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Franco-Italian Cultural Translation in the *Prophesies de Merlin* and the *Storia di Merlino*

Laura Chuhan Campbell
(University of Durham)

Università degli Studi di Padova

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35137 PADOVA

info@francigena-unipd.com

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Franco-Italian Cultural Translation in the *Prophesies de Merlin* and the *Storia di Merlino*

Laura Chuhan Campbell
l.j.campbell@dur.ac.uk

(University of Durham)

Abstract:
This article argues that northern Italian adaptations of the Merlin story mediate the French text culturally by exploiting alternative social dimensions within the narrative. While the Franco-Venetian *Prophecies de Merlin* juxtaposes the cultural discourses of Arthurian literature with ascetic and communal values, the Florentine *Storia di Merlino* goes further in deconstructing the social assumptions of Arthurian narrative.

L'articolo sostiene che gli adattamenti nord italiani della storia di Merlino mediano culturalmente il testo francese sfruttando dimensioni sociali alternative all'interno della narrazione. Se le *Prophecies de Merlin* franco-veneziane giustappongono i discorsi culturali della letteratura arturiana ai valori ascetici e comunitari, la *Storia di Merlino* fiorentina va oltre nella decostruzione dei presupposti sociali della narrazione arturiana.

Keywords:
Merlin – Franco-Italian – prophecy – translation – Venice – Florence
Merlino – franco-italiano – profezia – traduzione – Venezia – Firenze

The cultural translation of Merlin in Italy was primarily influenced by the fact that the character played a part in two diverse textual strands within Italian culture. On the one hand, the "literary » Merlin was derived from the same French prose romances that had brought Tristan, Arthur, and Lancelot into Italian culture, and which were widely read, transcribed, and rewritten in French before appearing in Italian vernacular versions from the mid thirteenth century onwards. In the Old French Vulgate Cycle and related texts, Merlin is the redeemed son of a devil, born with a diabolical knowledge of all things in the past and present, as well as a God-given ability to predict the future. He helps to establish Arthur as the king of Britain, acting as a royal advisor until he is finally killed or permanently detained by his lover, the Lady of the Lake. On the other hand, Merlin had also reached Italy through the Latin tradition of the *Prophetiae Merlini*, in which he appeared not as a fictional character, but as a pseudo-historical prophet. Originating in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (1136-1138), Merlin the prophet was adopted in Italy as part of a textual tradition of political prophecies that appeared in chronicles and prophetic compilations. It was not until the composition of the Franco-Italian prose romance, *Les Prophesies de Merlin* (ca 1279), that these two strands were combined together, bringing Merlin's

political prophecies into the setting of an Arthurian prose romance. The combination proved popular, and subsequent Italian vernacular translations repeated the same model of embedding prophecies about both real and fictional events into a narrative framework[1].

This unusual trajectory somewhat separates the Merlin romances from other Italian interpretations of the French Arthurian cycles, which tend to adopt the format and style of their sources. Nevertheless, it has been broadly acknowledged that Italian Arthurian romances, such as the *Tristano Riccardiano* (1280-1300), the *Tavola Ritonda*, and the *Tristano Panciatichiano* (both early fourteenth century) make cultural adaptations that reflect their reception by a readership that is «urban, mercantile, and communal»[2]. As Daniela Delcorno Branca argues, Italian versions of Tristan – a favourite among Italian readers – represent a form of knightly perfection that «corresponds naturally to a civic version of chivalry, placed at the service of the community, an interpretation of the Arthurian world that was typical of Italian communal society»[3]. While the Venetian and Florentine versions of the Merlin romances very much reflect this civic mentality, I will argue that they go much further in deconstructing the 'cultural discourses' that underlie French Arthurian romances. This stems, primarily, from the political positions introduced through Merlin's prophecies in the *Prophesies de Merlin*, which condemn greed, abuses of power, and injustice. While the *Prophesies de Merlin* combines conventional Arthurian themes and figures with the more ascetic political and moral attitudes of Merlin's prophecies (which Nathalie Koble characterises, respectively, as the «coté d'Arthur» and the «côté de Merlin»[4]), an early fourteenth century Tuscan version, the *Storia di Merlino*, blends the cultural discourses of the *Prophesies* with those of the French Arthurian prose romances. As a result, the Tuscan cultural translation of the Merlin story produces a greater shift in cultural register away from the imagined courtly setting of the Arthurian world, and the ethos and values that come with it.

1. The Prophesies de Merlin*: a Kaleidoscope of Cultural Discourses*

The *Prophesies de Merlin* is a Franco-Venetian retelling of the story of Merlin that was composed around 1279 by an author who wrote under the pseudonym «Maître Richart d'Irlande»[5]. This prose romance brings together stories and char-

[1] For example, Parma, BP, MS Pal. 39; Vatican City, BAV, MS Pal. lat. 949; *La Historia di Merlino.*
[2] *Tristano Riccardiano*: x. Cf. also Heijkant 2014: 49; Scolari 1990: 3.
[3] Delcorno Branca 2014: 77.
[4] Koble 2009: 47-51.
[5] Paton 1927, vol 2: 3; Cf. Delcorno Branca 1993: 8 and Delcorno Branca 2001: 78.

acters from the French Arthurian cycles that were so widely read and circulated on the Peninsula[6]. It adopts the context, narrative details, and linguistic medium of texts such as the Vulgate Cycle, the Prose *Tristan*, *Guiron le courtois*, and the *Suite du Merlin*, but combines them with a large number of original prophecies by Merlin. Unlike Merlin's prophecies in these French prose cycles, which only refer interdiegetically to events that will happen later in the same narrative, Merlin's prophecies in the *Prophesies de Merlin* predict both fictional events from Arthurian narratives and real-life events from recent history, in the style of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Prophetiae Merlini*. While the Arthurian prophecies serve to anchor the narrative of the *Prophesies* in the timeline and narrative universe of its sources, Merlin's political prophecies draw on chronicles of the recent history of northern Italy and related territories: he predicts the conflict between the Guelphs and the Ghibellines, Venetian affairs, the conquest of the Holy Land, and the coming of the Anti-Christ, referred to as the «Dragon de Babyloine»[7]. The narrative revolves around the composition of Merlin's books of prophecies, which he dictates to a number of scribes both before – and even after – his death. These prophecies are then interlaced with both conventional Arthurian adventures and short episodes depicting Merlin confronting instances of greed and corruption, especially within the church. The form of these brief narratives both resembles moralising sermon stories and pre-empts the episodic form of collections like the *Novellino*; indeed, four of these stories would be later incorporated into the *Novellino* itself[8]. The result is a generic hybrid between a romance, moral *exempla*, and a prophetic compilation, which inscribes the Arthurian universe and medieval Venice into the same narrative timeline.

