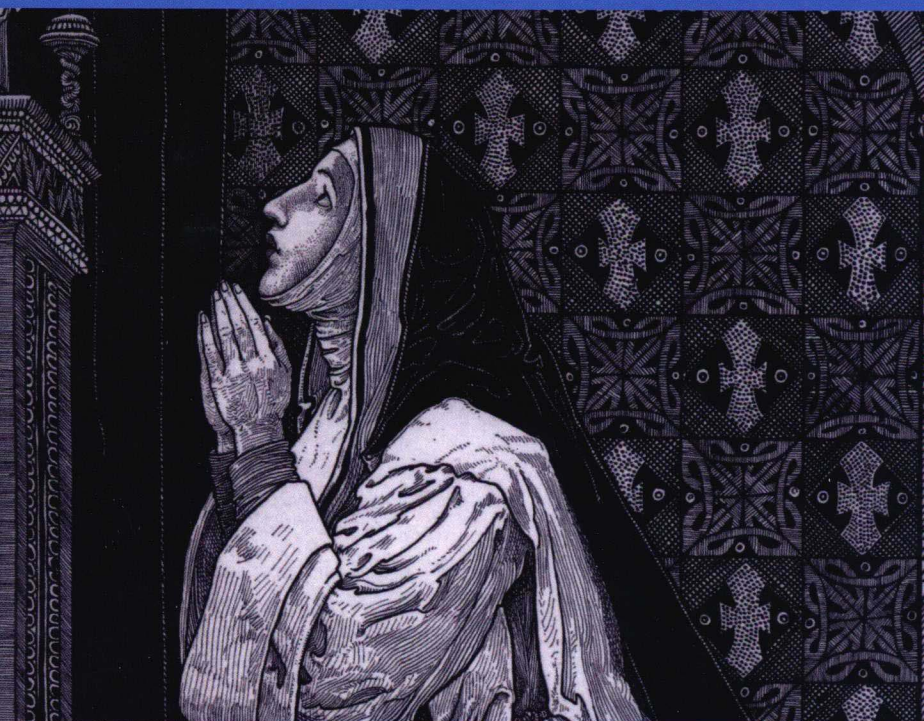# Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Feminist Origins of the Arthurian Legend
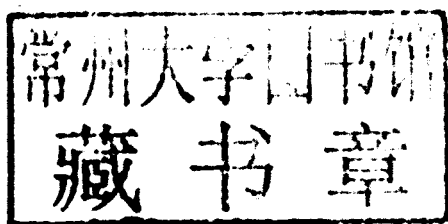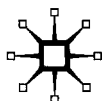
Fiona Tolhurst

GEOFFREY OF MONMOUTH AND THE FEMINIST ORIGINS OF THE ARTHURIAN LEGEND

Fiona Tolhurst

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For
Maureen Fries

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ABBREVIATIONS

CMGC	*Cyfoesi Myrddin a Gwenddydd ei chwaer* [The Prophecy of Myrddin and Gwenddydd, His Sister], in *The Romance of Merlin: An Anthology*, ed. Peter Goodrich (New York & London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1990)
FV	Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The Historia regum Britannie of Geoffrey of Monmouth 2: The First Variant Version, a Critical Edition* [*The First Variant*], ed. Neil Wright (Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 1988)
HRB	Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain: An Edition and Translation of* De gestis Britonum (*Historia regum Britanniae*), ed. Michael D. Reeve, trans. Neil Wright (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2007)
HRB Bern	Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The Historia regum Britannie of Geoffrey of Monmouth 1: Bern, Burgerbibliothek, MS. 568*, ed. Neil Wright (Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 1984)
LB	Laȝamon, *Laȝamon Brut or Hystoria Brutonum*, ed. and trans. with textual notes and commentary by W. R. J. Barron and S. C. Weinberg (Essex: Longman Group Ltd, 1995)
RB	Wace, *Wace's* roman de Brut: *A History of the British, Text and Translation*, ed. and trans. Judith Weiss, revised edition, Exeter Medieval English Texts and Studies (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002)
VM	Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Vita Merlini / Life of Merlin*, ed. with introduction, facing translation, textual commentary, name notes index and translations of the *Lailoken* tales by Basil Clarke (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1973)

