Unveiling Women's Trauma
in Arthurian Conception Narratives:
A Comparative Analysis of Geoffrey of Monmouth,
Wace, and Laȝamon

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Abstract

The accounts of King Arthur assume a central role for the first time in the *Historia Regum Britanniae* by Geoffrey of Monmouth (c. 1136), which was first translated into French octosyllabic verse by Wace in his *Roman de Brut* (c. 1155), and subsequently into semi-alliterative verse by the English poet Laȝamon (c. 1205). In these narratives, two of the primary male figures – namely Arthur and Merlin – are depicted as the result of non-consensual unions. Merlin is described as the offspring of an incubus who visits a sometimes-unconscious girl, whereas Arthur is conceived as the result of a plan devised by Merlin and Uther to deceive Igraine, wife of one of the king's vassals. Both women disappear from the narrative after the birth of their children and both births are imbued with the trappings of magic and romantic tropes, which serve to obscure the absence of explicit consent.

The aim of this paper is to undertake a comparative reading of the two episodes across Geoffrey's, Wace's and Laȝamon's narratives, in order to uncover the strategies adopted to soften the discomfort with the depiction of events imbued with moral ambiguities.

Key Words – Arthurian matter; non-consensual unions; Geoffrey of Monmouth; Wace; Laȝamon

Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (c. 1136)[1] is generally regarded as the first text to prominently feature King Arthur's achievements in a British historical narrative. As is well known, the Galfridian historiographic endeavour was widely popular from the start, being quickly adapted into French by Wace in his *Roman de Brut* (c. 1155)[2], and then rendered in turn in semi-alliterative verse by the English priest Laȝamon (c. 1185-1205) in his *Brut* (or *Hystoria Brutonum*)[3], leading on eventually to numerous adaptations in both verse and prose[4].

These narratives cover centuries of history and legend, but in the crucial section devoted to Arthur's feats, the two primary male figures, Arthur and Merlin, are united by the similarities in the mythologically coded conditions that lead to their respective births. As heroes are typically conceived and born in extraordinary, mysterious, and morally dubious circumstances[5], the *Brut* narratives portray both Merlin and Arthur as the offspring of supernaturally inspired unions, which appear to have been non-consensual.

Even though Geoffrey, Wace, and Laȝamon evade any recognition that these unions might constitute rape, their non-consensual nature seems to have caused some discomfort. Regarding the depiction of the trauma experienced by Arthur's mother, Igraine[6], Gillian Adler (2020: 49) notes that the three authors «all appear to grapple with the problem of

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[1] Known also as *De Gestis Britonum*, the text was composed by Geoffrey probably during the time he spent in Oxford as a *magister* and secular canon for St. George's College. In the prologue, he mentions as the main source of his work a 'very old book in the British tongue' – «Britannici sermonis librum uetustissimum» (Geoffrey of Monmouth, ed. Reeve and Wright 2007: 5) – that was brought to him by the archdeacon of Oxford, Walter. According to Reeve and Wright (2007: vii), the *Historia* was completed probably sometime after 1123, when Alexandre, one of the dedicatees, became bishop of Lincoln, and before 1139, when Robert of Torigni showed a copy of the work to Henry of Huntingdon at Bec.

[2] Even though Wace's work garnered significantly more attention, he was not the first to adapt Geoffrey's work: it appears that Geffrei Gaimar had already produced his own version of the text in Anglo-Norman French by the late 1140s. Interestingly, Wace had primarily dedicated his earlier efforts to crafting hagiographic and religious works. It is Laȝamon (ll. 21-22; ed. Barron and Weinberg 1995: 2) when introducing his sources, who provides the information that the French clerk presented his poem to Eleanor of Aquitaine, possibly indicating a date of completion for Wace's work as early as 1155. See on this, among others, the introduction in Wace, ed. Weiss (2002: xii-xiii).

[3] The only information we have about Laȝamon is found in the prologue of his poem, where he declares his own name and that of his father: *Laȝamon*, son of *Leouenað* (as in London, British Library, Cotton Caligula A. IX) or *Lawman*, son of *Leucais* (as in London, British Library, Cotton Otho C.XIII); he also provides his occupation and location, describing himself as a priest reading mass at Areley near the River Severn. On Laȝamon's location and identity, see Corsi Mercatanti (1984: 299-314); Frankis (2003: 109-132); Meecham-Jones (2013: 69-106). In similar terms, in order to date the composition of the poem, we need to refer to the text. Thus, based on the only reference in the poem to contemporary events, Le Saux establishes a possible range of composition stretching from 1185 to 1205; see Le Saux (1989: 8).

[4] Throughout the subsequent centuries, a plethora of notable works emerged composed in Latin, as well as in Anglo-Norman French and in Middle English. Robert of Gloucester's *Middle English Metrical Chronicle* (1300), Peres de Langtoft's *Anglo-Norman Verse Chronicle* (1307), and Thomas Castleford's *Middle English Verse Chronicle* (1327-1350) were all directly influenced by Geoffrey's work. The many variants of the *Prose Brut* and Robert Manning of Brunne's *Middle English Verse Chronicle* drew inspiration, instead, from Wace's *Roman de Brut*. For an in-depth exploration of the chronicle tradition in the Late Middle Ages, see Matheson (2009: 58-69).

[5] See Morris (1985: 70-71) who mentions, among other things, Roland's birth out of incest, and Lancelot's fathering of Galahad when he believes he is lying with Guinevere. But similar accounts can be found elsewhere, such as Heracles' birth from Zeus's impersonation of Amphitryon. Moreover, the biblical tale of David and Bathsheba resulting in the eventual birth of Solomon is particularly comparable to the story of Arthur's own conception. See also Mathey-Maille (1991: 222-29) and Breton (2017: 53-54).

[6] This character is known by many variants: Igerna, Ygerne, Ygraine, etc.; for clarity, I will consistently use the form *Igraine* throughout this text, except when directly quoting from original sources.

consent, indicating an understanding of Igerna's victimhood»; and similar observations can be made about the portrayal of Merlin's mother, who remains unnamed[7]. In fact, in all three texts, both episodes acquire, from one iteration to the next, elements reminiscent of the *romance* genre and marvellous details that act as a mitigating force in the absence of explicit consent.

In *Rape and Ravishment*, Corinne Saunders examines, among other things, the way different sexual crimes were perceived in secular and canon law during the English Middle Ages. Complex as this issue is, canon law writers seem to distinguish specific sexual crimes. According to Saunders, *raptus* involved «the abduction, with or without her consent, of a virgin, widow or nun», while *stuprum* could identify «the defloration of virgins or widows outside the context of abduction» (Saunders 2001: 86). Thus it appears that canon law used to recognize a ranking of sexual crimes emphasizing the notion of the woman as property, where the fundamental issues were theft and the illicit use of the woman's body. Similar, on this point, Gravdal's (1991: 10) observations, which denote the «indifference to the legal personality of individual women», since the main aim of the Church was simply the codification of marriage[8]. By the sixteenth century, the woman's will seems to have acquired gradually more importance, but in this earlier period, female reactions to force were generally met with ambivalence.

