

## Further Elements of Ecolore: Some Tales that Inform Ecolore and Ecospheric Living

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**ABSTRACT:** This essay delves further into two groups of mediaeval literary figures from Arthurian works, both of which were featured in a previous article on Ecolore. Both reflect upon a type of contract or bond that exists between humans and representatives of Nature and is evoked during participation in the sacred, as it is implicit in the rites of magic and worship. Texts to be discussed include *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and some sections from works that involve Merlin, written by Nennius, Geoffrey of Monmouth, and Robert de Boron. Finally, the presence of values and ethics encountered in such ancient lore is considered, with some evaluation of potential implications for our study of Ecolore.

**KEYWORDS:** Ecolore; Mythology; Sir Gawain and the Green Knight; Geoffrey of Monmouth; Merlin

### *Introduction*

Since ancient times, contracts and agreements have existed between humankind and the natural world, and were once understood implicitly as part of life. They were included in traditional culture in the forms of prayers, poetry, dance, drama, invocation and ritual, all elements involved in sacred ceremony and performance. Although largely set aside in recent times in order to facilitate modern industrial methods of production, such agreements do still exist. They are evident in the ethical systems inherited from ancient European ancestors, and are able, at any time, to be clearly stated by the world's First Nations populations. Many individuals are remembering aspects of these agreements as they explore their personal relationships with animals and the environment, but a majority of the world's business operations have thus far scarcely acknowledged their existence. After remaining unspoken in the West for so long, the time has arrived for these matters to be reconsidered. It is important to remember

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<sup>1</sup> Ecolore is a specific category of Folklore identified and set out in a previous article: Hawkins, Julie, 'Eco-Lore: Some Mythic and Folkloric Roots', *Australian Folklore*, 28 (2013), 174-187. <http://journals.kvasirpublishing.com/af/article/view/132>. Now consideration is given to some species of 'nature spirit' associated with Celtic, Norse and Greek lore in an associated article on Ecolore entitled 'When Nature beings and spirits engage with humans ...'. As its topic includes Mermaids and Selkies, it links with A. Asbjørn Jøn's detailed research on Mermaids and Dugongs.

that we have a contract with our planet—Earth nurtures and provides for us, while we, who regard ourselves as intelligent and self-aware, are required to nurture and care for the Earth and all its species. As part of this agreement, we need to reduce the harm we do to our world. One way to approach this is to regard Earth as a world composed of a series of delicately balanced interconnecting planet-wide systems, each of which is vital to the continuation of a harmonious world in which species can exist in a cross-nurturing balance of eco-systems; a further way is to inhabit Earth as participants in the ecospheric Earth.

The goal of this essay is to locate some indicators of such agreements in myth, legend, folklore and ritual, by studying how Human/Nature bonds can exist in the sacred arts of magic and worship, activities that are intimately associated, even though at first glance they appear to represent opposing values. Respect for sacred space and for deities in certain locations on Earth has always been one significant aspect of such agreements, not only in the ancient Greek and Celtic traditions of Europe, but also in Indigenous cultures of the Americas, Africa, Asia, Australia, New Zealand, and Oceania.<sup>2</sup> To define one type of nature spirit or being we look to the word 'nymph', a 'mythological spirit of nature imagined as a beautiful maiden inhabiting rivers, woods or other locations'.<sup>3</sup> While the more general word 'nymph' in Late Middle English comes through Latin and French from the Greek *numphe* with a meaning of 'nymph' or 'bride', the term 'naiad' which refers to a 'water nymph', comes from *Naias* from *naein* which means, appropriately, 'to flow', thus connecting the Naiad more specifically with the element with which she is associated. In like manner, the term 'dryad' comes from the Greek *drus* for 'tree', and *druad*, which means 'tree-nymph' also derived from *drus*. The purpose of this brief excursion into word-lore is to show how the meaning and elemental role of the nature spirit can be both expressive of certain qualities and inseparable from the spirit's role. The use of the term 'nature spirit or being' indicates a wider understanding that includes non-physical as well as physical beings who are said to be descended from spirits and deities.

This exploration will engage mainly with mediaeval Celtic myths and stories, looking in particular at Merlin and Arthur, and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, the Lady and Morgana, as well as Camelot, the Green Chapel, and Merlin's eventual imprisonment in the Earth by the Lady of the Lake, not necessarily in that order.