The integration of this fictional book of prophecies about real events into an Arthurian narrative produces an effect that Nathalie Koble has described as «polyphonie romanesque»:

> La forme fragmentaire […] peut être conçue comme une représentation esthétique de la complexité du monde et des multiples points de vue qui le parcourent : le prosateur ne s'en tient pas à un armature idéologique dominante, qui orienterait la lecture du texte dans une perspective univoque, où la matière arthurienne ne serait que prétexte[9].

[6] Cf. Koble 2009: 22. For the circulation of Arthurian romance in Italy, cf. Busby 2002: 604-35; Busby 2014: 12; Cigni 1993: 419; Cigni 2010; Cornish 2011: 70-100; Delcorno Branca 2010; Wells 2018: 474-475, 486. For a list of the extant manuscripts of the *Estoire* and the *Prophecies* which are thought or known to have been produced in Italy, cf. Delcorno Branca 2001: 82-85.
[7] Cf. Paton 1927, vol 2. On the political import of Merlin's prophecies, see Hoffman 1994 and Lahdensuu 2004.
[8] Novella II (*Prophesies*: 47-48), XXVI (*Prophesies*: 276), 70 (*Prophesies*: 272-275); 74 (*Prophesies*: 49); *Il Novellino*, 5-9, 51-53, 214-215, 250-252, 254-255, 330-331. Cf. Besthorn 1935: 62-64, 88-89, 93-94; Campbell 2017: 6. For the adaptation of Arthurian material in the *Novellino*, cf. Delcorno Branca 2001: 117-142. On the move towards a more episodic structure in Italian Arthurian romances, cf. Morosini 2003.
[9] Koble 2009: 215.

Merlin's omniscience, she argues, allows him to adopt any kind of discourse; his knowledge exceeds the limits of the Arthurian universe, extending out to real world politics, science, religion, historiography, and the apocalypse[10]. This prophetic eclecticism is reflected in the multiple generic perspectives that are brought together in this combination of romance, prophecy, chronicle, and *exempla*. Consequently, the *Prophesies de Merlin* in not just a literary hybrid, but also a cultural one. The ideological discourses of French Arthurian literature are not erased, but combined with the moral and political discourses introduced by the author of the *Prophesies*, which partly refer back in tone and style to the sources of the French Merlin romances, the political prophecy of Geoffrey's *Historia Regum Britanniae* and the prophetic episodes of the *Vita Merlini*. As a work of rewriting, the *Prophesies de Merlin* is not simply a cultural palimpsest that overwrites its sources with a Venetian cultural perspective; instead, it represents an accumulation of the cultural discourses that surround the figure of Merlin in various texts and languages[11]. «Cultural discourse» is a term coined by Sif Rikhardsdottir in her work on Old Norse and Middle English translations of Old French literature. As Rikhardsdottir explains, culture is a semiotic system whose ideological structures can be deciphered by analysing the «behavioural codes, gender conventions and socially prescribed actions»[12] that are encoded in the artefacts it produces, including literary texts. In the cultural exchanges about which Rikhardsdottir is writing, the extent to which these cultural codes are accepted or rejected in a translation reveals the way in which the cultural discourses of different communities overlap or differ[13]. Although cultural discourse will provide a useful conceptual tool for this analysis of the social information in Italian rewriting of the Merlin story, allowances have to be made for the long-standing presence of French literature in Italian cultures. As the 'polyphony' of the *Prophesies de Merlin* demonstrates, the cultural discourses of French Arthurian romances are combined in the same text as the prophetic and moralised discourses introduced by the Venetian author; both of these cultural discourses emerge from different interpretations of Geoffrey of Monmouth's Latin texts that were circulating simultaneously in part of Italy. French literature and language were not culturally unfamiliar to northern Italian readers, due to the fact that French romances, histories, and didactic works were widely circulated, read, and copied in their original language beyond the Alps[14]. Italian writers were active users of French when writing in these particular genres, and the language itself seemed to bring its own set

[10] Cf. ivi 2009: 70.
[11] Cf. Campbell 2017: 24-25.
[12] Rikhardsdottir 2012: 13.
[13] Cf. Rikhardsdottir 2012: 13.
[14] Cf. Cornish 2011: 99.

of cultural discourses, stylistic phrases, and generic conventions[15]. The way in which the *Prophecies de Merlin* blends Italian historiographical material with the stylistic and narrative conventions of French romance is not unique, and seems to be a product of a prior generic association between the French language and historiographical writing – irrespective of whether these histories were perceived to be true or fictional (a distinction that would have been less clearly defined at the time). Italian vernacular chronicles regularly adopted the stylistic and generic conventions of French romance; for example, Martino Canale's *Les Estoires de Venise*, a Franco-Italian chronicle that was written almost contemporaneously with the *Prophecies de Merlin*, presents the history of Venice through French romance conventions. It contains imagined dialogues between historical figures, and opens its episodic narratives with the conventional discourse markers of prose romance, such as "Que vos diroie je?", "Endementiers que" and "Ci endroit dit li contes"[16]. From this perspective, it would be reductive to categorise Arthurian romance as a French cultural discourse and Venetian history, political prophecy and moralised *novellini* as Italian ones, based purely on the provenance of the authors who contributed each section; just as Merlin's Italian prophecies also became popular in Francophone areas[17], it could be argued that Italian reception of the characters, themes, conventions, and motifs of French Arthurian romance eventually became an Italian cultural discourse, whose 'Frenchness' was part of the generic flavour of the material[18]. As Fabrizio Cigni has indicated, French Arthurian romances from the later thirteenth century also displayed an interest in triumphs of justice over abuses of power, which resonates with the concerns of the moral *novellini* introduced by the author of the *Prophesies*[19]. Irrespective of the linguistic or cultural origin of its composite elements, the *Prophesies de Merlin* represents a kaleidoscope of different cultural discourses, emblematising the way in which Arthurian literature in northern Italy was culturally present both in the original French versions and in the form of Italianised reinterpretations.