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INTRODUCTION

GEOFFREY OF MONMOUTH AND THE
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Geoffrey of Monmouth has received recognition for his contribution to the development of Latin into the language of medieval "courtiers" as well as to the emergence of the genres of romance and political prophecy.[1] Even his minor contribution to the content of early modern plays has received acknowledgment.[2] Literary critics have, however, misread the Arthurian section of Geoffrey's *Historia regum Britanniae* and neglected to explore the most interesting aspect of his Arthurian poem, the *Vita Merlini*. Because *The History of the Kings of Britain*, a work completed shortly before its discovery in January 1139, is universally acknowledged as a foundational text in the medieval Arthurian tradition, it receives a good deal of scholarly attention.[3] Nevertheless, the readings of it that scholars produce—whether those readings focus solely on the Arthurian section or discuss both the Arthurian and non-Arthurian material in the book—tend to position Geoffrey's history as a patriarchal, problematic, and lowly predecessor of the medieval romances that followed it. In contrast to his well-known major work, Geoffrey's *Life of Merlin* (completed ca. 1150) receives little scholarly attention; a likely reason for this critical neglect is the poem's "extremely limited circulation" during the medieval period that prevented its having a significant influence upon subsequent versions of the Arthurian legend.[4] The poem's lack of appeal as a subject of study might also stem from its form (Latin verse), brevity (only 1529 lines), and tone shifts, all of which make it an awkward text with which to work as well as a stark contrast to *The History of the Kings of Britain*.

It is my contention, however, that study of Geoffrey of Monmouth's prose history and Merlin poem, within the context of literary works closely related to them, reveals this twelfth-century author to be the creator of two points of origin for the Arthurian legend that merit the label of 'feminist.' In order to lay the groundwork for this line of argument,

this introduction explains the utility of a feminist-historicist approach to Geoffrey's works, defines the methodology employed in this study, justifies the application of the adjective 'feminist' to a male author of the medieval period, and provides an overview of the four chapters that follow.

The Need for a New Perspective on Geoffrey's Arthurian Works

A feminist-historicist reading of *The Life of Merlin* has utility because recent criticism has had nothing to say about a striking feature of this poem: both a female prophet and an early version of Morgan le Fay feature prominently in it. Such a reading of Geoffrey's *History of the Kings of Britain* has utility because it would remedy an awkward situation: while some readings of *The History of the Kings of Britain* deal with the text too cursorily to examine particular characters in detail, other ones approach it using interpretive paradigms that either exclude female figures from consideration or preclude a feminist reading of Geoffrey's book. Chaucer specialist Lee Patterson provides an example of cursory treatment of *The History of the Kings of Britain* despite his acknowledging the book's pivotal role in the development of insular historiography. This literary critic credits Geoffrey with giving subsequent medieval writers access to "a secular, purposive, linear historicity" grounded in Virgil's *Aeneid*, sparking a centuries-long "obsession with Trojan origins" in England, and creating an Arthur whose challenge to the Roman Empire both demonstrates and destroys his supremacy.[5] Nevertheless, Patterson offers detailed readings of *Le roman d'Eneas*, Chrétien de Troyes's *Erec et Enide*, and the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* while merely invoking Geoffrey's history—a noteworthy omission in a book entitled *Negotiating the Past*.[6] Other scholars examine Geoffrey's history in some detail but within interpretive frameworks that preclude consideration of female figures. For example, because Arthurian literature specialist Maureen Fries explores how Boethian ideas shape Geoffrey's history, particularly how "Boethian self-possession" defines good kingship, she discusses only male rulers.[7] Using a similarly male-centered interpretive framework, fellow Arthurian literature specialist Susan M. Shwartz documents Geoffrey's use of an Augustinian model of historiography, "one of betrayal by sin followed by retribution"; consequently, her analysis centers on parallels between King Arturus and King David of Israel and allows only one female figure to enter the discussion, Ronwein, who within this schema can function only negatively—as the sin-inducing object of King Vortegirnus's desire.[8] The approach of medieval romance specialist Laura D. Barefield—despite her concession that Innogin, Iudon, and Tonwenna demonstrate "the persistence and

power of cognatic connections for the kings of Britain"—precludes a feminist reading of Geoffrey's book because her view that its "narrative structure" "naturalizes and embeds patriarchy and the assumptions concerning gender it brings" leads ineluctably to the conclusion that *The History of the Kings of Britain* supports patriarchal power.[9] In all of the readings discussed so far, females are either irrelevant or marginal to the project of interpreting Geoffrey's history.