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2     Until now, our research on Ecolore has engaged mainly with the Celtic and Greek roots of European folklore well known in *Australian Folklore*, as these cultures have been studied extensively by the present author. In the future, additional cultures will be included, as this body of Ecoloric work continues to develop.

3     Entries from *The Oxford Dictionary*, Online version.

*On the Divine in Worship and the Sacred in Magic*

The divergent practices of worship and magic will be dealt with only briefly here, for they must then be explored in the texts themselves. Although both relate to the divine and the sacred, the approaches involved differ, as can the results. For example, magic can be used for personal gain, motivated by egoic desire and executed in manipulative ways, while worship is usually, but not always, conducted in the opposite way, as an offering of praise and trust to God, and a non-manipulative way to make requests. How may we define worship and magic more fully?

The word 'worship' may be defined from Old English *weorthscipe* as 'worthiness', and 'acknowledgement of worth'.<sup>4</sup> Thus, worshipful prayer to God involves an individual or community approaching God with a deep awareness and appreciation of the Divine in all of its perfection, and may include a deep sense of gratitude for all that has been given in the world. The word 'magic' comes originally from the Greek *magike* (*tekhne*) which means '(art of) a magus', through Latin '*magica*' and French '*magique*' into Middle English as 'magic'. The mention of the term '*tekhne*' indicates the Greek term for 'art and craft', which with the addition of 'ology' forms '*tekhnologia*', with its meaning of 'systematic treatment'. Magic is defined as: 'the power of apparently influencing events by using mysterious or supernatural forces'.<sup>5</sup> In order to succeed in using these 'mysterious or supernatural forces', a great deal of technical knowledge of the elements of ritual would be required.

Worship, therefore, is an act of selflessness that comes from one's deep self in a way that might bring about a deep contemplative experience, or a moment of aesthetic delight in which one feels merged with the divine immanence of the world. Magic, however, is more likely to involve a desire and an agenda, both of which entail an expectation of achievement or the creation of a result as the object of the desire. It may invoke the powers of a god or spirit, as can also be achieved through prayer. Therefore, there is a difference between prayer and worship, for prayer might be a request for a boon of some kind, or, equally, a surrender, and a letting go of attachment to preconceptions or objects. Magic might seek to fulfil a request as a matter of cause and effect, and may be compared with prayer and invocation more than with selfless worship as an end in itself. There is more likely to be hubris involved in magic than in worship, where selflessness is the goal. In some cases however, the magical and the religious approaches might be conjoined. This is because rituals and ceremonies consist of words, gestures, postures and motions incorporating the use of sacred objects such as candles, bells, goblets, incense, music and

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4 Entry for 'worthiness' in *The Oxford Dictionary*, Online Version.

5 Entry for 'magic' in *The Oxford Dictionary*, Online Version.

drumming, along with prayer or mantra recitation, and the singing of sacred hymns.

The point of this exploration of actions that might be equally involved in worship or magic is to find the relation between the idea of a contract or agreement with Nature itself, or with nature deities, beings or spirits, and/or with God himself. The use of ritual is acknowledged as an outward sign of the inner relationship a human being has with the divine and the sacred. The next part of this essay will consider the Middle English text *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which is permeated with the sense of both the magical and the sacred, and is able to reach a clear resolution, despite its warring oppositions.

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### *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

As our mediaeval text *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*<sup>6</sup> contains a wealth of information about both the heroic sacred and the mysterious magical, it serves us well to engage with the following pagan elements: the Green Knight, who is a variant of the Green Man, the Green Chapel, which is situated deep in the forest, the Lady Bertilak who relentlessly tempts Gawain with her arts of love, and Morgana who remains almost hidden in the shadowy interiors of the Castle Bertilak. Sir Gawain begins his journey at Camelot, a castle filled with contrasting light and merriment, where, as he prepares to leave, Arthur and the Queen commend him to Christ, and present him with his 'shield of shining gules, with the Pentangle in pure gold depicted thereon', which he hangs about his neck, ready for battle.<sup>7</sup>

Gawain's reluctance to enter the forest is in part a result of his preference for the shelter and culture of the castle and the polite society to which he belongs. Gawain's happiest times occur when he is within the sphere of the royal court of Arthur, involved in civilised and courteous activities. In contrast, due to his 'covenant' to represent King Arthur in the Beheading Game, his punishment is associated with the loss of familiar surroundings, an enforced exile in the frozen wasteland of midwinter Wales, and the mysteriously pagan<sup>8</sup> Green Forest, where he is scheduled to be beheaded.