2. The Triple Death of the Baron, Socially Reimagined

While Merlin's prophecies cover a vast range of topics, the narrative material of the *Prophesies de Merlin* falls into two main styles, which can be associated with

[15] Cf. Delcorno Branca 2010: 173-174; Heijkant 1990: 274.
[16] *Les Estoires de Venise: cronaca veneziana in lingua francese dalle origini al 1275*, XLIX. Cf. also Morreale 2010: 869, 875.
[17] On the reception of the *Prophesies de Merlin* in France, cf. Campbell 2017: 87; Koble 2009: 91-150; Paton 1927, vol I: 1-50.
[18] Cf. Heijkant 2014: 49; Zinelli 2018: 45-53.
[19] Cf. Cigni 2014: 34.
[20] Cf. Zumthor 1943: 132.

different cultural discourses: Arthurian narratives, which largely do not involve Merlin, and the *exempla*-style stories of Merlin using his prophetic powers to challenge corruption in his community. The distinction is particularly noticeable in the chronological placement of the latter, in that these short stories about Merlin are inserted into an account of Merlin's childhood, which covers the same chronological breadth as the early parts of the *Merlin en prose*. The *Prophesies de Merlin* does not begin with Merlin's birth as the *Merlin* does, but instead places the story of Merlin's childhood in his native Northumberland towards the end of the text., when a dying hermit called Elias, who witnessed and recorded Merlin's childhood deeds many years earlier, recounts them to Perceval after Merlin's death. These tales of Merlin's childhood fill in the space between events that are narratively juxtaposed in the *Merlin en prose*, even if it appears that some time has lapsed between them: Merlin's mother's trial, and Merlin being summoned by King Vortigern. In the *Merlin*, the only event that appears to take place in this intervening period is Blaise deciding to accept Merlin's invitation to document his prophecies and the story of the grail. In the *Prophesies de Merlin*, however, Elias' book expands on this time period with stories of the infant Merlin using his powers of omniscience and prophecy to solve various mysteries, correct judicial errors, and expose wrongdoers in his community. These stories express particular commercial, religious, and moral concerns; for example, Merlin proves that money-changers have been cheating foreign merchants in one story, and banishes some demons from a haunted statue in another. These stories of 'everyday' life in the Franco-Italian text, then, express social concerns that are different to those of the *Merlin en prose*, which focuses on the legitimacy of royal power and macro-narratives of the conflict between the Britons and the Anglo-Saxons. While the *Merlin*'s approach to religion is very theological, questioning the spiritual significance of the grail and the doctrinal implications of Merlin's conception by a devil[20], the *Prophesies de Merlin* is more concerned with ecclesiastical corruption, miscarriages of justice, and the everyday behaviour of practising Christians.

Although the *Prophesies de Merlin* does not explicitly rewrite any episodes, it does reinterpret some of the motifs from its source. The reinterpretation of these motifs demonstrate the way in which the *Prophesies* combines alternative cultural discourses of social morality with the more conventional courtly adventures. The episode of the triple death of the baron is one that appears in various iterations in different versions of the Merlin story, and in this case, illustrates particularly clearly the social perspectives introduced by the *Prophesies* – perspectives which may well have corresponded to those of the Venetian text's anticipated audience. The original version of this story is found in the *Vita Merlini*, after Merlin reveals

[21] Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Vita Merlini*: 66-72.
[22] *Merlin en prose*: 274-284.

to the king of Cumbria that his queen – and Merlin's sister – has a lover. The queen counters this with an attempt to demonstrate that Merlin is a fraud; she presents him three times with the same boy dressed in different disguises, and each time asks how the boy will die. Merlin appears to believe the boy to be three different people when he offers three different responses – that the boy will die on a cliff, in a tree, and in a river; as a result, the king is convinced of his wife's fidelity. Nevertheless, years later, Merlin is proven right when the boy is killed by falling off a cliff, which causes him to get caught on a tree and submerged in the river below[21]. The same story is reinterpreted in the *Merlin en prose* as the death of a baron at Uther's court who is jealous of Merlin's position as master of the royal council. He disguises himself as different invalids, and summons Merlin to tell him whether he will die or not; as in the *Vita*, Merlin gives him a different answer about his death each time (although he makes no show of being taken in by the ruse). Once again, Merlin is proven right when the baron falls from his horse while crossing a bridge and becomes caught on the bridge itself, which leaves him hanging upside in the river – causing him to die by falling, hanging, and drowning all at once[22]. In the French prose version, the purpose of the story is essentially the same as in the *Vita* – that is, to prove Merlin as a true prophet, despite a clever attempt to outsmart him by someone who wishes to test the limits of his powers. The result, however, is to affirm Merlin's authority within the court («Et lors dist li rois et tot cil qui ce oïrent que nus plus sages hon ne fu onques en vie que Merlin»[23]), as well as prompting him to start prophesying in obscure language in order to avoid similar future interrogations. The story has been adapted to serve the purpose of confirming Merlin's value to royal power; Pendragon orders that any of Merlin's prophecies that are heard at court should be recorded in a book, «de ce qu'il dist del roi d'Engleterre et de toutes les autres coses dont il parla puis»[24].

In the *Prophesies de Merlin*, the story is re-contextualised as a lesson against hypocrisy and greed. It no longer takes place in the context of the royal court, but instead in the «maistre eglyse de cele vile»[25], where the young Merlin is conversing with the bishop of Northumberland. When a man comes into church and starts giving money to the poor, the bishop comments on his generosity – only to be contradicted by Merlin, who reveals to everyone in the church that the man is in fact a hypocrite, whose charitable acts are all for show. He explains to the bishop that the man has stolen a great deal of money that has been bequeathed to him by people who are dying, because they believed him to be a good man who would distribute the money to the poor. When confronted by Merlin,

[23] Ivi: 282.
[24] Ivi: 282-284.
[25] *Les Prophesies de Merlin* (all quotations from ed. Berthelot 1992): 272.

the man asks how he will die; Merlin tells him he will be chained up, will fall into water, and will be burned («Tu sera encaaves, cou dist Mierlins, et seras tresbuchies en eve, et puis seras ars»[26]). Angry at Merlin's revelations, the man – who, we are informed, is called Agistre – decides to murder Merlin by setting his house on fire. Although the house is burned to the ground, Merlin is found playing in its charred remains, completely unharmed. Unluckily for Agistre, however, the fire spreads to his own house. When he attempts to put it out, he suffers from a freak accident that causes him to die in the threefold manner that Merlin had predicted: as he tries to draw water from the well, the chain holding the bucket becomes loose and drops on top of him. As a result, he falls into the well and drowns. He is then burned when some children dispose of bits of burning wood by throwing them down the same well[27]. Merlin is consulted on how best to redistribute Agistre's stolen wealth; he recommends dividing it into three parts on the model of the Trinity, giving one part to the family of the people to whom it originally belonged, one part to the church, and one part to the poor.

