages*, Edited by W. Rothell. Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 1973.
12. Geoffrey of Monmouth. *Life of Merlin*. Translated by Basil Clarke. Cardiff, Wales: University of Wales Press, 1973.
13. *Silence: a thirteenth-century French romance*. Translated by Sarah Roche-Mahdi. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1999.
14. *The Tale of Balain*. Translated by David E. Campbell. Evanston, IL.: Northwestern University Press, 1972.
15. Makhov, Alexander. "The Devil's Image from the Viewpoint of Rhetoric." In *Angels, Devils – The Supernatural and its Visual Representation*, Edited by Gerhard Jaritz, Budapest, Hungary: Central European University Department of Medieval Studies and Central European University Press, 2011.
16. Elliott, Dyan. *Fallen Bodies: Pollution, Sexuality, and Demonology in the Middle Ages*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.
17. *Anglo-Norma Verse Prophecies of Merlin*. Translated by Jean Blacker. Dallas, TX: Scriptorium Press, 2005.