<sup>6</sup> Stone, B., Trans, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, (London: Penguin, 1972).

<sup>7</sup> The Pentangle 'is proper to this prince of knights', for it is a symbol conceived once by Solomon 'to betoken holy truth, by its intrinsic right, for it is a figure which has five points, and each line overlaps and is locked with another; And it is endless everywhere, and the English call it, in all the land, I hear, the Endless Knot' (p. 45). Therefore, Gawain carries it, 'For, ever faithful in five things, each in five-fold manner, Gawain was reputed good and, like gold well-refined, He was devoid of all villainy, every virtue displaying In the field' (p. 45).

<sup>8</sup> The word 'pagan' is ambiguous, as in its meaning '*pagus*', from the Latin, both refers to a location in a 'country district', and in more modern usage, but derived from the association with rural locations, meant 'not holding the Christian religion', which was the accepted

Gawain's preparation for the encounter with the Green Chapel being completed with the ceremonial arming of the knight, he sets out on his path:

His way was wild and strange  
By dreary hill and dean.  
His mood would many times change  
Before that fane<sup>9</sup> was seen.<sup>10</sup>

In the second part of the tale Gawain arrives at Castle Bertilak, meets Sir Bertilak, and his host's Lady, and sees an older lady, whom he recognises as Morgana le Fay. These three characters could personify (metaphorically) a triad of nature archetypes, as an alternative to the opposing courtly triad represented by Guinevere, Arthur, and Merlin (who is as palpable in his absence as he is in his presence) at the Court of Camelot. Morgana and Merlin are magical figures, Sir Bertilak and Arthur are lords, and Lady Bertilak and Guinevere are symbols of fertility and temptation on the one hand, and regal courtly love, on the other.

It is likely that the figures in each triad have both a mundane and an esoteric purpose in the story. For example, Sir Bertilak is both the courtly host and the Green Knight, while his Lady is Gawain's temptress as well as Lady Bertilak, a faithful wife. Morgana is in residence as if a family member, yet her presence evinces the magical nature of the castle Bertilak, located as it is near the deep green woods. Gawain himself, as the hero and a knight on a mission of sacrifice in place of King Arthur, is not presently part of either triad, but has relations with each of the figures in the Arthurian Court and in the court of Sir Bertilak; although he knows the Lady Morgana, he does not converse with her. Gawain himself represents the holy and worshipful element of the Arthurian court, for his shield bears an image of Mary, mother of God, on its inner side, while the points of its outward-facing pentacle stand for the five wounds of Christ, and the 'five pure joys' of Mary, among a range of correspondences.<sup>11</sup>

The role of Merlin is naturally a magical one, as, even though he is in service to King Arthur, he is independent of the court. Morgana's role in the court of Sir Bertilak may be of a similar kind, and as it is recorded that Merlin had been Morgana's teacher, their magic has undoubtedly come from the same tradition, even if it is later used for differing purposes. However, as we shall soon discover, Morgana and Merlin have contrary

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religion in the Arthurian context, at the time at which these events are said to have occurred. (*Oxford Dictionary*)

9 The word 'fane' is from late Middle English from Latin 'fanum' and means 'a temple or shrine'. (*Oxford Dictionary*)

10 *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, p. 48.

11 *Ibid.* The full list of correspondences of the points of Gawain's pentacle are listed in the text on pp. 45-46.

roles in the matter of Merlin's apparent demise—his imprisonment in the fastness<sup>12</sup> of the Earth.