The stories have the same premise – an enemy of Merlin attempts to attack his person or reputation, only to be punished with a freak accident that proves the prophet's abilities. However, the socio-cultural parameters are quite different. The moral of the story in the *Prophesies* does not revolve so much around the authority of Merlin's prophecies, and his right to guide the kings of England; instead, it focuses on religious hypocrisy. Moving the location of the story from the royal court to the busy town cathedral signals a practical, civic approach to religion; the authority figure to whom Merlin proves his worth is not King Pendragon (as in the *Merlin*), but the local bishop, who is depicted here engaging with his community. If, as Rikhardsdottir explains, cultural discourse is made visible through socially prescribed actions, in this story, we can instead see a difference in the socially *proscribed* actions exemplified by the baron and Agistre. While the baron in the *Merlin* is condemned for doubting the authority of Merlin, and by extension, doubting the king's judgement in trusting him, Agistre's crime is to steal from members of his community and withhold alms from the poor. These civic concerns about theft and charity, however, simultaneously reveal ascetic ideals regarding the rejection of material wealth in favour of spiritual poverty: while Agistres initially appears to be a St Francis figure, giving away his worldly goods to the needy, he is in fact hoarding earthly possessions[28]. Whereas the incident in the *Merlin* prompts Merlin to only ever speak of the future «oscurement»[29] to prevent his prophecies being fully understood, the same incident in the *Prophesies* sees Merlin's wisdom being called upon in the matter of how to fairly redis-

[26] Ivi: 273.
[27] Ivi: 274-275.
[28] On St Francis' spiritual poverty and its influence, cf. Vauchez 2012: 297-311.
[29] *Merlin en prose*: 282.

tribute the stolen money. In this way, the *Prophesies* underscores its own Arthurian narratives with an alternative social and religious discourse, one that favours justice and fairness and rejects anti-social greed.

3. La Storia di Merlino*: A Socio-Cultural Translation*

Whereas the *Prophesies de Merlin* inscribed different social viewpoints within the overall framework of a French Arthurian romance, the Tuscan *Storia di Merlino* enacts a further linguistic and cultural shift that builds upon the cultural discourses introduced by its Venetian predecessor. *La Storia di Merlino* was written in Florence in the early fourteenth century by an author who calls himself Paulino Pieri. It is preserved in only one early fifteenth-century manuscript in the Biblioteca Laurenziana in Florence[30], but Mauro Cursietti has dated its composition to between 1324 and 1330[31]. Little is known about the author, other than the fact that he wrote a chronicle of Italian history around the same time, which perhaps explains his interest in Merlin's prophecies about the political affairs on the peninsula[32]. The narrative combines the story of Merlin's birth and childhood from the *Merlin en prose* with prophecies and moralised prophetic stories from the *Prophesies de Merlin*. Although it offers some material from the Vulgate Cycle, the *Storia* can still perhaps be considered as the 'least Arthurian' of the Italian Arthurian romances, given that it extricates Merlin from the Arthurian context almost completely. Other Arthurian characters are briefly mentioned in prophecies[33], but they never appear in the main narrative. Instead, Pieri focuses on stories of Merlin's childhood, his political prophecies, and the *exempla*-style stories that are introduced in the *Prophesies*.

Given that the *Storia di Merlino* is written in Tuscan dialect, as opposed to French or a Franco-Italian hybrid, it might be tempting to think of it as a translation. This label, with its modern implications of language difference, is conventionally rejected by scholars who suggest that medieval writers working within the fluid linguistic and cultural exchanges between French and Italian would barely have regarded their activity as translation at all[34]. On a linguistic level, the

[30] Firenze BML Plut. LXXXIX, inf. 65. Cf. Visani 1994.
[31] Cf. Paulino Pieri, *La Storia di Merlino*: xv-xvi, 107.
[32] Cf. Paulino Pieri, *Cronica delle cose d'Italia.* Cf. also Sanesi 1898: xlvi-xlvi; Gardner 1930: 191.
[33] Events from various Arthurian prose romances are alluded to in Merlin's prophecies, some of which are taken directly from the Vulgate Cycle (for example, the prophecy about the leopard and silver-headed serpent, which are glossed here as «messer Lancelotto di Lac» and «reina Ginepra» respectively; *Storia di Merlino*: 55). However, whereas the prophecies of the Vulgate Cycle foreshadow events that will take place later in the narrative, the *Storia di Merlino* refers to these events only in the prophecies.
[34] «In un'epoca come il Duecento, in cui era ancora salda l'unità romanza, e in cui sopratutto gli

boundaries between different French and Italian dialects were rather fluid, meaning that they would not necessarily have been perceived as wholly different languages. The formal and lexical similarities afforded the possibility of transliteration, as well as the blending of grammatical forms from different dialects to different extents[35]. Comments by Pieri in the prologue do, however, indicate an awareness of linguistic difference, and a sense of 'francese' as being distinct from his native 'toscano':

> E io, Paulino Pieri, avendo questo libro asemprato in francesco il meglio che ho saputo e potuto, nella lingua toscana l'ho recato tutto per ordine, colle più belle parole che i' ho sapute, non mutando in niuno luogo l'effetto di niuna cosa[36].