The depictions of Merlin's and Arthur's conceptions in the works of Geoffrey, Wace, and Laȝamon, even when accounting for the idiosyncrasies of each representation, appear to converge on a similar position to that expressed by canon law. As the overarching aim of these narratives is historical, no interest is expressed in depicting or acknowledging the experiences of women, and no questions are posed concerning a woman's right to determine the use of her own body. Nevertheless, the various strategies adopted by the writers seem to demonstrate an uneasiness with the ambiguity of the circumstances regarding the women's consent. This, in these instances, serves to acknowledge the sense that, in the eyes of the writers, these characters may have been wronged in some manner.

1. Merlin: A Nightmare's Spawn or the Fruit of a Dream?

Merlin has been a complex figure in Arthurian narratives since he first made an appearance. Geoffrey's depiction of the mage incorporates a variety of characteristics: Merlin is a sage, a magician and, most importantly, a prophet.

Geoffrey's main inspiration for this character comes from Ambrosius, a boy with prophetic abilities who appears in Nennius's *Historia Brittonum*.[9] In order to complete the construction of a fortified tower to defend his people from Saxon attacks, the high king of the Britons, Vortigern (Guorthigirn in this text), is in need of a fatherless boy,

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[7] She acquires a name for the first time – Adhan – in the Oldest Version of the Anglo-Norman *Prose Brut*. In this thirteenth-century prose adaptation of Wace's text, the events leading to Merlin's birth appear to be rationalized: according to Marvin (2006: 14), the author here «acknowledges the perpetration of rape as an all too plausible social reality rather than a phenomenon to be explained away by demonic means».

[8] Indeed, Gravdal (1991: 10) also states that: «The act of forced intercourse was not considered a canonical problem. Pure and simple rape was not a crime in Church law».

[9] This historiographic endeavour, showing more interest in legend than in history, was composed in the Welsh area in the ninth century; it is associated with the monk Nennius only from the eleventh century onwards. Structurally, the text can be divided into distinct parts, and with this in mind, the most recent studies suggest that there may have been multiple authors involved in its creation. For further details, see Pirrone (2020: viii-xiii).

«infantem sine patre» (Nennius, ed. Morris 1980: 70). During their search of the kingdom, the king's messengers come across a young man who is being taunted by his companions during a childish brawl. When they question the boy's mother, she declares her complete ignorance about the identity of her child's father. As a result, Ambrosius is brought before the sovereign. However, just as he is about to be sacrificed, he is able to save himself by foretelling the marvels that will be found under the field that the king has chosen to build upon. Eventually, it is revealed that the boy is a descendant of a Roman consul (Nennius, ed. Morris 1980: 70-73).

Geoffrey's portrayal substantially rehandles this material by associating young Ambrosius with Myrddin, a legendary figure from Celtic lore. In the early Cumbrian tradition, Myrddin is a nobleman who is traumatized in battle and comes to reject heroic endeavours for a life surrounded by nature. In the Welsh area, this wise character was represented as a prophet who predicted the future successes of the British people against the Anglo-Saxons[10]. Geoffrey thus creates a composite character, *Merlinus Ambrosius*, with supernatural abilities and combining prophetic and practical skills. In the Galfridian *Historia*, young Merlin's first appearance closely mirrors Nennius's tale. Yet as preparation for his developed role, Geoffrey expands on the story of his birth. The child's mother is led to the presence of the king, where she explains the circumstances of her son's birth at length:

> Vivit anima tua et uiuit anima mea, domine mi rex, quia neminem agnoui qui illum in me generauerit. Vnum autem scio, quod cum essem inter consocias meas in thalamis nostris apparebat michi quidam in specie pulcherrimi iuuenis et saepissime amplectens me strictis brachiis deosculabatur. Et cum aliquantulum mecum moram fecisset, subito euanescebat ita ut nichil ex eo uiderem. Multociens quoque alloquebatur dum secreto sederem nec usquam comparebat. Cumque me diu in hunc modum frequentasset, coiuit mecum in specie hominis saepius atque grauidam in aluo deseruit. Sciat prudentia tua, domine mi, quod aliter uirum non agnoui qui iuuenem istum genuerit. (Geoffrey of Monmouth, ed. Reeve and Wright 2007: 139)[11]

Merlin is born to a nun of royal descent and an unknown paternal agent, who was a creature capable of looking like a beautiful young man («in specie pulcherrimi iuuenis») and disappearing («euanescebat») at will. This creature appeared before the woman within the convent's wall, where she lived in a communal state with her fellow nuns, until she conceived the child[12].

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[10] It seems that Geoffrey also uses some motifs taken from another tradition, a Gaelic one: Myrddin is, in fact, often confused with another figure, Lailoken. Both are usually represented as deeply traumatized by the cruelty of war. For a detailed reconstruction of Cumbrian, Welsh, and Gaelic traditions on the figures of Myrddin and Lailoken, and Geoffrey's handling of them, see Knight (2009: 1-42).

[11] 'Upon your soul and mine, my lord king, I knew no man who begot this child of me. One thing, however, I do know, that when my companions and I were in our cells, someone resembling a handsome young man used to appear to me very often, holding me tight in his arms and kissing me. After remaining with me for a while, he would suddenly disappear from my sight. Often he would talk to me without appearing, while I sat alone. He visited me in this way for a long time and often made love to me in the form of a man, leaving me with a child in my womb. In your wisdom, you should know, my lord, that in no other way have I known a man who could have been this youth's father' (trans. Reeve and Wright 2007: 138).

[12] Another interpretation of the text is proposed by Charlotte Wulf (2001: 260-262), who reads «consocias» as referring to the young maidens accompanying a lady of noble birth. In this view, Merlin's mother was still at her father's house when she was visited by the creature, and only later in her pregnancy did she retire to the convent.

In order to test the credibility of the woman's account, Vortigern investigates the nature of this creature with his mage advisors. One of them mentions Apuleius as an authoritative source and suggests that this creature might have been a type of spirit, an *incubus*, a man-angel hybrid that takes on the appearance of men in order to seduce young women:

> Nam ut Apulegius de deo Socratis perhibet, inter lunam et terram habitant spiritus quos incubos daemones appellamus. Hii partim habent naturam hominum, partim uero angelorum, et cum uolunt assumunt sibi humanas figuras et cum mulieribus coeunt. Forsitan unus ex eis huic mulieri apparuit et iuuenem istum in ipsa generauit. (Geoffrey of Monmouth, ed. Reeve and Wright 2007: 139)[13]

As observed above, Nennius glosses over the origin of the boy's prophetic powers. In contrast, Geoffrey expands on the lack of information in the earlier text and plays with the idea that Merlin's abilities might have a supernatural origin. In Nennius's version, the king's messengers' requests for clarification are met by a simple reply from the boy's mother: «virum non cognovit» (Nennius, ed. Morris 1980: 71). The woman thus states that she never knew any man carnally, an answer that strongly echoes the «virum non cognosco» pronounced by Mary in the Annunciation tale in Luke (1.34)[14].