Although the marginalization of female figures in historicist, postcolonialist, and gender studies readings of Geoffrey's history is not necessitated by the choice of critical approach, it is remarkably consistent. In the chapter that historicist critic Stephen Knight devotes to *The History of the Kings of Britain*, he mentions only two of the female figures from the Arthurian section of the text, both of which he marginalizes and one of which he villainizes. When mentioning Helena, the niece of Duke Hoelus whom the Giant of Mont Saint-Michel kidnaps and assaults, Knight supplies neither her name nor an analysis of her story. Moreover, he identifies her as a relative of Arturus who is "raped and murdered" by the giant, a statement that is inaccurate for two reasons: the giant neither achieves forced coitus nor causes Helena's death intentionally.[10] Knight remains similarly silent about Queen Ganhumara's presence at the glorious crown-wearing at Caerleon in which she participates with her husband—although he discusses the ceremony at some length.[11] When Knight does mention Arturus's queen, however, it is to villainize her: first he identifies Ganhumara as having broken her marriage vows, and then he interprets her as a woman who "might not have been entirely unwilling to go with Mordred."[12] Postcolonialist critic Michelle R. Warren's study of *The History of the Kings of Britain* and the Welsh, English, and French texts that respond to it includes only one female figure from the Arthurian section, Helena, and she receives mention only because she dies before the Giant of Mont Saint-Michel can rape her.[13] When Warren mentions some of the female figures that appear in the non-Arthurian portion of the text, she assigns them to one of three categories: participants in dynastic marriages, victims or perpetrators of violence, or wives who inspire either city-building or lust in their husbands.[14]

Even gender studies critic Jeffrey Jerome Cohen assesses Geoffrey's presentation of Arthurian females harshly. In his wide-ranging study of both epic and romance texts, Igerna's only significance is that she produces two children after being "tricked into sleeping with Uther" while Ganhumara remains a marginal figure: she participates in the Caerleon celebrations but dines "segregated from the men," and she finally becomes a nun after proving to be an infertile adulteress.[15] Although Cohen mentions Guendoloena's fifteen-year reign and Ganhumara's "role in her husband's

plenary court," he attributes to Geoffrey's female figures only minor and negative roles.[16] Given that several critical approaches have produced similarly ungenerous responses to Geoffrey's female figures, a different methodology is needed to facilitate a systematic and nuanced study of them.

The need for a methodology that foregrounds Geoffrey's female figures becomes even more evident in light of the readings of medieval romance specialists who, despite acknowledging Geoffrey's *History of the Kings of Britain* as a point of origin for the genre of romance, suggest the insignificance of his Arthurian works.[17] Helen Cooper, whose field of expertise encompasses both medieval and early modern literature, makes Geoffrey of Monmouth's contribution to the genre of romance seem unimportant by giving it a prominent position in the title of her study (*The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare*), but not in her subsequent analysis. At various points in her discussion of the development of medieval English romance, Cooper acknowledges Geoffrey's role as an originator of the genre: he "set many of the stories of romance on their way," created Merlin's biography, saved the Celtic hero Arthur from obscurity, gave this hero both Avalon as a place to be healed and a beautiful sister Morgen to care for him, and provided subsequent authors with the story of King Leir and his daughters.[18] However, readers interested in Geoffrey's Arthurian works will find only a handful of references to and brief discussions of them in Cooper's masterful four-hundred-page study.[19] Furthermore, in all but one instance, Cooper mentions Geoffrey's contributions to the development of romance merely in passing, and, even on the one full page that she devotes to his history of Britain, she suggests that its only value lies in the trends it started: there is no close reading of Geoffrey's romance episodes because the focus is on later, and presumably more important, texts.[20] In short, Cooper's presentation of *The History of the Kings of Britain* and *The Life of Merlin* leads readers to believe that neither work merits much attention.