Here, Pieri claims to have copied out the text in French («avendo […] asemprato in francese») before writing it out in Tuscan, drawing a parallel between transcription and translation that suggests that the two activities were somewhat on a par. However, that parallel in and of itself also implies a distinction between copying and translating. The word «recare» suggests the same physical and spatial parameters of the term *translatio*, which was more commonly applied to a translation from the temporally, culturally, and linguistically distinct traditions of antiquity[37]. Pieri, therefore, apparently perceives his work of bringing the text into the «lingua toscana» as a linguistic intervention that is more extensive than simply making some grammatical and lexical modifications during transcription, as scribes copying from an exemplar in a dialect other than their own seemed to have done. Indeed, despite the presence of some Gallicised expressions taken directly from the source texts[38], the language of the *Storia* is distinctly Tuscan overall. Nevertheless, despite claiming not to have made any alterations to the *effect*, or workings, of the narrative («non mutando in niuno luogo l'effetto di niuna cosa»[39]), Pieri does make adaptations to the order of events, and sometimes even the facts of the story. Although substantial rewriting is in no way unusual in cases of what we might now call translation, the combination of interlingual/-dialectical mediation, transcription, and rewriting corroborates suggestions by Alison Cornish, Aurelio Roncaglia, and Simon Gaunt that these activities were all part of the same con-

scambi culturali e commerciali con la Francia rendevano poco netto il senso d'una frontiera, le due strutture linguistiche francese e italiana non erano sentite in opposizione; non si potrebbe quasi parlare, a rigore, di traduzione» (Segre 1964: 22). Aurelio Roncaglia, also speaks of «[…] adattamento linguistico senza che vi sia una vera intenzione di tradurre» (Roncaglia 1975: 4). Cf. also Folena 1994: 12-13.

[35] Cf. Zinelli 2018.

[36] *Storia*: 4.

[37] Cf. Stahuljak 2005: 160-178.

[38] For example, transliterations of Francophone expressions such as «Ora dice il conto […]», *Storia*: 22; «E metti in iscritto che […]», *Storia*: 56.

[39] *Storia*: 4.

tinuum[40]. Rewriting the text using «[le] più belle parole» suggests a mediation that is not exclusively or necessarily linguistic.

Whether or not Pieri's linguistic mediation would have been regarded in terms of translation, or as something more fluid is difficult to determine. Nevertheless, what is clearer to a modern reader is the way in which he has made adaptations to the socio-cultural information of his sources. If the French language and Arthurian romance are still present within linguistic constructions and the intertextual context of the *Storia*, then we can see a more fundamental shift in the cultural discourses encoded in the text. As with the *Prophesies*, however, this is more complicated than the straightforward displacement of a French cultural perspective by an Italian one. The *Storia*'s social perspective is heavily mediated by the Franco-Venetian text, and it especially builds upon the way in which the *Prophesies* integrates multiple cultural discourses. However, where the *Prophesies* juxtaposes the cultural discourses of practical religion and communal morality with Arthurian narratives, themes, and concerns, the *Storia* instead merges these cultural discourses with the Arthurian narratives that it appropriates.

The parameters of this cultural reinterpretation are established by the way in which Pieri has fused episodes from the *Merlin* and the *Prophesies* into a single chronological narrative. The attempt to combine parts of the *Merlin en prose* and the *Prophesies* into a single text is by no means unique, and Pieri may have been working from one or more French versions that brings the two together, either as two separate texts within the same manuscript, or as a singular continuous text. The exact form of this combination varies across the manuscripts that contain both texts. Venice, BNM, Str. App. 29 (=243) places the *Merlin* before the *Prophesies* in the form of a prequel, a pattern that would be followed by later fifteenth-century versions in Venetian dialect[41]. Meanwhile, Vatican, BAV, Reg. lat. 1687 and Paris, BNF, fr. 98 insert prophecies from the *Prophesies* into the narrative of the *Merlin en prose*, and Chantilly, Musée Condé, 644, conversely inserts the *Joseph en prose* and the *Merlin en prose* into the middle of the *Prophesies*. Pieri's combination is similarly idiosyncratic, and not attested in any other extant version; he presents the story of Merlin's birth from the *Merlin*, followed by material from Elias' account of his childhood in the *Prophesies* – which includes prophesies from elsewhere in the *Prophesies de Merlin* – which is followed by the episode of Vortigern's tower from the *Merlin*. In this way, both accounts of Merlin's early life are seamlessly blended together in chronological order.

Bringing these events into a linear timeline harmonises not just the chronology of the narrative, but also brings into contact different perspectives of each account.

[40] Cf. Cornish 2006: 329; Gaunt 2013: 93; Roncaglia 1987: 740. Cf. also Kay 2011: 461; Zinelli 2018: 58.

[41] Parma, BP, MS Pal. 39; Vatican City, BAV, MS Pal. lat. 949; *La Historia di Merlino.*

Because the *Merlin* was also a source for the *Prophesies*, Pieri finds numerous opportunities to align the concerns of both his textual sources. For example, the testimony of the judge's mother in the trial of Merlin's mother provides one such point of contact between the cultural discourses of the *Merlin* and the *Prophesies*. In the *Merlin*, the protagonist's mother is put on trial for having a child out of wedlock; the child is of course Merlin, who was conceived by a devil, and who as a result, is miraculously able to talk immediately after birth. Even more miraculously, he defends his mother in court, and forces the judge to drop the charges against her by revealing that the judge's own mother also had a child out of wedlock. When called in to testify to this, Merlin explains that the judge's real father was in fact a priest with whom the mother was having an affair; the mother has to admit that this is true, forcing the judge to acquit Merlin's mother as he is unable to sentence his own mother to death[42]. Pieri amplifies this episode by having the mother explain that, unlike the seemingly consensual relationship between the mother and the priest in the *Merlin*, she was taken advantage of by the priest due to her desperation to have children:

> Figliuolo, io non ti posso il vero celare, né farti credere la bugia. Sappi che al tempo che messer Giovanni [her husband] vivea, egli fu ed era molto vago di aver figliuoli: io non ne potea avere, e stetti co.llui ben X anni che io no.n'ebi mai niuno. Onde io, veggendo ch'e' n'avea così gran voglia e non ne potea avere, per sodisfare a lo intendimento suo, ebi consiglio con uno, il quale mi promisse di farmene avere s'io facessi quello ch'e' mi dicessi. E io, conoscendo la voglia che messer Giovanni avea che io ne facessi, feci quello ch'e volle, ed egli giacque con meco: per la qual cosa io ebi voi, ed egli ne fu più allegro uomo del mondo[43].

Pieri, then, takes advantage of the mention of an immoral priest to extend the criticisms of ecclesiastical corruption found in the *Prophesies* to his adaptation of an episode in the *Merlin*. In doing so, he brings this episode in line with the concerns relating to a different event from Merlin's childhood that is depicted in the *Prophesies de Merlin*, in which a different priest rapes a woman who has visited him to ask for confession for a sick relative:

> L'autre iou avint que une poure femme s'en ala chies .i. prouvoire de cele vile et dist: «Sire, en ma maison est uns hom ki molt desire le penitence; et sachies certainement que il est mout afoiblis». Et quant li prouvoires vit la dam ki avenans estoit de cors et de tous membres, biele, cointe et plaisans, il le prist maintenant par la main et dist: «Dame, il vous estuet gesir o moi anscois que vous vous departes de moi». Et lors commencha maintenant a dame a crier a haute vois. Et li prouvoire frema l'uis de sa cambre et fist de li tout son talent a fine force[44].