In a previous article on Eco-lore, the following has been stated about Gawain in his mission to the Green Chapel:

Yet the location of this part of the contest is the wilds of Wales in snowy midwinter, not the cultured court of Camelot. The Green Chapel stands nearby, an invitation to Gawain to enter and pay homage to the very qualities of divinity that are intrinsic to the natural world, but which have been bypassed and displaced by human cultures such as that of Camelot.<sup>13</sup>

Arthur is the leader of polite and cultured society at his Court, and is also a knight and the once and future King of all Britain. Bertilak is the head of the society at his own Court, but his Green Knight persona marks him as a representative of Nature herself, and therefore of the wild places of the world. Here the two aspects of Britain, the 'civilised' and the 'wild' have come together, earlier through the Green Knight's presence in Camelot, and later by Gawain's presence at the Green Chapel. Neither Gawain nor the Green Knight belongs to either triad, but both rather act as

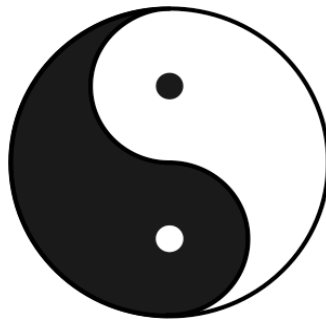


Figure 1. The Yin Yang Symbol.

intermediaries in connecting the opposite poles of this binary, to enable a form of resolution by means of Gawain's ordeal. Indeed, their roles evoke the image of the Yin/Yang symbol: ☯, in which a seed of the opposite quality is set in the centre of each side, indicating that the Green Knight and Sir Gawain are bound in the symbolism of the relations between oppositions. The pair therefore serve as a representation of the resolution of opposites that occurs so smoothly, yet with such suspense, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.<sup>14</sup>

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### Merlin

Since Merlin does not have a specific role in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, we will be exploring some sections of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (1139) and the *Vita Merlini*,<sup>15</sup> the *Historia*

<sup>12</sup> In Old English, the word is *fæstnes*, a secure place well protected by natural features (*The Oxford Dictionary*, Online version).

<sup>13</sup> Hawkins, *op. cit.*, 2013, p. 183.

<sup>14</sup> The Yin Yang symbol is from *The Oxford Dictionary*, Online version.

<sup>15</sup> Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Vita Merlini*, Trans. John Jay Parry, in *Life of Merlin: Vita Merlini* (1925), transcribed by Graeme K. Talboys. Accessed on 28/12/17: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/eng/vm/vmeng.htm>

*Brittonum* by Nennius,<sup>16</sup> Robert de Boron's *Merlin*,<sup>17</sup> and some connected Mediaeval French poetic verses.<sup>18</sup> In these works, Merlin serves in at least three roles: 1) as a Wild Man in *Vita Merlini*; 2) as a Wizard at the courts of Vortigern and Uther, and as Arthur's teacher, wizard and counsellor in Geoffrey's *Historia*; and 3) as an Elder and Wise Man in the ancient Celtic religious and philosophical tradition in the Prose Merlin and associated French poetry. These roles indicate some depth in Merlin's experience, and might seem to echo some fragments of Druidic wisdom and practice. It is evident that Merlin's magic gives him a deep connection with Nature, and that his magic arises from his profound involvement in the world itself. Both Nennius and Geoffrey state that Merlin's father was a spirit, and his mother a nun. The term used for spirit has also been interpreted as 'demon', however, it is at least possible that Merlin's father was a spirit in a sense similar to that of Socrates' inner teacher, which was known as a spirit, or *daimon*.<sup>19</sup> Alternatively, in the case of Merlin, this term might signify a nature deity, perhaps such a one as Cernunnos or Pan, a type of all-father deity of Nature.

In recent years, Merlin has come to be regarded as a wizard who exemplifies a relationship with non-human nature, by means of a mergence of magic, Earth-consciousness and spirituality. If by this there is an implication that Merlin represents an attainment of oneness with the immanence of Nature as Divine, then Merlin's 'magic' might be viewed as an aspect of his unending involvement within the world. We might suggest simply that Merlin is a poetic expression of the deep ecospheric nature of Earth as a planet. If his magic is a result of his underlying involvement in Earth's ecosphere, he may be interpreted as a representative of the deep life of Earth. Such a wide and ecospheric interpretation of Merlin's role would suggest that his character speaks to humans of life in its natural context, rather than in the more keenly sophisticated cultural contexts in domesticated locations such as Arthur's Court. This line of reasoning that takes metaphor into account might also suggest for Merlin a role of overseeing humankind's relationship to Earth, and the elements of life and land.