Geoffrey uses a similar turn of phrase («nemine agnoui»), but, in contrast, the king's adviser, Magauntius, suggests the possible identity of Merlin's father using a conditional sentence («forsitan»). The mage's opinion seems to reflect some of the most common beliefs about *incubi* in the Middle Ages. Besides being dream entities that cause sickness symptoms, they supposedly have sex with women – a belief that at the time might have been used to explain some unexpected pregnancies[15].

Geoffrey here radically alters the young woman's experience: even though the entity involved as the father agent is supernatural, the child's birth might be explained in naturalistic terms as the result of sexual intercourse. In particular, Geoffrey presents the woman's attitude to the whole situation as vague; she is represented as completely awake and aware of the masculine presence, and thus she appears to be consenting. Some psychological details in her recollections of the events seem to suggest a high level of involvement. Thus she reports that the meetings with the paternal agent happened in «thalamis nostris», a rather specific choice of words, which as Michael J. Curley (2015: 224) explains, eventually transmutes «the austere convent cells of the brides of Christ into erotically charged private bedchambers (*thalami*), receptive to the visitations of other kinds of spiritual beings». Geoffrey offers here an extraordinary moral stance that contrasts with clerical positions regarding women's sexuality.

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[13] 'As Apuleius records in *De deo Socratis*, between the moon and the earth there live spirits whom we call incubi. They are part human, part angel, and take on human form at will and sleep with women. Perhaps it was one of them who appeared to this woman and fathered this youth' (trans. Reeve and Wright 2007: 138).

[14] «The boy's mother, while claiming ignorance about how her son was conceived, nevertheless situates herself in the tradition of the best-known mother in the Christian world, one who conceived her son while not having "known man." We hear no more of the mother in the *Historia Britonum*» (Curley 2015: 221).

[15] Women's consent to *incubus* sex seems to have been one of the most contentious issues in medieval debate. During the Middle Ages, the most widely accepted theories about reproduction were those previously postulated by Aristotle and Galen. These two theories were not completely compatible: whereas Galen assumed that for conception to occur, women must necessarily experience pleasure, in Aristotle's view, women do not have seed that needs to be ejaculated, so female pleasure is irrelevant, and conception can occur even if the woman does not consent. See on this, among others, Elliott (1999: 52-56); Van der Lugt (2001:175-200); and Obermeier (2014: 53-54).

Uncomfortable with this freedom, Wace and Laʒamon adopt very different moral stances compared to Geoffrey: they eschew the uncertainty present in Geoffrey's narrative, completely embrace the fantastical elements in Merlin's birth, and make the woman a blameless victim who, by being completely passive and innocent, is devoid of agency.

Wace's *Roman de Brut*, in taking up this episode, accentuates the woman's innocence and religious piety. At the same time, the French clerk highlights the marvellous aspect of the nocturnal visitor, which is clearly described as being an apparition, although endowed with its own form of concreteness. Thus in his depiction, Wace chooses firstly to emphasize the lady's attitude (ll. 7412-7413): «La none tint le chief enclin; / Quant ele out pensé un petit» (Wace, ed. Weiss 2002: 186)[16]. She bows her head, possibly as a sign of embarrassment and contrition, and muses over what she is about to say. Then, the first words she utters are an invocation of God's help, «Se Deus, dist ele, me aït» (l. 7414), before trying to satisfy the king's enquiries (ll. 7421-7433):

> Quant jo fui alques gran nurrie,
> Ne sai se fu fantosmerie,
> Une chose veneit suvent
> Ki me baisout estreitement,
> Cumë hume parler l'oeie,
> E cumë hume le senteie,
> E plusurs feiz od mei parlout
> Que neient ne se demustrout.
> Tant m'ala issi aprismant
> E tant m'ala suvent baisant,
> Od mei se culcha si conçui,
> Unches hume plus ne conui.
> Cest vallet oi, cest vallet ai,
> plus n'en fu, ne plus n'en dirai.
> (Wace, ed. Weiss 2002: 186)[17]

In contrast to the *Historia*, Wace describes the woman as being alone during the nocturnal visits, which all take place while she is awake. Nevertheless, she does not appear to consent or even to understand what happens to her. Although the creature is shown to be physically present – the woman spoke to him, heard him, and felt his kisses (ll. 7423-7430) – he is still referred to as «une chose» or as a «fantosmerie». Wace tries not to implicate Merlin's mother negatively in the mysterious origin of her son, and thus portrays the astonishment and innocence of the woman as she describes the events as being unexpected and incomprehensible.

Finally, the king's advisor refers to the nature of the *incubus* as being mischievous, but mostly harmless (ll. 7448-7456):

> Ne püent mie grant mal faire;
> Ne püent mie mult noisir
> Fors de gaber e d'escharnir.

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[16] 'The nun bowed her head. After reflecting a while' (trans. Weiss 2002: 187).

[17] 'When I was a full-grown novice, some thing – I don't know if it was an apparition – often came to me and kissed me intimately. I heard it speak like a man; I felt it as if it were a man, and many times it spoke with me, without ever making itself known. So long did it continue to approach me and to kiss me that it lay with and I conceived. I knew no other man. I had this boy, I have him still; there was no more to it and I shall say no more' (trans. Weiss 2002: 187).

Bien prenent humaine figure
E ço cunsent bien lur nature.
Mainte meschine unt deceüe
E en tel guise purgeüe;
Issi puet Merlin estre nez
E issi puet estre engendrez.
(Wace, ed. Weiss 2002: 188)[18]

This depiction, while mirroring Geoffrey's own words, seems to minimize any potential harm posited in an encounter with an *incubus*, as they are simply able to deceive and deride («gaber» and «escharnir»)[19]. Yet at the same time, Wace describes their actions using the past participle of *purgisir,* meaning «to lie with, have intercourse with», but also «to rape, to ravish» (*AND*: s.v. '*purgisir'*), an ambiguous term, which, however, seems to imply the *stuprum* suffered by the nun.

Laȝamon's version is clearly modelled on Wace's, but his propensity to dramatize stands out particularly in this scene (Laȝamon, ed. Barron and Weinberg, 1995: 402-405). Merlin's mother is introduced as a nun who was previously a 'wonderfully beautiful' princess («wunder mere», l. 7805), and so King Vortigern greets her politely and with astonishment (ll. 7814-7815). Reflecting Wace's portrayal, the woman does not respond immediately to the king's questions, as the English writer chooses to emphasize her silent and contemplative demeanour (ll. 7829-7831); she then starts to tell her marvellous story («seolcuðe spellen», ll. 7832-7854). The adjective *selcuð* characterizes something as being «marvellous, miraculous, preternatural; unusual, strange, peculiar» (*MED*: s.v. *selcŏuth*). The strange aspect of the events seems to be a key factor in Laȝamon's perspective on this episode, *selcuð* appearing twice more among the words spoken by the woman.