Among specialists in Continental romance, Geoffrey's history suffers harsh dismissal rather than mere marginalization for two reasons: Geoffrey receives blame for the villainization of Arthur's queen that occurred during the medieval period, and his Arthurian section fails to meet the expectations of scholars who measure it against a standard derived from the romances that followed it. These tendencies are particularly evident in the 1996 essay collection *Lancelot and Guinevere: A Casebook*. In her introduction to the volume, Lori J. Walters allots to *The History of the Kings of Britain* just two sentences and through them defines it as the origin of Guenevere's negative traits, and nothing more. Walters asserts that "in his need to explain the downfall of a ruler as eminent as Arthur, Geoffrey in his *Historia* had her engage in acts of adultery and commit high treason

with Mordred," and she concludes that Geoffrey's "negative portrayal" of Arthur's queen "would come to color the tradition."[21] As a result, Geoffrey of Monmouth receives the blame for medieval authors' subsequent villainization of the primary female figure in the Arthurian tradition. Furthermore, by defining Geoffrey's presentation of Ganhumara as negative and omitting any mention of the female rulers that appear in Geoffrey's history, this introduction encourages readers to assume that he treats all of his female figures in a similar manner. The articles that comprise this casebook likewise treat Geoffrey's history dismissively and negatively. Only one article discusses *The History of the Kings of Britain*, and in that article German literature specialist Susann Samples devotes only two paragraphs to it—paragraphs in which she presents Arturus's queen as a marginal figure.[22] Samples's analysis of the separate Masses and feasts in which Arturus and Ganhumara participate during their celebratory crown-wearing implies that all Galfridian females occupy a marginal position. Nevertheless, Samples's inverting the narrative order of the Masses and feasts suggests a lack of interest in Geoffrey's Ganhumara, one that becomes palpable when she sets the Latin text aside in order to focus on the French and German romances that followed it.[23] Her objections to both the "lack of interaction" between the king and queen during the crown-wearing and the historian's failure to develop either the "courtship" of the couple or a full portrait of their marriage reveal that she faults Geoffrey for failing to meet her expectations, expectations set by romances that postdate his history.[24] Although other literary critics have expressed more generous views of Geoffrey's Ganhumara, scholars interested in Continental romances tend to use Geoffrey's Arthurian section as a negative example of the presentation of female figures that romances rectify.[25] Such dismissal, however, is possible only because these critics do not examine all the female figures that appear in Geoffrey's extant works, or even all the females that appear in the Arthurian section of *The History of the Kings of Britain*. A feminist-historicist approach to Geoffrey's Arthurian works offers a means of giving Galfridian females the attention they have yet to receive.

My choice of a feminist-historicist approach to Geoffrey's Arthurian works has precedents possessing both longevity and authoritative origins. These precedents have been part of the scholarly conversation about Geoffrey's works for nearly three-quarters of a century, and they have the support of distinguished scholars in both literary and historical studies. The oldest precedent is a 1938 article on Geoffrey's motives for writing his history, written by Arthurian literature and Chaucer specialist J. S. P. Tatlock. In this article, Tatlock observed that the female rulers of early Britain who appear in *The History of the Kings of Britain* constitute

support for the claim of Empress Matilda, the only surviving legitimate heir of her father King Henry I, to the English throne.[26] Twelve years later, in his encyclopedic study of *The History of the Kings of Britain* and its early translations, Tatlock argued that the most likely explanation for Geoffrey's creating several legendary female rulers and presenting their reigns in positive terms was the political need to provide historical precedents for the reign of Empress Matilda in England.[27]