An element of Merlin's story that supports these ideas concerns his relationship (in the *Prose Merlin*) with Nimue or Nimiane, a maiden whom

16 Although he flourished around 800CE, Nennius is credited with the compilation or revision of the earlier *Historia Brittonum*, which is one of the earliest texts dealing with the story of King Arthur. (*Oxford Dictionary*, online version).

17 Robert de Boron, *Prose Merlin*, Ed. John Conlee, University of Rochester: New York, (1998), Middle English Text Series. <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/conlee-prose-merlin> Accessed on 28/12/17.

18 Robert de Boron's work has been published online as part of a Robbins Library Digital Project, edited by John Conlee and facilitated by the University of Rochester. As this work is presented in Middle English, quotations employed here are in that form.

19 To the ancient Greeks, the term did not mean 'demon' in the way it has come to represent under Christianity, but rather a wise and deep inner voice of wisdom.

Merlin loves and tutors in all of his magical arts. In connection with this, a ballade by Deschamps, #213, records: 'By a woman was Merlin imprisoned in his grave'. As the texts suggest that Merlin's tomb was variously a cave, a rock, or even his grave, it appears that Merlin has been 'imprisoned' alive 'in his grave'. Merlin is very highly regarded in the French mediaeval poetry, where he is recorded as being a sage, intellectual and wise, even by the religious authors of these works. If he has been imprisoned in the earth, in a rock, or a cave, or even in a grave, he may not have perished, and therefore might be considered, again, metaphorically, as being ready to return with Arthur should he be called upon by the British nation to serve in time of great need.<sup>20</sup>

In the *Vita Merlini*, much reference is made to Merlin's role as 'a king and prophet'. It is said that: 'to the proud people of the South Welsh he gave laws, and to the chieftains he prophesied the future'. He is transformed into a 'wild man' after a terrible battle, during which time he grieves for the loss of kings, the brothers of Peredur:

Merlin called his companions out from the battle and bade them bury the brothers in a richly coloured chapel; and he bewailed the men and did not cease to pour out laments, and he strewed dust on his hair and rent his garments, and prostrate on the ground rolled now hither and now thither.<sup>21</sup>

Merlin has a wolf as companion during his wanderings in the wild. The *Vita Merlini* says that:

He entered the wood and rejoiced to lie hidden under the ash trees; he marvelled at the wild beasts feeding on the grass of the glades; now he chased after them and again he flew past them; he lived on the roots of grasses and on the grass, on the fruit of the trees and on the mulberries of the thicket. He became a silvan man just as though devoted to the woods. For a whole summer after this, hidden like a wild animal, he remained buried in the woods, found by no one and forgetful of himself and of his kindred.<sup>22</sup>

However, the forest turns into a wasteland during winter, and after a time of deprivation, this 'wild Merlin' emerges again from the woods. Clearly, Merlin is as much associated with wild nature as is the Green Knight.

Merlin is the principal magical figure in the Arthurian literature and arts, while the female Lady of the Lake, Nimiane or Nimue in some

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20 A recent astrological rumour has predicted that Prince William whose name is William Arthur, and will serve Britain in fulfilment of the prophecy of Arthur's return in Britain's time of need.

21 *Vita Merlini*, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

22 *Ibid.*



versions of the story, and Morgan or Morgana in others, are students of Merlin's magical arts, and ultimately defeat him by taking advantage of his love to trap him variously in the Earth, in a rock or cave, or even in the ground, or in what is referred to as his grave. The woman in question then wields all of Merlin's power, because she has persuaded him, through applying the arts of love, to grant her the knowledge of how to so imprison him that he is unable to escape. What has happened here? The appearance is that Nimiane has convinced Merlin of her love for him and he has agreed to dedicate himself to her for the rest of his life. However, it becomes clear that she is after Merlin's knowledge and wants to wield his power. Merlin, on the other hand, truly loves Nimiane, and tells Blase 'I am so surprised with hir love that I may me not withdrawen'.<sup>23</sup> He later says to Gawain that the enchantment may never be undone 'while the world endureth'.<sup>24</sup> This verse suggests Merlin is bound up forever with Earth.

