A Nature Interlude in the *Vita Merlini*

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It has long been recognized that the 1,529 line *Vita Merlini* ("Merlin's Life") contains passages that derive directly from Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies*. This paper will examine one of those passages in detail, and will discuss the technical virtuosity shown in transforming good Latin prose into excellent Latin poetry.

The authorship of the *Vita Merlini* is unknown. My examination and rejection of the commonly-held attribution to Geoffrey of Monmouth may be found on my website www.skupinbooks.com in *Squibs*, the essay titled "Not Geoffrey." Explicitly removing Geoffrey as a factor will help us focus on the poem as it stands on the page, without preconceptions. I will refer to the author as the *Vita Merlini* (VM) poet.

The reader unfamiliar with this fine medieval epic is referred to two sources, John J. Parry's annotated *en face* translation (University of Illinois, 1925), and

to my website (above), which has a close *en face* translation, a free poetic one with a prefatory overview, and a discussion of the work as a source of twentieth century poet Laurence Binyon's drama *The Madness of Merlin.*

I trust that the reader familiar with Latin poetry will indulge a few prefatory remarks about dactylic hexameter, the meter of the *Vita Merlini*. If this is redundant, so be it; I had rather include readers than exclude them.

Dactylic hexameter, the rhythm *par excellence* of epic poetry, consists of six-beat lines of dactyls (a long syllable followed by two short ones) and spondees (two long syllables).   Noteworthy revivals of this meter include Goethe's *Hermann und Dorothea* and Longfellow's *Evangeline*. Ovid (known to the VM poet) used it for light-hearted themes, but more commonly it is used as did Vergil (also known to the VM poet), for themes of weight and dignity. The poet controls the tempo by balancing the ictus (the tick-tock regular rhythm) and the accent (the natural stress of the words). When ictus and accent match, the motion of the verse is fast and smooth; when they clash, the movement is slow, with syncopated "kicks."   The author's challenge is to fit the poetic means with the poetic message.

On three occasions the VM poet took on another challenge, that of versifying the prose of encyclopedist Isidore of Seville. He did so successfully, and his achievement is remarkable both for the ingenuity of the circumlocutions he employed and for the fidelity to Isidores text that will be demonstrated. VM 875-909 derive from Isidore's XIV.vi, *De insulis* ("concerning islands"), VM 1179-1242 from Isidore's XIII.xiii, *De diversitate aquarum*, ("concerning the diversity of bodies of water"), and VM 1301-1386 from Isidore's XII.vii, *De avibus* ("concerning birds"). It is the second of these passages that will be discussed, using the Oxford text.

Isidore mentions thirty noteworthy sites:

1. The Albulan waters, near Rome.
2. The Fountain of Cicero, in Italy.
3. A lake in Ethiopia.
4. Zama, a spring in Africa.
5. Lake Clitorius, in Italy.
6. A spring in Chios.
7. Two springs in Boeothia.
8. A spring named Cyzicus.
9. A lake in Boeothia.
10. Waters in Campagna.
11. A spring in Ethiopia.
12. Leinus, a spring in Arcadia.
13. Two springs in Sicily.
14. Two rivers in Thessaly.
15. Clitumnus, a lake in Umbria.
16. The Reatine swamp.
17. The "Asphalt Lake" in Judaea.
18. Side, a pond in India.
19. Apuscidamus, a lake in Africa.
20. The spring of Marsidas, in Phrygia.
21. The water called Styx, in Achaia.
22. The Gelonian pond, in Sicily.
23. A spring in Africa around the temple of Ammon.
24. The Spring of Job in Idumaea.
25. A lake in the "Trogodytes."
26. The spring of Siloam
27. A river in Judaea
28. Springs in Sardinia
29. A spring in Epirus
30. A spring among the Garamantes

Before detailing the ingenuity with which the VM poet is true to Isidore's original, let us consider instances where he is not. He merges #7 and #9 above (they are, after all, both in Boeothia). He cuts #22 and #23, likewise #26, #27 and #28. Slips of the pen like *Achadia* for Isidore's *Achaia* (line 1223) need no special commentary, but one of his renderings is so outlandish that it fairly jumps off the page: for Isidores lake *Apuscidamus* he gives lake *Aloe*. How does one get *Aloe* from *Apuscidamus*?

I do not know.

(Duly set off in parentheses, however, I offer a few thoughts. First, Isidores original:

At contra in Africae lacu Apuscidamo omnia fluitant, nihil mergitur.

["But on the other hand, in Africa's lake Apuscidamus, all things float,

nothing sinks."]