The analysis of this founder of modern Galfridian studies received confirmation in 1974 from historian Antonia Gransden, despite her strong disapproval of Geoffrey of Monmouth as lacking commitment to recording historical fact.[28] Gransden acknowledges that, because Geoffrey was "a supporter of the Empress Matilda," "women play an important part in the *Historia*"—some of whom function as "successful British rulers."[29] Problematically, however, she chooses to comment not upon female rulers but rather upon Igerna and Ganhumara as "the objects of men's love" whose "beauty leads men to illicit passion."[30] In 1993, Arthurian literature specialists Martin B. Shichtman and Laurie A. Finke (citing Gransden) corroborated Tatlock's positive assessment of Galfridian females. In a much-cited article, they assert that "the presence of so many prominent women in the *Historia*—and Geoffrey's praise of those women—serve to create a precedent for the woman ruler."[31] Nevertheless, with only one exception Shichtman and Finke categorize Geoffrey's female figures as "dutiful daughters" (Cordeilla), "pawns in the gender politics of feudo-dynasticism" (Innogin and Ganhumara), peacemakers (Gewissa and Tonwenna), or adulteresses who do not receive condemnation (Igerna and Ganhumara); moreover, this exception is the 'evil woman' Ronwein to whom they devote more attention than any other female figure.[32] Because Galfridian females have never received enough attention from literary critics for either their individual or their collective significance to emerge, this volume attempts to fill this interpretive gap. It does so by providing detailed analysis of all the female figures that appear in Geoffrey's Arthurian works, analysis that adds an essential dimension to the current understanding of Geoffrey's contribution to the Arthurian literature of the Middle Ages by documenting the uniqueness of that contribution.

Given both the historical moment at which Geoffrey completed his history—when political conditions in Norman-controlled England made it possible for Empress Matilda to attain the English throne that her father King Henry I had left to her—and the varied and mostly positive roles that Geoffrey assigns to the female figures in both his history and his Arthurian poem, a feminist-historicist approach to Geoffrey's works is the most appropriate methodology through which to study them. In order to argue that Geoffrey's portrayal of female power in his Arthurian

works is a response to the political career of Empress Matilda, I employ the strategies of both historicist and New Historicist critics. Like traditional historicist critics, I interpret literary works in relation to a particular historical moment: in this case, Empress Matilda's attempt to gain permanent possession of the English throne. Like New Historicist critics, I focus on how various texts—the Arthurian section of *The History of the Kings of Britain*, a chronicle account of Empress Matilda's wedding, two redactions of Geoffrey's history, the Arthurian sections of Wace's and Laȝamon's translations of Geoffrey's history, *The Life of Merlin*, and one of the likely Welsh sources of the poem—illuminate one another rather than engage in source study for its own sake. By labeling my work as feminist-historicist in method, I try to make my interests and biases evident, for I share Patterson's belief that historicism (like any other act of interpretation) can offer neither "disinterested" analysis nor neat separation of "external and internal evidence."[33]

Defining and Redefining the Other F-Word

The feminist point of origin for this study of Geoffrey of Monmouth is the scholarship of Maureen Fries, to whom I dedicate my work in the hope that I honor her memory by comparing the female figures in both the Arthurian section of Geoffrey's history and his Arthurian poem to the female figures present in related literary works. In particular, the terminology with which Fries describes female figures in medieval Arthurian literature—female hero, heroine, and female counter-hero—provides an interpretive framework that I adapt in order to describe Galfridian females.[34] Moving beyond the assumption that heroism is by definition male, Fries categorizes Arthurian females according to their functions. They can be heroines who are "conservative, passive, instrumental non-actors, useful for provoking, renewing and rewarding the actions of their knight-agents"; female heroes who "may, indirectly and for a specified time, consciously play female parts to effect transformation of their male-dominant world, but...always act only for knightly benefit"; or female counter-heroes who "openly refuse to be seen in womanly supportive roles in what is essentially a male drama and attempt to change their woman-hostile world by direct and not indirect action"—action that is "often...in their own interest instead of the males'."[35]

Fries's paradigm, however, has limitations: it assumes that female figures never play traditionally male roles such as king or hero (in the traditional, male sense) and cannot act in their own interest without becoming dangerous or destructive to males. Because Arthurian literature specialist Donald L. Hoffman has already used the female figures in Sir Thomas

Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* to demonstrate that Fries's categories can overlap, this study expands and modifies these categories in order to accommodate the characters present in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* and *Life of Merlin*.[36] By doing so, it corroborates historian Joan Cadden's conclusion that, because many conflicting ideas about gender were in circulation in the medieval West, "there is no coherent set of concepts that can be said to constitute the medieval gender framework."[37] In addition, by allowing the data in Geoffrey's texts to determine the categories that his female figures occupy instead of forcing these figures into predetermined categories, this study honors a principle that historian Judith M. Bennett articulates: that feminist medievalists should offer fresh perspectives on the Middle Ages without allowing their feminist values to determine either their findings or how they describe those findings.[38]