[42] *Merlin en prose*: 176-182.
[43] *Storia*: 15.
[44] *Prophesies*: 286-287.

The figure of the corrupt priest, therefore, provides an opportunity to merge the preoccupations of the *Prophesies* with those of the *Merlin*. Immorality among the clergy is the target of both stories, but Pieri's version brings it more in line with the cultural discourses of communal justice and pastoral religion that are expressed in the *Prophesies*. In Pieri's version, the priest who sleeps with the judge's mother is not simply breaking his vows, but exploiting his power to take advantage of a vulnerable woman in much the same way as the rapist priest in the *Prophesies* – and the fact that the *Storia* presents both episodes of these together further merges the concerns and events of both source texts. The work of translation in the *Storia*, then, is essentially a cultural translation, but not one that is unidirectional, or that relies on a clear separation between target and source culture. Instead, rather like the linguistic amalgamation of French and Italian features in Franco-Italian language, the differing cultural viewpoints have been amalgamated in line with a Tuscan reception.

4. La Storia di Merlino*'s Alternative Arthurian Society*

The effect of blending these cultural discourses in the *Storia* is most evident in Pieri's reinterpretation of material taken from the *Merlin en prose*. In rewriting the earlier French text in light of this engagement with the Venetian *Prophesies*, the Tuscan version brings new dimensions of the *Merlin*'s narrative into focus, exploiting and foregrounding areas of the story that are less prominent in the Vulgate version. Without making substantial changes to the facts of the narrative, Pieri writes the same story from a different social perspective, one that finds points of contact between the cultural discourses of the *Merlin* and the *Prophesies*. The primary effect of this is to present an imagined model of society that differs from that of the *Merlin*, and of French Arthurian romance in general.

The social focus of the *Merlin en prose* and its Vulgate continuation, the *Estoire de Merlin* (which, in the Cycle, are blended together seamlessly) is principally orientated around the legitimacy of royal authority and dynastic politics. The concerns of genealogy and legitimate patrilineage, as a result, are foregrounded as a prominent cultural discourse, which both structures the imagined society of the narrative, as well as directs its social focus towards this fictional feudal aristocracy. As analyses by Kate Cooper, Jennifer E. Looper, and Zrinka Stahuljak have shown, the story of the judge's mother in the *Merlin* is part of a broader narrative of complications of patrilineage in the French Merlin stories[45]. The judge's origins are distorted by an apparent paternity that is revealed – by Merlin – to be false, just as Merlin must reveal that Arthur is in fact the son of Uther, as opposed

[45] Cf. Cooper 1986; Looper 2002; Stahuljak 2005.

to that of his adoptive father, Antor. These genealogical complications are echoed by a whole host of similar instances in the *Merlin* and its continuations, and it is ironically the role of Merlin, the "fatherless child" (almost literally, as Stahuljak notes, as his father is a devil with an ethereal body composed of air), to expose the truth of these lines of descent[46]. On some occasions, apparently legitimate children are revealed to be illegitimate, as the judge is. For example, when Merlin laughs at a child's funeral on his way to Vortigern's court, he explains to his companions that the priest conducting the mass is in fact the real father of the child: «Il deüst faire le duel cil provoires que cil preudome fet, que je voel bien que vos sachiés que cil enfes fu ses fiex, por qui cil a cui il n'est noient fait si grant duel […]»[47]. More significant to the narrative, however, are instances in which apparently fatherless or low-born children are revealed to be the sons of powerful men. In the Vulgate Cycle, Lancelot is initially unaware that he is the son of King Ban, Galahad is revealed to be the son of Lancelot in the Vulgate Cycle; in the *Suite du Merlin*, Tor is revealed to be the illegitimate son of King Pellinor, and Mordred that of Arthur.

This preoccupation with the stories of distorted paternity that surround Merlin in the French texts reveals, as Cooper argues, an anxiety surrounding origins, privileging them at the same time as undermining them[48]. In terms of the social dynamics of these narratives, then, this focus on revealing legitimate paternity locates power and authority – quite predictably – in the recognition of aristocratic lineage. Not only does this locate the social dimensions of the text in the macro-narratives of dynastic rule (most notably in the conflicts surrounding the succession of Vortigern, Uther, and later Arthur), but it also distributes power and privilege in the narrative in a rather homogenous way. As Merlin indicates when he reveals Tor's parentage, the noble qualities required of a knight («chevalerie » and «gentillece») are very much the product of nature, not nurture, in that they represent a conflation of moral character and breeding:

> Lors dist Merlins a Tor: «Tor, or poés veoir et connoistre que vous n'estes pas fiex de vilain, mais fiex de roi. Certes, se vous fuissiés d'estrassion de vilain, ja ne vous presist talent de chevalerie mener. Mais il ne puet estre que gentillece ne se moustre, ja ne sera si enserree[49].

This is of course rather standard in medieval French chivalric romance, where the topos of the noble child raised by peasants points to an idealised «class essentialism» that ascribes inherent qualities to noble blood[50]. To borrow concept from Pierre Bourdieu, we might say that nobility in French chivalric romance operates

[46] Cf. Stahuljak 2005: 92.
[47] *Merlin en prose*: 222.
[48] Cf. Cooper 1986: 1-15.
[49] *La Suite du roman de Merlin*: 272.
[50] Cf. Baker 2002.

as a form of symbolic capital in which wealth, lands, chivalric training, and aristocratic titles coalesce with breeding and innate personal qualities[51].