There are a number of potential metaphors at work in this motif of betrayal that results from what seems an improper use of the wise arts by an apprentice whose hidden agenda is to overcome the master and deprive him of his freedom. For Merlin loves truly, while the Lady loves differently. Lines 126-130 of the section of the *Prose Merlin* set out Merlin's agreement with Nimiane:

'Certes,' seide Merlin, 'ye seme to me so pleasaunt and deboneir that for youre love I shall shewe yow a party of my pleyes, by covenaunt that youre love shall be myn, for other thinge will I not aske.'<sup>25</sup>

In this way, Merlin agrees to the covenant suggested by Nimiane, which vow traps him in a path that leads to his apparently eternal imprisonment. The significance of this is magnified by Nimiane's double nature. First, she is daughter of a certain Dionas, who is a god-son of the woodland goddess Diana. Diana promises that Dionas' first-born daughter shall have such great beauty that the wisest man shall teach her all he knows of magic, and that he shall have no power to do anything to stop her. He has agreed: 'And alle thinges that she enquereth, he shall hir teche'.<sup>26</sup> Some questions arise from this, firstly, how do we know what the improper use of magic is? and secondly, has either Merlin or Nimiane used it improperly?

Has the Earth somehow asserted its natural power by overcoming the greatest male wizard of all time? Or might the motif be viewed as a metaphor of restoring balance to the Earth, so that Nature has control over her own body, while the man is unable to fly away or leave, but is soundly imprisoned on or in the Earth, and must now relate to Earth through a

23 *Prose Merlin*, 'Merlin and Nimiane', lines 44-45.

24 *Prose Merlin*, 'Merlin's Imprisonment', line 234.

25 *Prose Merlin*, 'Merlin and Nimiane', lines 126-130.

26 *Ibid.*, lines 70-71.

covenant. In this way, his magical technology is unable to overwhelm the natural order. However these interpretations, while interesting, may be too much generalisations. Merlin is not shown as unethical or as lacking in values or an awareness of the sacred. Can there be an esoteric reason for his imprisonment?

His work has been to serve the king, and he is shown in service to Vortigern, Uther, and Arthur in Geoffrey's *Historia* (c. 1130).<sup>27</sup> In Nennius' *Historia Brittonum* (c. 800), Merlin is not named, but is known by the name Ambrose in Latin and Emrys in Welsh, in a role that is later embellished by Geoffrey in his *Historia* as Merlin Ambrosius, to maintain continuity with Nennius. It is possible that there was indeed once a 'small book' which had recorded the whole story from the years that passed from the fifth century to the time of Nennius' writing, which Geoffrey would have been able to use to access more specific information on the stories involving Arthur and Merlin. Such a book has never been found, however, and the reason for this motif is undoubtedly to confirm the veracity of Geoffrey's account. Geoffrey includes the 'Prophecies of Merlin' in the *Historia*, which are later included in different forms in other texts, including the later *King Lear*, while his *Vita Merlini* appears to deal with an alternate version of Merlin.

Merlin's significance in the Arthurian tales stems from his loyal service and support of Arthur, his magical talent and skill, and the strength and depth of his Earth-centred wisdom. It is likely, then, that the Lady of the Lake, the Lady Bertilak and Morgana le Fay, whether they are represented separately, grouped into a triad, or conflated into one magical person, use magic in accordance with the prophecy given by Diana to Dione, in the quest to outdo and silence Merlin, by taking advantage of his ability to love deeply as a means to gain his power for themselves; perhaps they have not gained his particular Earth wisdom. The question of why the Lady of the Lake steals Merlin's powers and imprisons him in the Earth may have more than one answer. This motif seems to at least have a double meaning. Clearly, the intent is to learn all that can be learned before imprisoning Merlin. However, might this motif also hint that Merlin becomes permanently united with the Earth by means of this imprisonment, in which case he would be deeply immersed in the sacred qualities of the goodness and beauty of life and form in Nature. In the light of the episode of the Green Chapel, in which worship can occur within an immersive context of nature, it might be possible to ascertain a clearer answer to this question. Further, there is a contract in place, requiring that Merlin should first teach the woman, and then the woman will entrap Merlin in the Earth. Further, might the imprisonment signify a sacrifice, a relinquishment of independence for the sake of Nature? Might this represent an actual

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27 Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Britanniae*, c. 1130.

mergence, even a deep spiritual mergence of Merlin with air, rock and Earth?