Moreover, the tale related by Merlin's mother differs from that of her counterparts in previous narrations, since Laȝamon chooses to insert a series of details that allow the episode to be better contextualized: he provides the name of her devoted father, the king («mi fader Conaan þe king luuede me þurh alle þing», l. 7833); he tells us the girl's age at the time of the events («Þa ich wes an uore fiftene ȝere», l. 7835); he specifies that the meetings take place in the girl's private apartments («þa wunede ich on bure on wunsele mine», l. 7836), in the presence of the girl's maids («maidene mid me», l. 7837), and during the night while the girl is asleep («þenne ich wæs on bedde iswaued mid soft mine slepen», l. 7838 and, once again, «Þis ich isæh on sweuene alche niht on slepe», l. 7841). Moreover, Laȝamon's depiction of unexpected motherhood is particularly interesting (ll. 7845-7848):

Þa ich an ænde me bisæh   selcuð me þuhte þas;
mi mæte me wes læð   mine limes uncuðe.
Selcuð me þuhte   what hit beon mihte
Þa anȝæt ich on ænde   þat ich was mid childe.

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[18] 'They cannot do great wickedness, they cannot cause much harm except deceive and deride. They easily take human shape and it agrees well with their nature. They have deceived many girls and ravished them in this way. Thus might Merlin be born and thus might he be begotten' (trans. Weiss 2002: 189)

[19] The advisor's condescending tone and the reiterated definition of the creature as an illusion or a thing seem to suggest that Wace is here trying to represent a woman who has been duped by some demonic tricks. As argued by Obermeier (2014: 51) this view aligns with a position on the *incubi*'s matter, as exemplified by the *Canon Episcopi* (early tenth century) and the *Decretum* by Burchard of Worms (early eleventh century): both texts deny the possibility of actual sexual intercourse between these spirits and human women. They suggest that those who believe this to be true have experienced some form of trickery.

> Þa mi time com,   þisne cnaue ich hæfuede.
> (Laȝamon, ed. Barron and Weinberg 1995: 404)[20]

The girl is clearly disturbed by the manifestation of the physical changes brought about by her pregnancy, and Laȝamon expresses this apprehension through rhetorical devices such as the repetition of «selcuð me þuhte», and the imperfect rhyme, «þuhte» and «mihte», between the two half-lines in l. 7847. All of these elements not only provide a context for the scene, locating the events in time and space, but also contribute to constructing the miraculous nature of what has occurred (see Rider 1989: 5).

Additionally, repeating twice that the visits take place during the night while the girl is asleep, Laȝamon identifies the *incubus* without any doubt as a creature belonging to the dream world. Yet the entity is described by the woman in deliberately ambiguous terms (ll. 7839-7844):

> þen com biuoren   þa fæireste þing þat wes iboren,
> swulc hit weore a muchel cniht   al of golde idiht.
> Þis þing glad me biuoren   and glitenede on golde;
> ofte hit me custe,   ofte hit me clupte
> ofte hit me tobæh   and eode me swiðe neh.
> (Laȝamon, ed. Barron and Weinberg 1995: 404)[21]

The paternal agent is represented as something indefinite: the text always refers to this entity with the neuter personal pronoun (*hit*), and more than once it is referred to as a «þing» (ll. 7839, 7842), a direct translation for the French «une chose». Conversely, though, it is described as luminous and appealing, and while both its golden hue and its beauty could be explained by its preternatural origin, it can be said that the nun, chaste though she is in her dress and manner, provides an almost tantalizing description of her experience. Laȝamon works skilfully on depicting the episode: the incubus's nocturnal visits are recounted through an expert combination of alliteration («iswæued»/«slepen», «isæh»/«sweuene»/«slepe», «glad»/«glitenede»/«golde» and «custe»/«clupte») and rhymes («biuoren»/«iboren», «cniht»/«idiht», «to-bæh»/«neh»), which give the scene a studied intensity (see Glowka 1994: 60-61). The poet appears interested in depicting the scene as an amorous encounter. As Saunders pointedly suggests: «the incubus seems the embodiment of a romantic dream rather than a demonic nightmare» (Saunders 2010: 225).

In the scene that follows, the astrologer Magan identifies the *Incubi Daemones* as spirits, but suggests that they should not be considered dangerous, because they limit themselves to deceiving sleeping women (ll. 7877-7881):

> Heo beoð ihaten fuliwis   incubii demones.
> Ne doð heo noht muchel scaðe,   bute hokerieð þan folke,
> monine mon on sweuene   ofte heo swencheð;
> and monienne hende wimmon   þurh heore cræfte kenneð anan;

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[20] 'These things puzzled me when I eventually came to myself; my food was unpalatable to me, my body felt strange. What this might mean puzzled me. Then finally I realized that I was with child. When my time came, I gave birth to this boy' (trans. Barron and Weinberg 1995: 405).

[21] 'There appeared to me in my deep slumber the fairest creature ever born, in the guise of a tall warrior all arrayed in gold. Each night, as I slept, I saw this in a dream, this creature glittering in gold, gliding towards me; it kissed me repeatedly, it embraced me often, often bent down towards me and pressed very close upon me' (trans. Barron and Weinberg 1995: 405).

and monies godes monnes child   heo bicharreð þurh wigeling.
(Laȝamon, ed. Barron and Weinberg 1995: 406)[22]

The words *cræfte*[23] and *wigeling*[24] might etymologically allude to a perception of magical abilities as the skill to deceive, but Laȝamon, like Wace, characterizes the event as the amused game of a supernatural being that cannot completely be identified. As Merlin's mother herself specifies, she found it impossible to know what it was: 'neither if it were an unclean spirit, nor if it had been created by the work of God' («no whaðer hit weore unwiht, þe on Godes halue idiht», l. 7852).

Clearly, both the later narrators found the tale of Merlin's conception equally fascinating and unsettling. Wace and Laȝamon rewrite the scene to emphasize the woman's virtue. In both descriptions, the veiled sexual assault is categorized as harmless. Laȝamon's depiction, in particular, makes one think of a pair of lovers; the woman remembers the creature as tantalizing, but at the same time, her repeated references to her state of sleep affirm her innocence and sidestep the question concerning her will. The potential for shame is here replaced by elements of high romance appropriate to the birth of the prophet Merlin (see Saunders 2001: 221). The woman's will is rendered irrelevant in the context of the wider scheme. Mysterious, or miraculous, entities are at work in order for Merlin to exist – Merlin, who is the crucial magical agent in the birth of Arthur, and thus instrumental in the institution of the Arthurian kingdom.