Because this study of Galfridian females builds upon Fries's work, it continues the tradition of images of women scholarship within Anglo-American feminist studies; nevertheless, it adds a new dimension to this type of scholarship by proposing that the word 'feminist' can—under particular circumstances—be used to describe a medieval text. It resembles traditional images of women criticism both in focusing on the female figures in several literary texts and in examining how these texts present gender roles. Moreover, like much Anglo-American feminist work, it does not approach the language of the texts under investigation from a poststructuralist perspective. This choice, however, is a function of the texts under investigation as well as of personal philosophy. Like French literature specialist Jean Blacker, I treat medieval texts from a structuralist perspective because the authors of the texts in which I am interested treat language as referring to realities outside of the text.[39] In addition, I share historian Nancy F. Partner's discomfort with Foucaultian social constructivism that assumes "women have nothing to do at all, except passively display whatever imprint the patriarchal discourses have directed to their specific class, race, status."[40] Consequently, my analysis focuses on how the traits and actions of female figures shape readers' perceptions of male figures rather than the other way around. This approach reveals that Geoffrey of Monmouth was a male writer of the medieval period who produced texts worthy of the label 'feminist,' if this term is defined in a period-specific way. I refer to this term as the other f-word in order to highlight the strong reactions it tends to elicit, whether it is applied to medieval or modern texts.

Although my proposed redefinition of the other f-word might appear to be a radical step, it offers greater clarity of meaning when producing feminist analyses of medieval texts than other terms provide. Certainly, most medievalists shy away from using the word 'feminist' on the basis

of anachronism: the common view is that to use the word in reference to any premodern text is inappropriate because the feminist movement did not begin until the modern period, and the word itself did not officially enter the English language until 1895.[41] Middle English literature specialists Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson articulate this view in their introduction to a volume of feminist readings of medieval texts. They declare that "'feminism' is not an historically portable term," for women's status and "modes of resistance" to their status changed as Western society moved from the medieval, to the early modern, to the modern period.[42] Nevertheless, such a view fails to take into account two facts: the word 'feminist' is already fraught, and the words that substitute for it are no less problematic. Anyone asserting a feminist identity must specify the tradition to which s/he belongs: Anglo-American or French? Second Wave or Third Wave? Lesbian? Queer? In addition, because every user of the term brings to it generational, cultural, and political biases that determine his or her understanding of what feminism is and should do, the word itself lacks a specific referent. It can connote anything from a focus on analyzing women's roles, to an interest in and commitment to women's rights, to a systematic critique of patriarchal social and political systems, to a rejection of modern patriarchy and concomitant call for female separatism. As a result, people who embrace the label of 'feminist' disagree, sometimes fundamentally, about the status and purpose of the feminist movement as well as about what constitutes feminist work within academe.

For feminist scholars working in the field of medieval studies, there are at least two additional problems associated with using the word 'feminist': alternatives to the word do not offer greater clarity of meaning, and the concept of the 'antifeminist' tradition of the Middle Ages is a given with which they must contend. A common solution to the problem of trying to label medieval texts that do not conform to misogynist norms is to amend the word 'feminist' to signal the difference between modern/feminist and premodern/nonfeminist times. The results are words such as 'protofeminist' and 'prefeminist.' Unfortunately, because the term 'feminist' already encompasses clashing meanings, these amended terms can do no more than identify a text as premodern, for what 'protofeminist' or 'prefeminist' might mean depends upon the user's definition of what 'feminist' means. Consequently, the amended versions of the word are no clearer in meaning than the original one. Even the term 'profeminine' that has been offered by Alcuin Blamires, a specialist in medieval texts about women, is problematic if one is trying to describe female characters that play roles traditionally reserved for males.[43] More specifically, 'profeminine' suggests praise of traditionally feminine qualities, making the term inapplicable to Geoffrey of Monmouth's female kings who display a combination