In the *Prose Merlin*, Merlin speaks to Gawain and advises him from his prison in the rocky fastness. He tells the knight that he will never see him again, and that he cannot be freed.

'My lorde Sir Gawein,' quoth Merlin, 'me shull ye never see; and that hevieth me sore that I may do none other. And when ye be departed from hen, I hall never speke with you no more, ne with noon other saf only with my leef. Ne from hen may I not come oute, ne never I shall come oute, ... Ne I may not come oute ne noon may entre, saf she that me here hath enclosed, that bereth me companye whan hir liked, and goth hens whan hir liste.'<sup>28</sup>

Merlin's fastness is made not of iron nor of stone. Rather, he tells Gawain, that 'in all the worlde is not so stronge a clos as in this whereas I am. And it is nother of iren ne tiell ne tymbir ne of ston', but, rather, 'it is of the aire withoute eny othir thinge by enchauntemente so strong that it may never be undon while the world endureth'.<sup>29</sup> In his Introduction to the *Prose Merlin*, John Conlee calls this 'a kind of living death'.<sup>30</sup> There is therefore no sign of Merlin actually dying; there is an imprisonment in the fastness that is 'of the aire'. It is suggested that Merlin, in his long captivity in his 'grave' may be looked upon as now belonging to Earth and Air, and as having become part of the world. As such, he would now be a 'spirit' of the Earth, and so associated with the world that he might be seen as a kind of 'world-spirit'.

Gawain asks him: 'How is that, swete frend, that ye be in this manner withholden, that noon may you delyver by no force that may be do, ne ye may not you shewe to me, that be the wisest man of the worlde?' Merlin responds that 'I am soche a fole that I love another better than myself, and have hir lerned so moche where thourgh I am thos beclosed and shette in orison, ne noonmay me oute bringe'.<sup>31</sup>

The *Prose Merlin* records that Merlin informs Blase, his own master,<sup>32</sup> that he has made with Nimiane a 'covenant',<sup>33</sup> one from which he cannot withdraw.<sup>34</sup> It is after she has learned from Merlin 'all that she could ask', that Nimiane has decided to seek the secret knowledge of how to imprison Merlin forever, apparently desiring to be free to perform her magic

28 *Prose Merlin*, lines 227-230.

29 *Ibid.*, lines 232-234.

30 Conlee, 'Introduction', *Prose Merlin*, p. 1.

31 Robert de Boron, *Prose Merlin*, 'Merlin's Imprisonment', lines 227-242.

32 Blase was Merlin's mother's former confessor, as she was a nun.

33 *Prose Merlin*, 'Merlin and Nimiane', line 44.

34 Robert de Boron, *Prose Merlin*, 'Merlin's Imprisonment'; and Gawain and the Dwarf Knight', Ed. John Conlee, University of Rochester, 1998. 'Merlin and Nimiane', line 44.

unimpeded. As we noted earlier, neither Nimiane nor Merlin was free to choose in this matter. However, there are two covenants involved, the principal one between Diana and Dionas, and the secondary one which results from the first, that between Nimiane and Merlin. Merlin tells Gawain that he is shut 'in orison', which we may take as meaning not only that he is in a state of prayer, but also in one of eternal 'contemplation'. In his last words to Gawain, he sends good wishes to Arthur, whom he will now no longer be able to advise or protect.

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*Ethics in Nature Lore: A Further Development and Application of Ecolore*

Ethics that are evident in the texts discussed above, and which are engaged with ecolore, include: respect for Nature in the world; because we cause so much harm to nature and because this appears to come from human selfishness and human-centredness, we can learn to take this capacity for harming innocent nature due to our selfishness, which we might call taking the harm out of ourselves; acknowledging the presence of spirit, the sacred or nature spirits, evident in the essence of the Beautiful and the Good in Nature, and the essence of Truth that binds these ideal qualities; and evoke Christ's Golden Rule, to do unto others as we would have others do unto us—a maxim for humans to apply to all life and to the whole Earth, with its ecosystems, and its biosphere, its atmosphere, its lithosphere and its hydrosphere.<sup>35</sup>