2. Arthur: Bedtricks and Silence

The events leading to the birth of Arthur are fully established by Geoffrey's narrative. The Oxford *magister* presents Merlin's intervention as entirely necessary, and makes use of the bedtrick trope[25], a form of non-violent coercion that ends up raising questions about gender and power dynamics in Uther and Igraine's relationship.

During a feast, King Uther sees the beautiful Igraine and immediately falls in love with her, even though she is the wife of one of his thanes, Gorlois, Duke of Cornwall (*HRB*, VIII, 137):

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[22] 'They are called, to be precise, incubi demones. They do not do much harm, but they deceive people, deluding many while asleep; and many an honest woman quickly becomes pregnant through their wiles; and through sorcery many a good man's son is sired deceitfully' (trans. Barron and Weinberg 1995: 407).

[23] During the Old English period, *cræft* covered a broad array of meanings, including 'art, skill' or 'craft'. As noted by the editors of *Dictionary of Old English* (*DOE*), «the most frequent Latin equivalent of *cræft* is ars, yet neither "craft" nor "art" adequately conveys the wide range of meanings of *cræft*. "Skill" may be the single most useful translation for *cræft*, but the senses of the word reach out to "strength", "resources", "virtue" and other meanings». (*DOE*: s.v. *cræft*). A similar semantic richness can still be traced in the Middle English period. See *MED*: s.v. *craft*.

[24] ME *wigeling* or *wiȝelunge,* 'sorcery, witchcraft', stems from OE *wiglung*, 'divination, soothsaying, sorcery, augury'; its cognate *wiȝel* is defined as «a stratagem or trick devised through demonic or supernatural means; also, an act of sorcery». See *MED*: s.v. *wiȝelunge* and *wiȝele*; and see also *ASD*: s.v. *wíglung*.

[25] A common motif in mythological conceptions, the definition of the 'bedtrick trope' was first discussed in scholarly debates about Shakespeare. The trope involves individuals being deceived into engaging in sexual encounters with someone who is pretending to be another person. Doniger (2000:1) describes it as follows: «You go to bed with someone you think you know, and when you wake up you discover that it was someone else – another man or another woman, or a man instead of a woman, or a woman instead of a man, or a god, or a snake, or a foreigner or alien, or a complete stranger, or your own wife or husband, or your mother or father. […] Sex with a partner who pretends to be someone else».

> Aderat inter ceteros Gorlois dux Cornubiae cum Igerna coniuge sua, cuius pulcritudo mulieres tocius Britanniae superabat. Cumque inter alias inspexisset eam rex, subito incaluit amore illius ita ut postpositis ceteris totam intentionem suam circa eam uerteret. Haec sola erat cui fercula incessanter dirigebat, cui aurea pocula familiaribus internuntiis mittebat. Arridebat ei multociens et iocosa uerba interserebat. (Geoffrey of Monmouth, ed. Reeve and Wright 2007: 185)[26]

Offended by the public designs of the king, Gorlois storms out of the court without permission, arousing the ire of Uther, who declares war on his errant vassal. The duke establishes himself in Dimilioc castle and places Igraine in his stronghold of Tintagel, a safe location on the coast. The king lays siege to both forts and manages to isolate Gorlois, but is unable to reach the woman. Consumed by his love, he seeks advice from Ulfin and ultimately from Merlin, who, moved by the king's passion[27], willingly offers his *medicamina* or magic herbs to alter the king's appearance so that he can look and act just like Gorlois (*HRB*, VIII, 137).

> Vt uoto tuo potiaris, utendum est tibi nouis artibus et tempore tuo inauditis. Scio medicaminibus meis dare tibi figuram Gorlois ita ut per omnia ipse uidearis. Si itaque parueris, faciam te prorsus similare eum, Vlfin uero Iordanum de Tintagol, familiarem suum. Alia autem specie sumpta, adero tercius, poterisque tuto adire oppidum ad Igernam atque aditum habere. (Geoffrey of Monmouth, ed. Reeve and Wright 2007: 187)[28]

As is often the case in Geoffrey's fluid prose, the bedtrick scene is dealt with in a couple of straightforward sentences: «Commansit itaque rex ea nocte cum Igerna et sese desiderata uenere refecit»[29]. While Merlin's offered solution is a crucial point of development, because his deception cures the king from his consuming urge, Geoffrey is not afraid to reveal Uther's similar duplicity (*HRB*, VIII, 137):

> Deceperat namque illam falsa specie quam assumpserat, deceperat etiam ficticiis sermonibus quos ornate componebat; dicebat enim se egressum esse furtim ab obsesso oppido ut sibi tam dilectae rei atque oppido suo disponeret. Vnde ipsa credula nichil quod poscebatur abnegauit. Concepit quoque eadem nocte celeberrimum uirum illum Arturum, qui postmodum ut celebris foret mira probitate promeruit. (Geoffrey of Monmouth, ed. Reeve and Wright 2007: 187)[30]

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[26] 'Among them was the duke of Cornwall, Gorlois, with his wife Igerna, the most beautiful woman in Britain. As soon as the king saw her among the rest, he suddenly burned with love for her and had eyes only for her, neglecting the others. To her alone he constantly presented dishes, to her alone he directed goblets of gold with friendly messages. He kept on smiling and joking with her' (trans. Reeve and Writght 2007: 184).

[27] See *HBR*, VIII, 137: «Qui comperta anxietate quam rex patiebatur pro ea commotus est super tanto amore ipsius». 'When he saw how troubled the king was on her account, Merlin was moved by Uther's great passion' (Geoffrey of Monmouth, ed. and trans. Reeve and Wright 2007: 186-187).

[28] 'For your wish to be granted, you must resort to strange arts, unheard of in your time. With my herbs I can give you the exact appearance of Gorlois. If you agree, I will make you his double, and Ulfin that of his retainer Jordanus of Tintagel. I shall accompany you in another disguise, and you will be able to get into the castle safely and gain access to Igerna' (trans. Reeve and Wright 2007: 186).

[29] 'The king spent the night with Igerna and cured himself through the love-making he had longed for' (trans. Reeve and Wright 2007: 186).

[30] 'Igerna was deceived by his false appearance and also by the lies he wove so well; for he said that he had stolen out of his castle to look after the thing he most loved and his refuge. So she trustingly denied nothing

Geoffrey structures the episode around the conflict between the king and his vassal, focusing solely on male perspectives. Uther's insatiable desire, which will result in death if left unfulfilled, is a central theme. Conversely, the reader is not provided with any insight into Igraine's reaction. As noted by Rosemary Morris (1985: 73), «in this reversion to bellicosity, Igerne's own feelings are entirely ignored». She is described simply as beautiful and «credula» ('trusting' or 'gullible'), so much so that she is easily convinced that she is spending the night with her husband. Gorlois then dies on the battlefield and Uther is able to immediately marry the woman, moving Geoffrey's narrative swiftly towards the birth of Arthur (*HRB*, VIII, 138):

> Reuersus itaque ad oppidum Tintagol, cepit illud cepitque Igernam et uoto suo potitus est. Commanserunt deinde pariter non minimo amore ligati progenueruntque filium et filiam. Fuit autem nomen filii Arturus, filiae uero Anna. (Geoffrey of Monmouth, ed. Reeve and Wright 2007: 189)[31]

The reference to their passion not being little («non minimo amore») suggests that theirs was a union with a degree of success, at least from a conventional point of view. This implied success, though, conflicts with what the character might have actually experienced. Any emotional consequence suffered by the woman is entirely discounted, further depriving her of any sense of agency or personhood.