   The Oxford editor notes that some manuscripts have *alce*, others *alche*
instead of *Africae*. If *Africae* is doubtful, then, and if *Apusci*- is a slip of the
pen for *Apsuci*- [or, if you prefer, a transposition error], which would give us
the Greek word ΑΨΟ×ΪΌ [apsykhos, "without life {psyche}, inanimate"],
then one could think that Isidores original was a Greek description of Israel's
Dead Sea, where [almost] all things float and [almost] nothing sinks.

   If the VM poet was working from an *alce* manuscript, and read the *c* as
an *o*, then that would account for his *aloe*.

$$in\ al\underline{c}e\ lacu \rightarrow in\ al\underline{o}e\ lacu.$$

Here endeth the guesswork.)

   The VM poet *is* a poet, but he finds ways to anchor his fancy to the prose
that he is versifying. First, he reuses Isidore's words that have poetic, that is,
metrical possibilities: note the last two words of Isidore's sentence.

   In Italia fons Ciceronis oculorum vulnera curat.

   ("In Italy the spring of Cicero cures wounds of the eyes.")
The syllable lengths of *vulnera curat* are long-short-short long-long (metrically,
a dactyl and a spondee), which is the trademark rhythm of the last two feet of
a dactylic hexameter line. Even in prose, ending a sentence with this kind of
metrical swing was an effect the Romans admired: it can be found in the
oratory of Cicero and the history of Livy. By the Middle Ages, judging by its
scarcity, the device had lost its "punch,"   so I suspect that this instance in
Isidore is not calculated, but mere coincidence. Be that as it may, however,
the VM poet seizes on the coincidence; it is a way to minimize the need for
poetic jugglery, and allow him to save his creative energies for trickier passages.

Manat in italia fons alter qui ciceronis   Another fountain flows in Italy, which
                                             is Cicero's,

Dicitur hic oculos ex omni <u>vulnere curat</u> It is said; this cures the eyes from
   Sometimes a little rearranging is necessary.   every injury.

                                             Isidore wrote

   Zamae fons in Africa canoras voces facit.

   ("The spring at Zama in Africa, makes voices melodious.")

   The VM poet rearranges the words to compliment the dactylic hexameter
line.

 Potus dat <u>voces</u> subita virtute <u>canoras</u> 1191. One   drink,   and   it   produces
                                                   melodious   voices   with
                                                   sudden power.

An analogous example is found in Isidore's account of springs in Campagna.

   In Campania sunt aquae quae sterilitatem feminarum et virorum insaniam
   abolere dicuntur.

   ("In Campagna there are waters which are said to do away with the
barrenness of women and the madness of men.")

   Here, though, the VM poet does not avail himself of the metric "tag" that
Isidore provides, (*abo*)*lere dicuntur* (long-short-short long-long),   composing
instead a "tag" of his own: (*abo*)*lere virorum.*

 Idem dicuntur furias <u>abolere virorum</u> 1201 The same are said <u>to destroy</u> the
                                     .   furies <u>of men</u>.

   On the other hand, the VM poet once uses Isidore's original not for the last
two feet of a line, but for the first four.

   <u>*In Asphaltite lacu Iudaeae*</u> *nihil mergi potest, quidquid animam habet.*

   ("In the Asphalt lake in Judaea nothing can sink, whatever has a soul.")

Asphaltite lacu iudee corpora mergi   In the Asphalt lake in Judaea
                                                                    bodies cannot
Nequaquam possunt vegetat dum 1215. Ever sink while a spirit animates
    spiritus illa   them,

    Even thriftier is his versification of Isidores description of Sicilian springs,
the words to be "recycled"   being underlined.

    In Sicilia fontes sunt duo, quorum unus *sterilem* fecundat, *alter fecundam*
sterilem *facit*.

    ("In Sicily there are two springs, of which one makes the barren woman
fertile, the other makes the fertile woman barren.")
The VM poet changes the prepositional phrase *In Sicilia* to the semantically
equivalent, but less frequently used locative case (the suffix is *-ae* in classical
Latin, *-e* in medieval; the VM poet's *sycilie* for *Siciliae* is a perfectly normal
medievalization), and, by "finessing" the suffixes, is able to keep the roots
"fecund-"   and "steril-."

Sunt duo sycilie fontes steriles facit alter 1205 There are two fountains in
                                        .   Sicily;   one   makes   girls
                                                    barren,

Alter fecundans geniali lege puellas   The other making them fertile according
                                                    to the law of reproduction.

    The description of the springs in Campagna, whose prose original we have
considered above, is similar.

Qui faciunt steriles fecundas flumine poto 1200. Who make barren women
                                                        fertile when its stream
                                                        is drunk.