This essay has engaged with some of the lore of humankind in its relationship to non-human nature. The tales, customs and aspects of traditional lore that relate to the world of nature, and which include non-human life and the ancient recognition of ubiquitous nature spirits that inhabit earth, sea, and air, indicate a sense of spirit that pervades life and matter, which leads to a view of our world as sacred. The ancient metaphor of spirits inhabiting sacred places includes streams, woodlands, hills and valleys, and signifies the need for humans to respect all the life that inhabits all places.<sup>36</sup> This leads to a consideration of the ethics involved in human relationships with the natural world, and the need for an exploration of how to apply the sacred ethics and values of the ancients to non-human

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35 The Ecosphere is composed of the spheres that deal with the rocky nature of Earth, the water, the air and the life: the lithosphere, hydrosphere, atmosphere and biosphere. Some of these have further divisions in the context of their individual sciences.

36 The only land for which we lack tales of nature lore is Antarctica, yet the lore of other lands largely fills the gap. For example, there is bound to be some lore that exists as a result of expeditions mounted to the South Pole, and creatures of the ice and far southern seas include sea and land life with which we are mostly on friendly terms. This will be a fruitful area for future exploration.

nature. This would be based on humanity's deep exploration of the elements of the world, as found in our culture and relating to our vision for a better world in the future, supporting the view that humans would do well to respect the non-human world.

In our last essay the discussion centred on Celtic and Greek mythological ecolore, building on the presence of nature spirits in the two traditions and relating these to our present time, in which ecological imbalance is such a prominent concern, carrying with it implications for our future in terms of living in a well-balanced set of ecosystems on Earth. While a well-balanced ecosphere is clearly no longer the reality, it is able to be held as a fresh ideal for future generations to aspire to. We have expanded this focus mainly with reference to elements in the Celtic lore, and there is of course more to be said, not only on the nature spirits themselves, but on the contexts in which these stories have been told originally.

There are at least two reasons for relating these two areas together: 1) the ancient lore of our species comes from a time when our culture was less separated from the natural world than it is today; 2) the ancient lore grew up hand-in-hand with substantial spiritual and philosophical traditions to which it seems logical for us pay attention. In point of fact, for our present world to ignore the ancient planetary wisdom of our species, would be a suicidal error not only for humans, but for the balance of Earth, a world that once enabled all life to thrive, although the evidence that its balance has been compromised continues to mount.

The ancient lore of the Greeks was associated with not only Greek mythology and religion, but also the age of Greek philosophy, in which we can find the origins of a large portion of our present-day ethics and values.<sup>37</sup>

### *Respect for Sacred Space*

Lack of respect for sacred space and for the deities associated with sacred place in mythology might result in the cessation of the aspect of nature that involved, or even worse, might lead to a location being ignored or cursed by the deity. It seems that the laws of nature have in the past been represented as connected with agreements between the religious authorities in charge of ceremony and ritual, and the nature spirits that inhabit various locations and help those places to thrive. Humans have in that sense always been aware that they had obligations to keep regarding nature. However, as humans began to distance themselves from nature, more and more agreements have been set aside. Perhaps this idea might

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<sup>37</sup> It should be noted that Christian ethics and values were afterwards combined with these, but these will be considered separately at another time.

seem a bit far-fetched at first glance, but we may read this as simply a metaphor. Either way, it is clear that we benefit from paying attention to the natural landscapes we inhabit, watering when the rain fails to fall, and feeding animals when wild food is not available.

The Greeks honoured the Muses and kept their spring on Mount Helicon sacred. In turn, poets and singers would call upon the Muses to bless their endeavours and help them continue in their skills and performances. This kind of interaction was a part of the culture, and it enriched the life of the community. Without such exchanges the sacred skills of inspiration in the arts and music, so necessary to human culture, might fall into decline. As the piety of the population and particularly of rulers began to decline, so did the finesse of their arts. In the same way, our world suffers more each day, as we push aside our obligations to relate to the world in a respectful and nurturing way. Perhaps we might take the Golden Rule as our standard, and treat the world as we would prefer to be treated.

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Merlin the Enchanter by Louis Rhead (1923). Public domain image.