This social perspective is deconstructed in the *Storia di Merlino*, which, consistent with the setting of Merlin's childhood in the *Prophesies de Merlin*, shifts attention away from the concerns of aristocratic courtly society towards a more urban environment. As we have seen, this cultural shift resembles the well-attested move towards a more civically-minded attitude that can be observed in other thirteenth-century Tuscan versions of Arthurian romance, particularly the *Tristano Riccardiano* and *Tavola Ritonda*. Nevertheless, while these romances offer an alternative perspective on some events and characters, they still essentially revolve around royal courts and princes. The Tuscan versions of Tristan and Lancelot occupy a very similar social identity to their earlier counterparts, give or take a few personal qualities. The *Storia di Merlino*, however, largely displaces the social strata of Arthur's court and the cast of knights and ladies that populate it in favour of exploiting social dimensions of the narrative that are left unexploited in the sources. This involves, in some cases, amplifying the roles and personalities of minor characters from the Merlin who do not belong to the chivalric classes, and who, as a result, feature more as nameless 'types' than individuals in their own right. These characters, who are of little importance to the macro-narrative of the *Merlin*, are named and given brief descriptions. For example, the two nurses who assist Merlin's mother in prison – described in the Merlin simply as «ii. femes»[52] – are named as «Bersabè» and «Liabella», the former of whom «era di gran tempo» and the latter «era giovane di XXV anni»[53]. While they by no means major characters in the *Storia*, they are at least developed into distinct individuals with distinct roles; while Liabella nurses and cares for the infant Merlin, Bersabè attends to his mother. The figure of the judge is similarly elaborated; he is individualised as «Messer Matteo», son of «Giovanni da Bacciano», and the story of him finding out that he is the son of a priest is accorded more prominence than in the *Merlin*. Pieri amplifies Giovanni's conversations with his mother, inserting believable accounts of their emotional reactions to Merlin's revelations about his paternity that are absent in the source:

> […] ella [la madre] avea tutta quella notte pianto e poco dormito per paura delle parole che 'l figliuolo l'avea dette la sera, e anche del dolore del prete ch'era affogato[54].

> O dolente o lieto ch'e' ne fusse, sì riserbò nel animo e non mostrò ira veruna se non come non fosse, però ch'e' non volea che altri se ne avedesse[55].

[51] Cf. Bourdieu 1983: 186; Bourdieu 1994: 161.
[52] *Merlin en prose*: 162.
[53] *Storia*: 9.
[54] Ivi: 15.
[55] *Ibid.*

Not only are these characters accorded more individuality, but the contexts in which they exist are concretised in more detail. The legal impasse in Merlin's mother's case that results from the judge finding out that he would be a hypocrite to prosecute Merlin's mother and not his own seems to be resolved on irony alone in the *Merlin*. The *Storia*, on the other hand, shows Messer Matteo consulting the bishop on how to resolve the case, who recommends that they put the question to the townspeople during mass, and allow them to decide whether Merlin's mother or the judge should be punished («io predicherò e metterò questo innanzi al popolo, e vedremo l'animo di più persone»[56]). Pieri also elaborates on details of the construction of Vortigern's tower, depicting his conversations with the architects who make the recommendation of rebuilding it with extra-strong lime-mortar, and joining the corners with leaded iron after it falls down[57].

Pieri, therefore, brings different social aspects of the narrative into focus, shifting the perspective away from the noble characters and clarifying the focus on non-noble ones. In other words, the Tuscan text refracts the narrative through a different lens. In the French Arthurian romances, the privileging of the cultural discourses of aristocratic values, lineages, and concerns establishes a 'noble gaze', in which characters and episodes that are incidental to these concerns are featured less prominently. In displacing this focus onto characters who fall outside of the noble gaze, Pieri is establishing a point of contact with the cultural discourses of the *Prophesies de Merlin*'s version of this same stretch of narrative chronology. The figure of the judge, the priest, the nurses, and the urban setting resonate with the sort of characters and episodes that appear in the *Prophesies*' version of Merlin's childhood; expanding upon them, then, brings the events of the *Merlin* in line with the *Prophesies*' focus on communal living, fairness, and justice. Even the only episode that takes place in the royal court – Merlin's prophecies to Vortigern – is reinterpreted from this same perspective. When Merlin predicts Vortigern's death, he emphasises that it is his tyranny against his «sottoposti» that will cause his death. Whereas Vortigern in the *Merlin* is killed by the rightful heirs, Uther and Pendragon, whom he had previously dispossessed, Pieri's Merlin informs Vortigern that his own people will overthrow him: «la tua gente medesima ti fieno adosso perch'e' ti vogliono male»[58]. Once again, the community in which these characters exist is brought more fully into focus, becoming the moral centre of the episode.

Finally, this shift in social perspective is underscored by modifications and additions that deconstruct the accumulation of symbolic capital of the French romances, which brings together wealth, titles, power, and influence. This is evident,

[56] Ivi: 16.
[57] Cf. ivi: 34-35.
[58] Ivi: 44.

for example, in the elaboration of two other minor characters, the messengers sent by Vortigern to retrieve Merlin (who, in the *Merlin*, are as anonymous and indistinguishable from each other as Merlin's mother's nurses). Not only are they named as «Ruggieri» and «Lambegues» (formerly the name of a knight from the Tristan Cycle) but they are also described as «uomini savi e gentili e da llor medesimi ricchi»[59]. Pieri attributes to them wealth, knowledge, and the fact of being "gentile", which could be interpreted either as inherited nobility or alternatively as courteous behaviour. The ambiguity as to whether they are noble in the sense of their breeding, or simply noble in their manners further complicates the social identity of characters in the *Storia* – although the fact that they made their own money perhaps points to a commercial background as opposed to an aristocratic one. The use of terms such as «gentile» and «nobilità» as indicators of character that are independent from lineage is also evident in the description of a character who has no precedent in either the *Merlin* or the *Prophesies*. Ruggieri and Lambegues hear about Merlin from a knight named Riccardo, who, we are told, is too poor even to own his own horse:

> Ora a quello convinto ebbe uno cavaliere il quale era molto gentile uomo e facea molto bene per cortesia, e perciò era rimaso povero; e avea nome Riccardo ed era chiamato "il conte" per nobilità, ma non che avesse mai avuto contado[60].