In one case the VM poet is so thrifty that he reuses one of Isidore's words

twice.

> *Cyzici fons amorem Veneris tollit.*

> ("The spring of Cyzicus takes away the love of Venus.")

> This becomes VM line 1198.

Fons syticus <u>venerem venerisque</u>	The fountain of Cyzicus drives
repellit <u>amorem</u>	away libido and the love of
	sexuality.

More literally, "drives away Venus and the love of Venus."

> A charming mini-example of this thriftiness is in the rendering of Isidore's

> *In Indis Siden vocari stagnum, in quo nihil innatat, sed omnia merguntur.*

> ("In India [there is] a pond called Side, in which nothing swims, but everything sinks.")

In the VM it begins with an introductory *At contra* ("but on the other hand"). An original touch? No, the phrase is plucked from the following sentence in the original, at contra in *Africae lacu Apuscidamo omnia fluitant, nihil mergitur*, which we have already examined, and grafted onto line 1216.

At contra stagnum syden fert indica	1216. But on the other hand the soil of
tellus	India has a pool called Syda,
Quo res nulla natat set mergitur	In which no thing swims, but sinks
ilico fundo	to the bottom of it.

 Further on, Isidore writes:

> *In Aethiopia lacus est quo <u>perfusa</u> corpora velut oleo <u>nitescunt</u>.*

> ("In Ethiopia there is a lake where bodies doused in it shine as if from oil.")

The syllables of *perfusa* are long-long-short; of *nitescunt*, short-long-long. By putting them together, the VM poet achieves the metric long-short-short long-long metric "tag" that is the trademark of dactylic hexameter.

Ethiopes etiam stagnum perhibentur	1188. They also say that the Ethiopians
habere	have a pond
Quo velut ex oleo facies perfusa	Which makes the face it is poured
nitescit	on shine as if from oil.

Here, however, we note not only technical ingenuity, but also poetic license: Isidore's lake has become a pond. There is a metrical reason for this: although both *lacus* and *stagnum* have two syllables, according to the rules of prosody, two consonants together make a short vowel long, so *stagnum* is long-short, while lacus is short-short. In the same way, when "bodies" become "faces," there are metrical differences because of the lengths of the syllables: *corpora* (because of the consonants rp) long-short-short, while *facies* is short-short-long. We see the same mixture of thrift and exuberance in lines 1202-3, which derive from Isidores

   In Aethiopiae fonte Rubro qui biberit lymphaticus fit.

("In Ethiopia he who drinks of the Red Spring becomes insane.")

   Again underlining the "recycled" words, the VM poet has

Ethiopum tellus fert rubro flumine	The Ethiopians contains a
fontem	fountain with a red current;
Qui bibit ex illo limphaticus inde	When a madman drinks from it, thence
redibit	he will be restored.

The reader will have observed that this passage goes beyond poetic license: it is in fact a rare instance of a mistranslation on the VM poet's part: Isidore's drinker becomes insane; in the VM, he is restored to his right mind.

   Returning to poetic license proper, we find that in line 1221. Isidore's "rocks" become the VM poet's "cliff."

   In Achaia aqua profluit e saxis Styx appellata, quae ilico potata interficit.

("In Achaia water called Styx flows from the rocks, which, when it is drunk, kills instantly.")

Stix fluuius de rupe fluit perimet   1221. The River Styx flows from a cliff and
   que bibentes   kills those who drink.

Going back to lake Aloe, it is not only rocks that float, but

Omnia set fluitant quamvis sint   But everything floats, even lumps of
   plumbea saxa   lead.

Literally, "leaden rocks."

   Sometimes, however, a rock is just a rock.

   Marsidae fons in Phrygia saxa egerit.

   ("The spring of Marsidas in Phrygia expels rocks.")

Fons quoque marsidie compellit   1220. The Marsidian Fountain also makes
   saxa natare   rocks swim.

   Even when a rock is just a rock, however, making it swim rather than merely being expelled is the mark of the poet. So is volubility. Isidore is terse; the VM poet is exuberant, and his renderings sometimes overflow the laconic original. In the case of the "Zama" reference above, the finished product is two lines, not one: this time I have underlined the superfluities.

Affrica fert fontem qui vulgo   1190. Africa has a fountain which is commonly
   zama vocatur   called Zama;

Potus   dat   voces   subita   One drink, and it produces melodious
   virtute canoras   voices with sudden power.

   Lines 1184-5 are an expansion of a similar prose note.

   Nam iuxta Romam Albulae aquae vulneribus medentur.

   ("For next to Rome the Albulan waters cure wounds.")