When describing real-life bedtrick victims, Wendy Doniger (2000: 78) notes that they often react with «disbelief, fury, sadness, embarrassment, loss of self-esteem, and sometimes madness», but most texts using the trope leave out any mention of these feelings[32]. In line with this, Geoffrey does not include Igraine's reaction to Uther's actions, but chooses to obscure her presence and her perspective. Although she is a central figure because she is essential to Arthur's existence, she is relegated to the role of a silent mother. As Adler (2020: 57) sharply puts it, Igraine is reduced to simply being «a vessel for the creation of Arthur»[33].

Wace rewrites this episode taking particular care to describe the 'courtesy' in the king's attitude, in an attempt to mitigate the deceitfulness of Uther's actions (ll. 8565-8596). As one of the earliest writers to be influenced by the ideas of courtly love[34], Wace adds that Uther already loves and desires Igraine long before he even sees her (ll. 8580-

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that he asked. That very night she conceived the renowned Arthur, whose prowess afterwards secured his fame' (trans. Reeve and Wright 2007: 186).

[31] 'So he returned to the castle of Tintagel, took it and Igerna and fulfilled his desire. They remained together thereafter, united by no little passion, and had a son and daughter. Their son was called Arthur, their daughter Anna' (trans. Reeve and Wright 2007: 188).

[32] Doniger (2000: 78) argues that such an omission here may be because these emotions are assumed to be obvious.

[33] On this, see also Monnier's (2013: 142) discussion on Arthurian women.

[34] As is well known, the term *amour courtois* was popularized by Gaston Paris (1883) to describe a codified set of social rules for both ladies and their lovers during the Late Middle Ages. Although the anachronistic approach on the theme is a matter of ongoing debate, with recent criticism (Bryson and Movsesian 2017) and alternative conceptualisations emerging, Trachsler (2019) proposes that courtly love should be conceptualised as a set of discourses already existing in the Middle Ages, revolving around the object of love, and, while these discourses are predominantly expressed through lyric poetry and the romance genres, there were also normative texts, such as André le Chapelain's *De Amore*, *a posteriori* defining a set of rules drawn from established literary traditions. Courtly love served as a central theme in medieval literature, originating with troubadour poetry in southern France around the late eleventh century. Wace was writing in northern France in the middle of the twelfth century, at the same time that these ideas were spreading throughout the northern region as well. See also Moller (1960: 39-52) and Aurell (2019).

8581)[35]. Similarly, the king here is transformed from the unrefined military leader portrayed by Geoffrey into a chivalric hero, while jealous and quick-tempered Gorlois is portrayed as being considerably less polite (ll. 8600-8606). In presenting Uther as a more likeable hero, Wace focuses on his love-sickness, while the blame for any machinations leading to the tricking of Igraine seems to be placed on Merlin.

Moreover, Wace's Igraine herself shows a number of courtly traits (ll. 8574-8576):

> Nen ot plus bele en tut le regne
> Curteise esteit e bele e sage
> E mult esteit de grant parage.
> (Wace, ed. Weiss 2002: 216)[36]

She also acquires a reputation for *sagesse*, which she confirms when addressed by Uther's attentions (ll. 8595-8596): «Ygerne issi se conteneit / Qu'el n'otriout ne desdiseit» (Wace, ed. Weiss 2002: 216)[37]. Not showing a preference for one course or the other might be perceived as the only appropriate demeanour for a virtuous lady being pressed by royal attention. Nonetheless, the choice of words here creates ambiguity, because the 'ne … ne' construction suggests that Igraine might actually reciprocate Uther's interests, thus perhaps reducing the pressure to condemn the king's behaviour (see Morris 1985: 77; Adler 2020: 62).

Nevertheless, her consent is never made explicit; it actually appears, once again, to be treated as irrelevant by Uther and the male figures surrounding her. As a matter of fact, in Wace's narration, after the king satisfies his sexual desire, she is almost immediately forgotten. Wace's conclusion of the episode reflects a disinclination to dwell on either the seduction or the sexual act (ll. 8733-8736).

> Li reis od Ygerne se jut
> E Ygerne la nuit cunçut
> Le bon rei, le fort, le seür,
> Que vus oëz numer Artur.
> (Wace, ed. Weiss 2002: 218)[38]

The French clerk shifts the focus away from the act itself to the conception of Arthur. Igraine is mentioned, once more, with an emphasis on her role as mother. Whatever her feelings may be, they are completely unimportant in the narrative of male success. Thus, the final coda to the episode dispels any impression of Uther's misconduct by emphasising his love for Igraine and their equal marriage, and by avoiding any mention of the woman's consent (ll. 8814-8819).

> Li reis ot mult Ygerne amee,
> Senz ensuine l'ad espusee.
> La nuit ot un fiz cunceü

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[35] Notably, Morris (1985: 77) writes: «He has already fallen in love with Igerne by reputation […]. The violently impulsive warrior has become a lover for whom words and thoughts are as important as physical feelings, and who has already made trial of patience».

[36] 'There was no fairer in all the land: she was courteous, beautiful and wise, and of very high rank' (Weiss 2002: 217).

[37] 'Ygerne behaved in such a way as neither to consent nor refuse' (Weiss 2002: 217).

[38] 'The king lay with Ygerne, and that night Ygerne conceived that king – the good, strong and resolute – whose name you will know as Arthur' (Weiss 2002: 219).

> E al terme ad un fiz eü,
> Artur ot nun; de sa bunté
> Ad grant parole puis esté.
> (Wace, ed. Weiss 2002: 220)[39]

Taking a similar stance, Laȝamon also maintains the moral ambivalence of this episode (Laȝamon, ed. Barron-Weinberg, 1995: 476-495). Uther is portrayed as a rough warrior, consistent with Laȝamon's general treatment. In contrast to this, however, Igraine's kindness, loyalty, and wisdom are emphasized, in line with Wace's depiction. She is the fairest of all women («wifene aðelest», l. 9288), and referred to as *hende*, 'fair, noble, gracious'[40], more than once (ll. 9249, 9250, 9287, etc.). She is also described as being sympathetic to the loss of life in the war, as in ll. 9290-9291: «Ygerne wes særi and sorhful an heorte / þat swa moni mon for hire sculden habben þer lure»[41]. Laȝamon, however, presents her reactions to Uther more ambiguously than does Wace's account (ll. 9251-9256).