Riccardo is not blessed with the inherited titles and wealth that are generally take for granted in the case of the knights in the French Vulgate Cycle. But his courtesy and nobility – here, clearly used in the sense of a personal quality, because we are told that he has never held a real *contado* – provide him with a form of cultural capital that is elevated above the need for titles and wealth. The idea that noblility could be a «moral and intellectual virtue»[61] that is dissociated from inherited privilege was not exclusive to the ideals of northern Italian literature – indeed, as Aldo Scaglione notes, Jean de Meun and Andreas Cappellanus had made the same argument[62]. Nevertheless, it was one that was frequently expressed by northern Italian poets, and belonged to a literary trope that, as John Stephens argued, was influenced by the way in which «new centres of patronage» operated for writers in the Italian communes from the late thirteenth century onwards:

> To succeed in this competition, writers and artists needed to promote values appropriate to their patrons. Looking about them and to the past, they exalted a new ideal of nobility

[59] Ivi: 36.
[60] *Ibid.* Although this character seems to have been introduced by Pieri, the name «Richart» comes up at least twice in the *Prophesies de Merlin*: the authorial pseudonym, Maistre Richart d'Irlande, and Richart, king of Jerusalem (*Prophesies*: 303-309).
[61] Scaglione 1963: 69.
[62] Cf. *ibid.*

> as springing not from birth or wealth, but from the noble heart. They also gave currency to a notion of fame earned by the moral excellence of the individual. These were values well suited to the oligarchies which were finding their feet in northern Italy. Artists and intellectuals could supply not so much 'civic needs' or values as demonstrate the moral fitness of their patrons to have a place amongst the governors or rulers of a state[63].

That is not to say, of course, that communes like Florence did not have an influential hereditary aristocracy who shared political power with wealthy merchants and guildsmen (the *popolani*); nor is it to suggest that ideals of noble blood and lineage were irrelevant in northern Italy[64]. Rather, Pieri's addition of the character of Riccardo – who, interestingly, has the same name as the supposed author of the *Prophecies*, «Maistre Richart» – corresponds to a cultural discourse in Italian literature that frames the relationship between class and character in an alternative way. The idea that nobility is located in behaviour of course resonates with the values of other Tuscan Arthurian romances; for example, in the Tuscan redaction of the *Tavola Ritonda*, Ferragunze claims that «gentile può éssare ogni persona che à belli atti e costumi; et dolce parlare fa gentilezza»[65]. Where Pieri goes one step further, however, is to give this claim a specifically socio-economic dimension; we are even told that Riccardo's good manners are the reason for which he has remained poor, a detail which is in line with the ascetic attitude towards wealth and greed in the *Prophesies de Merlin*, and contrasts with the conflation of economic and cultural capital in the Vulgate Cycle and related romances. This shift in socio-economic outlook, then, takes the form of a linguistic as well as a cultural interpretation. The meaning of the terms «gentillesse» and «nobilité» in the French Arthurian romances is implicated in the cultural discourses of lineage and genealogy; they refer not only to cultivated behaviour that is heavily implicated with undertones of aristocratic breeding and courtly education (whether or not they are used in that way). By explicitly dismantling the essentialism of these terms with characters such as Riccardo, Ruggieri, and Lambegues, Pieri instead articulates this form of nobility that is located purely in manners and courtesy. It is a translation that is simultaneously cultural and linguistic, in that this cultural reinterpretation engages with the semantic range of the words «gentillesse», and «nobilité», even emptying the title «conte» of its association with inherited aristocracy. Pieri's model of society then, is not only one that deconstructs the cultural discourses of genealogy and brings the ethics of the community to the foreground; it also resignifies the cultural/linguistic markers that conflate class and character.

[63] Stephens 2014: 6.
[64] Cf. Lansing 1991; Klapisch-Zuber 1997: 215-216.
[65] *La Tavola ritonda*: 38-39 (XI). Cf. also Delcorno Branca 2014: 79.

5. Conclusion

The Venetian and Tuscan reinterpretations of the Merlin story exemplify a form of cultural translation that involves primarily a shift in literary register – one that is simultaneously generic, cultural, and linguistic. The *Prophesies de Merlin*, although different in form and tone to other Italian Arthurian adaptations as a result of its prophetic strand, is more conventional in its juxtaposition of the narrative structures, verbal commonplaces, and cultural discourses of early thirteenth-century French Arthurian romance with perspectives that resonate with the «post- or non-feudal, non-courtly, and urban»[66] values of Italian Arthuriana. These outlooks, which in this text are associated with the moralised *novellini* about Merlin's childhood and his activities in Northumberland, are incorporated into the Arthurian narratives as part of the interlace structure. This produces rapid shifts in perspective and register, which signalled by conventional formulae such as «Mais a tant laisse li contes a parler de ceste aventure […]»[67]. The Tuscan *Storia di Merlino*, on the other hand, dispenses with interlace, following instead a single narrative line that integrates the accounts of Merlin's childhood in both the *Merlin en prose* and the *Prophesies* together. Rather than juxtaposing the cultural discourses of the French Arthurian romance with the later discourses introduced by the author of the *Prophesies* (which are not only Italian, *per se*, but also resonate with French romances of this period), the *Storia* blends them together, finding points of contact between the events and interests of both texts. Consequently, the story of Merlin's early life from the *Merlin en prose* is told from a different social perspective, one that deconstructs the accumulation of social privilege and symbolic capital among characters who belong to an idealised aristocratic class, and who rely on bloodlines and genealogy for their position. Concomitant with this is the fact that Pieri directs the focus away from the typical cast-list of Arthurian knights, while elaborating on characters that belong to the same social environment as those introduced by the *Prophesies de Merlin*. In this way, the *Storia di Merlino* delves into social dimensions of the narrative that are latent or unexploited in the *Merlin en prose*, shifting the cultural register towards an alternative set of social concerns and characters. Presumably, the characters of the judge, Riccardo, and the ambassadors, as well as Merlin's exposure of hypocrites and frauds, would have resonated with Tuscan audiences, or at least with Pieri himself.

That is not to suggest that the *Storia di Merlino*, or indeed the *Prophecies de Merlin* were adapted purely to reflect their intended audiences. It is perfectly possible for audiences and readers to enjoy stories about characters who do not reflect

[66] *Tristano Riccardiano*: x.
[67] *Prophesies*: 277.

them socially, and there is evidence that French and Italian Arthurian romance was enjoyed equally by urban mercantile classes in Florence and Venice, and in the noble courts of Ferrara and Mantua, whether for the same or for different reasons[68]. The reception of the Merlin, romances, however, offer an alternate suggestion for how Merlin could deploy his prophetic abilities and omniscience. Merlin's use of his powers reflects the overall ethos of the text – whether it be to predict the grail, to establish Arthur as king, to arrange lineages, predict the events of contemporary history, or to fight against abuses of power and crimes against the community. The *Prophesies* and the *Storia* imagine a different use for Merlin's prophetic gifts, one that tackles injustices in the urban environment with which some of their audiences would perhaps have been familiar.

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