Iuxta Romam is condensed by a locative, as above, but the two syllables that

the VM poet saves thereby are immediately "spent" on the gratuitous, if colorful *rapax* ("rushing"), evidently for the alliteration with the preceding rome.   *Aquae* ("waters") becomes amne salubri ("with a healthful river"); *medentur* ("they heal") expands to *sanare...certo medicamine* ("to heal with sure treatment")

Albula namque rapax rome fluit amne 1185. At   Rome,   for   instance,   the
    salubri   rushing Albula flows, with
                                                  its healthful river,

Quem sanare ferunt certo medicamine 1185. Which, they say, is a sure cure
    vulnus   for wounds.

   I hope that this sampler has conveyed something of the personality of the *Vita Merlini* poet, and something of his talent. I end by letting him have the last word, in my verse translation of this whole passage.

      "The great Regulator,"   Taliesin said,

"Gave each river a healing property   1180.

      To benefit the sick, keeping apart

      The fountains, rivers, lakes humanity

Relies on to enhance the healer's art.

      At Rome, quick-flowing Albula's a cure

      For injuries, and helps the healing start.   1185.

Another spring in Italy is sure

      To heal the eyes.   They call it 'Cicero's'.

      An Ethiopian pond has water pure

Which, poured on the face, just like oil it glows.

      Zama's a spring in Africa.   One sip,   1190.

      And suddenly the voice melodious grows.

Aversion to wine, even one little nip,

    Is Lake Clitorius power, while those who drink

    From Chios' font get groggy. Two springs slip

From Boeotian terrain. One helps you think,   1195.

    The other takes away your memory.

    A lake there whips libido to the brink;

Cyzicus' spring curbs sexuality.

    They say that drinking from Campagna's streams

    Makes barren women fertile instantly,   1200.

As well as curing the men's fever-dreams.

    In Ethiopia runs a fountain red,

    Which restores reason from insane extremes.

Leinu's spring lets childbirth go safe ahead.

    Sicilian streams will either make a maid   1205.

    Barren or fertile, as children are bred.

In Thessaly two spring's powers are displayed:

    A sheep that drinks from one will have black fleece;

    The other, white; both, wool of mottled shade.

An Umbrian lake, Clitumnus, will increase   1210.

    The size of bulls at times, and horse-hooves grow

    Rock-hard the moment the steeds cross the piece

Of sandy land that the map-makers know

    As Reatine Swamp. In Israel's Dead Sea

    Things float on the surface, won't sink below,   1215.

But on the other hand, there's said to be

    An Indian pool, Syda, where bodies sink.

    Bodies bob on top of lake Aloë,

Even lumps of iron, heavy lead, or zinc.

    On the Marsidian fountain they do, too.   1220.
    Cliff-flowing River Styx kills those who drink,
As the land of Arcadia's witness true.
    The Idumaean fount four times a day
    By wondrous law, they say, changes its hue.
Murky at first, in an orderly way   1225.
    It goes to green, then blood-red, then it's clear.
    Downstream three months each of the colors stay,
Progressing regularly every year.
    Then theres Lake Trogdytus, whose wave flows through;
    Three daily changes, sweet to sour appear.   1230.
Epirus' font makes torches burst into
    Flame, and light up again when they're put out.
    The Garamontes' fount will freeze you blue
By day, but boils all night.   It's turn-about,
    Denying access both by cold and heat.   1235.
    Hot geysers threaten many when they spout,
Brought to a boil when rushing waters meet
    Alum or sulfur, which are both endowed
    With healing properties known good to treat
The sick, artesian wells that cascade loud,   1240.
    Proclaiming the Creator's power to heal
    Through His agents, water and steamy cloud.

주제어: 『멀린의 생애』, 멀린, 세빌의 이시도르, 어원학, 중세 서사시

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Abstract   Michael Skupin

The author of the 1,529-line *Vita Merlini* based three long sections of his
work on passages from the *Etymologies* of Isidore of Seville.   Transferring
Isidore's Latin prose to Latin poetry was a demanding task, especially
considering the difficulties inherent in the dactylic hexameter rhythm.   This
paper will consider the passage involving bodies of water.   The first thing to
be considered is Isidores original, a list of bodies of water that have unusual
properties.   Minor corrections are proposed to two of the toponyms that Isidore
gives.   After this, there is a discussion and translation of the corresponding
passages in the *Vita Merlini*.   It will be seen that the *Vita Merlini* poet was
resourceful and creative in his transformation of good Latin prose into excellent
Latin poetry.

Key Words

Vita Merlini, Merlin, Isidore of Seville, Etymologies, medieval epic.