

English 300: Merlin
Topics for Discussion or Papers

**Geoffrey of Monmouth's Works, Sources,
and Antecedents**

1. Using the excerpts from histories and pseudo-histories as sources, explore and distinguish among the ways in which the past seemed meaningful to those writers. How did early medieval convictions about the worth and meaning of history become embodied in these texts? Could you conjecture anything about the historians' attitudes to the present and future as well?
2. Gildas recapitulates the British past in terms of his Christian historiographical vision, intending his audience to apply to their own lives the national lessons of British history. Nennius and Bede are heavily influenced by Gildas' example, but Geoffrey of Monmouth and his contemporaries do not follow this pattern. Analyze some of the differences between these two groups.
3. Geoffrey of Monmouth is clearly interested in the individual: in human desire, even when it runs counter to the good of national interests; in the rise and fall of great men; in the conduct of good and bad kings. But, as the scholar Robert W. Hanning states, Geoffrey's central character' [is] the nation itself. How do you understand the figure of Merlin to contribute to Britain's national character, in Hanning's sense?
4. Geoffrey's Merlin can see into the processes of history and sometimes aid them in coming to fruit, but he cannot change them. What relationship is there then between the prophecies enunciated by Merlin and the historical text written by Geoffrey? Or between the figures of Merlin and of Geoffrey?
5. The historian David N. Dumville calls Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia . . . one of the greatest romantic novels of all time, the work whose popularity unleashed on Europe (in a way which might otherwise never have been achieved) the Arthurian romance which is still with us and which has been responsible for some of the finest (and some of the most banal) works of European literature. Comment on the continuity that you observe between Geoffrey's works and the Arthuriana with which you are familiar.
6. Describe and analyze some of the important ways in which Merlin is marked as mad in contrast to other characters in the Historia, the Vita, and the saints' lives that we have read.
7. Is there any change or development in the Merlin of the Vita that is reflected in his prophecies?
8. Merlin's retreat into the wilderness, as outlined in the Vita, can be understood as a rejection of courtly life. Do you agree? Is a broader thesis suggested by this statement?
9. In her discussion of the conventions of madness in Middle English literature, Penelope Doob claims that the Vita carefully traces Merlin's dual progress from unholy to holy wildness and from rejecting the pain of sin to rejecting sin itself. Argue for or against this position.

10. Is Merlin an example of purgative madness in some sense taught by his suffering to be fully human and rational? How is this sort of plot played out in the Vita?

11. The eminent scholar J.S.P. Tatlock, when considering Geoffrey's re-positioning of Merlin's prophecies as Book VII of the Historia, writes: Seldom does Geoffrey show his architectonic ability more than by his seventh book. When the *Historia* has completed half of its steady advance, comes this pause, to look back a little and forward even to the point of writing. Then he carries the blood of his own present into the withered past, gives it actuality and sweep, and links the whole of insular history together. From Virgil, who does the same half-way through the *Aeneid*, also by means of a marvelous prophecy in picturesque circumstances, he may have got the idea. Likewise Milton on a grander scale than either, though with less warmth, twice in the latter part of *Paradise Lost* turns the eyes far back and forward. Geoffrey doubtless suffers from comparison, but the tightening and deepening is the same. This mingling of accounts of the past as if they were future along with attempts to forecast the future in the present makes it necessary for Geoffrey to construct a character outside of the temporal frame of the text. How well does Merlin answer to this need?

12. In the corpus of medieval Welsh poetry that may attest to a tradition of Myrddin, chieftain and seer, our well-developed Merlin looms as a strikingly small presence. What kind of figure could you construct from the Welsh poetic sources? How different is he from Geoffrey's Merlin?

13. Can you comment on any similarities you find between the world of nature in Geoffrey's Vita and the frequently keen observations of nature in Welsh poetry? How is nature comprehended by each of these texts? To what end?

14. The prophecies of Merlin (in both Geoffrey's Historia and Vita) are a rich and self-referential tangle, certainly without the sort of plot and characters one is used to. How did you find your way through this thicket? Discuss some of your strategies for navigating this non-narrative creation.

15. Although medieval Welsh poetry is generally heroic in impulse and tone, its elegiac nature can be felt to overwhelm the allusions to warriors and battles. Comment on the tension between these two modes, using Myrddin as an exemplary figure for your analysis.

16. The character Ganiada has a complex relationship to that of her brother Merlin in the Vita. Why is Ganiada necessary in this biography of the wizard?

17. The topics of adultery and lust call forth some female characters from Geoffrey of Monmouth. What is the typical woman as imagined by him? What aspects of Merlin are developed only through contact with women?

18. Is the somewhat dim, sometimes bewildering figure of an historical Merlin necessary to the more fully articulated fictional character? What aspects of Merlin are jeopardized if his historicity is diminished, limited, are left doubtful? Or, is Merlin somehow improved if the historical sources for him are jettisoned?