> Ofte he hire lokede on   and leitede mid eȝene,
> Ofte he his birles sende   fron to hire borde,
> Ofte he hire loh to   and makede hire letes;
> And heo hine leofliche biheold — ah inæt whær he hine luuede!
> Næs þe king noht swa wis   ne swa ȝære-witele
> Þat imong his duȝeþe   his þoht cuðe dernen.
> (Laȝamon, ed. Barron-Weinberg 1995: 476)[42]

She is described as looking 'kindly' (*leofliche,* l. 9254) on the king. Here Laȝamon could be implying or insinuating something about Igraine's feelings: the semantic range of ME *leofliche* is vast and could also mean 'lovingly'[43]. In light of the numerous implications associated with this adverb, it seems telling that Laȝamon specifies his own ignorance about the woman's true feelings in the subsequent parenthetical verse («ah inæt whær he hire luuede!»). A similar ambiguous stance can be read in Laȝamon's depiction of the bedtrick scene (ll. 9502-9515):

> Ygærne beh to bure   and lætte bed him makien;
> wes þat kinewurðe bed   al mid palle ouerbræd.

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[39] 'The king, deeply in love with Ygerne, married her without delay. She had conceived a son that night and in due course bore him. His name was Arthur: his greatness has been celebrated ever since' (Weiss 2002: 221).

[40] *Hende* could be used to denote someone 'having the approved courtly or knightly qualities, noble, courtly, well-bred, refined, sportsmanlike; […] as noun: a noble person' (*MED*: s.v. *hende*). Along similar lines, Weinberg (2002: 119-131) argues that Laȝamon uses the term as an English equivalent for Wace's *corteis*.

[41] 'Ygerne was sorrowful and sad at heart that so many men for her sake should lose their lives there' (trans. Barron and Weinberg 1995: 479). In accordance with Linton (2013: 17), I read here Laȝamon depicting Igraine as a woman who prioritizes the well-being of others over her own circumstances. However, this passage may be interpreted also in a way that casts Igraine in a negative light, attributing to her the responsibility for the war (see Tolhurst 2012: 85-86).

[42] 'He looked at her often, flashing glances from his eyes, often sent his cup-bearers to her table, smiled at her and eyed her often; and she looked kindly upon him – but whether she loved him I do not know! The king was not so prudent nor so quick-witted that he could conceal his feelings from his followers' (trans. Barron and Weinberg 1995: 477).

[43] *MED* (s.v. *lēflī*) defines the adverb as 'lovingly, affectionately, amiably; with kindly attention or favourable will; willingly, gladly, eagerly; beautifully, fairly'. Adler (2020: 66) comments on this, arguing that this choice of word might be used to imply that Igraine accepts and appreciates Uther's attentions.

> Þe king hit wel bihedde   and eode to his bedde;
> and Ygærne læi adun   bi Uðere Pendragun.
> Nu wende Ygerne fuliwis   þat hit weoren Gorlois;
> þurh neuere nænes cunnes þing   no icneou heo Vðer þene king.
> Þe king hire wende to   swa wapmon sculde to wimmon do,
> and hæfde him to done   wið leofuest wimmonne,
> and he streonede hire on   ænne selcuðne mon,
> kingen alre kenest   þæ æuere com to monnen;
> and he wes on ærde   Ærður ihaten.
> Nuste noht Ygerne   wha læie on hire ærme,
> for æuere heo wende fuliwis   þat it weoren þe eorl Gorlois.
> (Laʒamon, ed. Barron-Weinberg 1995: 488-490)[44]

When Laʒamon describes the bed as «kinewurþ», literally 'worthy of a king, fit for a king', he seems to suggest the idea that this Igraine might be aware of the true identity of her bed-mate, even though the poet twice comments explicitly (ll. 9506-9507; ll. 9514-9515) on the woman's belief that the man is actually her husband. This is a conviction, Laʒamon tells us, which she also maintains even after Uther has sent her tokens concerning what they had said to one another in bed (ll. 9598-9599).

> He sende to þan castle   his selest þeines.
> and grætte Ygærne,   wifuene aðelest,
> and sende hire taken   whæt heo i bedde speken,
> hehte heo þat heo aʒeuen   þene castel biliue —
> þer nes nan oðer ræd, for hire lauerd wes dæd.
> Ʒet wende Ygærne   þat hit soð weoren
> þat þe dæde eorl   isoht hafede his duʒeðe,
> and al heo ilæfde   þat hit læs weore
> þat þe king Vðer   æuere weoren icumen her.
> Cnihtes eoden to ræde, cnihtes eoden to rune,
> radden þat heo nalden   þene castel lengere halden.
> (Laʒamon, ed. Barron-Weinberg 1995: 492-494)[45]

However, the text does not mention the potential consequences of this situation. Igraine loses her voice again[46]. The defending knights decide to surrender the fortress upon

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[44] 'Ygerne went to the bedroom and had his bed made; the bed, fit for a king, was all spread with rich coverings. The king looked at it with pleasure and went to his bed; and Ygerne lay down beside Uther Pendragon. Now Ygerne truly believed that it was Gorlois; in no way whatsoever did she recognize Uther the king. The king went unto her as a man should to a woman, and had his way with the woman most dear to him, and he begot on her a marvellous man, the boldest king who ever was born; and in this world he was called Arthur. Ygerne knew not who lay in her arms for all the time she fully believed that it was the earl Gorlois' (trans. Barron and Weinberg 1995: 489-491).

[45] 'He sent his best thanes to the castle to greet Ygerne, the noblest of women, and sent her as a sign something she had said in bed, commanding her to yield up the castle instantly – there was no other recourse, for her lord was dead. Ygerne still believed the truth was that the dead earl had gone to join his troops, and she firmly believed it was not true that King Uther had ever come to her. Knights took counsel, knights held debate, decided that they would not defend the fortress any longer' (trans. Barron and Weinberg 1995: 493-495).

[46] In his analysis of the public and political aspects of Arthur's emotions as a king in Arthurian narratives, Andrew Lynch (2015: 51-56) demonstrates how emotions in Galfridian chronicles are political before being private. In a similar vein, Phoebe Linton (2013) proposes a reading of Igraine's character in Geoffrey and Laʒamon, whereby her public and private personas are considered in a dichotomic perspective in relation

realizing the impossibility of resisting Uther's assault. Anaphora abounds in Laȝamon's poetic style. It is worth noting, however, that the reiterated use of «cnihtes» (l. 9605) emphasizes the active role of the knights, while at the same time highlighting Igraine's lack of agency. Igraine is shown here to have no say in the future of the castle in which she resides, nor in her own future.

