

English 300: Merlin
Topics for Papers and Discussion
Weeks V - VI

1. In his adaptation of Geoffrey's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, the Anglo-Norman author Wace seems less interested in Merlin as prophet – and thus in foregrounding a political comprehension of the wizard's prophecies – and more interested in Merlin as a sage, illusionist, and engineer. Do you agree with this reading of Wace? If so, how does he accomplish this reduction or change in Merlin?
2. Layamon's *Brut* recounts Merlin's building of Stonehenge, stating that Merlin examines the ring of stones "moving his lips like a man saying his prayers" (ll. 8700 ff). Based on Layamon's characterization of Merlin's relationship to Christian ceremony, would you argue that Merlin is in fact praying – or casting a spell?
3. How does each of the authors that we have read who chooses to deal with the subject account for Merlin's powers (call upon any combination of works that you choose)? In each text that you consider, what is the exact nature of Merlin's capacities?
4. Even though he bases his *Brut* on Wace's, Layamon alters his Anglo-Norman source in many ways: leaving out concepts that were culturally marked as Norman, omitting words of Norman origin even when they were demonstrably in use in England in the thirteenth century, writing his work in an archaic "English" alliterative style. This sort of evidence is adduced to support the thesis of Layamon's "Englishness," one of the first moves in the building of a style that could be seen as English, and not as a version of French. Closely compare the Merlin sections in Wace and Layamon and see what you come up with.
5. Although we class Geoffrey's *Historia Regum Britanniae* as a work of pseudo-history, -- the claims of which were regarded with some skepticism soon after it was composed (e.g., see Gerald of Wales), -- Geoffrey marks his text as written under the sign of the historian. Wace's and Layamon's adaptations of Geoffrey move even nearer to fabulous narrative. Yet, each of these two adaptors of Geoffrey nod toward the idea that they are composing a truthful account. Discuss the attitudes of Wace and Layamon toward their source. Particularly useful might be the role played in each of the narrator.
6. Do the two royal brothers, Uther and Pendragon, who figure in the prose adaption of *Merlin* attributed to Robert de Boron, believe that Merlin's intentions toward them are basically good? Is the reader of the text to rely on the judgment of Uther and of Pendragon?
7. Considering the texts of Robert de Boron and his continuators, what would you say about Merlin's ultimate plans for Arthur and his people? Is Merlin complicit in a cosmic-scale plan devised by the demons who caused his begetting to wreak havoc on Arthur's world? Or is there evidence to cause one to set aside Merlin's aspect as an "anti-Christ"?
8. In his introduction to the late nineteenth-century edition of the text of the Middle English

Prose Merlin (see the excerpt in Goodrich, pp. 149ff), W. E. Mead remarks that “Even considered by itself, the *Merlin* has in more than one passage a nameless charm and beauty in comparison with which the *Morte Darthur* [by Sir Thomas Malory] is distinctly inferior, though the heights occasionally reached in the *Merlin* make us see only more plainly the barren wastes through which much of the narrative creeps.” Later critics have pointed out that Mead’s statement damns the *Prose Merlin* with faint – and as you can see from the quotation, unsubstantiated – praise. With the complex French material before it and the rich feast of Malory following, the *Prose Merlin* seems in need of a rare critic to appreciate it. What would you forward in its favor?

9. The scholar Derek Pearsall has called for a re-appraisal of medieval English works of verse and prose translated and adapted from other languages, arguing that this part of the process whereby English as a literary language “was consolidated and . . . brought up to date, as if English, coming late to the scene, had to absorb into itself a mass of learning and learned writing before it could move forward.” You have read excerpts from Latin, Anglo-Norman, and French originals that were the sources of Middle English versions. Does Pearsall’s argument invite you to see these English works differently?

10. The edition of the *Prose Merlin* cited above contains a number of remarks about medieval romance, including the statement that “The artistic sense in most of the medieval story-tellers was sadly awry. They seem to have regarded it as a literary crime to leave the most trivial detail to the imagination of the readers.” Using several of the texts we have read recently, assert your opinion of these sentences.

11. In her reading of the Vulgate Cycle, E. Jane Burns claims that “. . . this propensity for narrative repetition calls into question the fundamental notions of individual creation and interpretation that we, as post-Romantic heirs to an ideology of originality, often take for granted. The modern concepts of narrative coherence and the well-wrought tale, which imply the assurance of a writer’s idiosyncratic authority, are thoroughly undermined in the earlier medieval system. . . . [the] view that literary creation was grounded in the continuous order of repetition offers a challenge to the Romantic order of discontinuous, unique inventions. . . . In a tradition that self-consciously erases ‘points of origin’ to dictate points of confluence, the reader’s responsibility shifts from the search for a putative ‘fixed’ meaning to the careful assimilation of narrative repetition and exchange.” Does her analysis aid your comprehension of the medieval texts that we have been reading?

12. Many discussions of the genre of romance credit it as the textual site where women emerge as fuller characters with larger roles, where the active patronage and readership of women is clearly reflected in changes that range from the format of a manuscript book to the form of a story. Discuss this statement using examples from the Middle English romances that we’ve read.