Just like his predecessors, Laȝamon focuses on the immediate marriage of the couple, and Arthur's birth. In general, it seems that the English poet is even more invested than Wace and Geoffrey in presenting Arthur's birth as part of a bigger design. When Ulfin intercedes for Merlin's assistance in Uther's predicament, the mage agrees to take the situation into his own hands and launches on a long revelation of the bright future destined to the fruit of Uther and Igraine's union (ll. 9403-9418). Moreover, Merlin takes upon himself all the responsibility, highlighting how these marvellous things would not happen if not for his special intervention (ll. 9400-9402):

> Ah longe is æuere,   þat ne cumeð nauere
> þat he heo biwinne   bute þurh mine ginne
> for nis na wimmon treowere   in þissere worlde-riche.
> (Laȝamon, ed. Barron-Weinberg 1995: 484)[47]

Merlin's interference is here called a *ginne,* a noun that can be defined as an «inventive talent, ingenuity, cleverness, skill; also, skill in magic or occult science», but which is also «a means of effecting a purpose, an expedient, scheme» (*MED*: s.v. *ǧinne*). It derives from Old French *engin/gin*, meaning «native wit, intelligence; ingenuity, skill; magic power; cunning, contriving; ruse, trick; fraud, deceit; craft, art; craftsmanship» (*AND*: s.v. *engin*)[48]. The purpose effected by Merlin's *ginne* here is Arthur's birth, and this form of scheming seems to be viewed by Laȝamon as crucial to the Providential design. Later on, Merlin's involvement is also defined as a *lechecraft* (ll. 9447-9452):

> Ah al þin iwille   wel scal iwurðen;
> for ich con swulcne lechecraft   þe leof þe scal iwurðen,
> þat al scullen þine cheres   iwurðen swulc þas eorles,
> þi speche, þi dede   imong þere duȝeðe,
> þine hors and þine iwede,   and al swa þu scalt ride.
> Þenne Ygærne þe scal iseon,   a mode hire scal wel beon.
> (Laȝamon, ed. Barron-Weinberg 1995: 486)[49]

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to the representation of her feelings. Geoffrey is concerned solely with her public persona; he is not interested in addressing the issue of her internal feelings, because it does not matter for her public role. While Igraine's silence is arguably necessary for her to assume her role as queen, it also creates ambiguity in later rewritings. Wace, as seen, posits an ambivalent stance, Laȝamon delves more deeply into Igraine's cognitive and emotional state, offering a more intricate representation of her inner turmoil. While this shift may reflect a growing emphasis on the complexities of human emotion and a transformation in views on human nature between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries (see Boquet and Nagy 2018: 131), nevertheless, Igraine's public role, the dynastic predominance of the chronicle narratives, necessitates for her to remain mostly silent and be eclipsed from the narrative once her son is born.

[47] 'But it will never happen, as long as time shall last, that he shall win her save by my magic skill; for there is no truer woman in this mortal world' (trans. Barron and Weinberg 1995: 485).

[48] This derives ultimately from Latin *ingĕnĭum*, which shares the same root as *gigno,* meaning 'I give birth' or 'I bring forth'. Originally, this term encompassed notions of 'natural disposition, character, inclination', while also extending to denote 'natural capacity, ability, talents' (*OLD*: s.v. *ingĕnĭum*).

[49] 'But your every wish will soon be fulfilled; for I know some magic arts such that will be very welcome to you; so that your whole appearance will become similar to the noble lord, your talk, your way of acting

A *lechecraft* is a magical interference originating from the natural world; in Old English it was referred to as «the art of medicine or surgery» (*ASD*: s.v. *lǣce-crǣft*), while during the Middle English period, it could also be associated with magic (see *MED*: s.v. *lẹche-craft*). Therefore, it can be described as a magical art with a medical or therapeutic function. The use of both *ginne* and *lechecraft* in Laʒamon's diction is an indication of a positive attitude towards Merlin's actions. Despite its potential ambiguity, Laʒamon regards Merlin's magic as both clever and useful (see Saunders 2010: 227-228). Indeed, Merlin's abilities are considered so beneficial that this magical intervention is followed by another supernatural occurrence marking Arthur's birth: the presence of the so-called *aluen*[50]. In Laʒamon's depiction, these enigmatic creatures assist Arthur's life and evolution as a king[51]. In this particular instance, they work as the fairy godmothers of folkloric tradition, bearing a series of gifts for the new-born child. It is interesting to note here how the nine lines used to describe their intervention can be read as a way of distancing both his father and his mother, portrayed as mere instruments for Arthur's birth. A sign of the benevolence of God, these new presences are used by Laʒamon to eclipse the role of the parents; as noted by Morris: «The innocence of the former and the guilt of the latter are both irrelevant in the light of the greater purpose» (Morris 1985: 80). As in the case with Merlin's birth, it appears that Laʒamon, just like Geoffrey and Wace, omitted Igraine's voice in order to enhance his celebration of the establishment of the Arthurian realm.

In conclusion, both births are portrayed as being crucial to a nation-building narrative for the country of Britain. Despite the three authors presenting distinct perspectives, it becomes apparent that the overarching emphasis on the historical and political significance of both births overshadows, in the narrative, the individual traumas experienced by the women involved. Yet the heightened supernatural and courtly elements added in subsequent rewritings suggest a discomfort with the moral complexities of the events. Wace and Laʒamon employ these elements to veil the suffering endured by Igraine and Merlin's mother, aiming to render their pain unrecognizable beneath the veneer of *courtoisie* and marvellous details. While the narratives may downplay trauma, the subtle yet enduring impact that it has remains palpable.

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among your thanes, your horse, your clothes, and you will ride just like him. When Ygerne will see you, she will be happy in her soul' (trans. Barron and Weinberg 1995: 486).

[50] See ll. 9608-9616: «Þe time com þe wes icoren; þa wes Arður iboren. / Sone swa he com an eorðe, aluen hine iuengen; / heo bigolen þat child mid galdere swiðe stronge: / heo ʒeuen him mihte to beon bezst alre cnihten; / heo ʒeuen him anoðer þing, þat he scolde beon riche king; / heo ʒiuen him þat þridde, þat he scolde longe libben; / heo ʒifen him, þat kinebern, custen swiðe gode / þat he wes mete-custi of alle quike monnen; / þis þe alue him ʒef, and al swa þat child iþæh». 'The time predestined came; then Arthur was born. As soon as he came upon earth, fairies took charge of him; they enchanted the child with magic most potent: they gave him strength to be the best of all knights; they gave him another gift, that he should be a mighty king; they gave him a third gift, that he should live long; they gave him, that royal child, such good qualities that he was the most liberal of all living men; these gifts the fairies gave Arthur, and the child thrived accordingly' (Laʒamon, ed. and trans. Barron and Weinberg 1995: 494-495).

[51] On the different roles assumed by elves in Laʒamon's *Brut*, see Dalbey (2016) and Church (2018). On the presence of magical elements in Laʒamon's depiction of Arthur, see Bria (2022).

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