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# Concerning *Veritas* as an Early Historiographic and Editorial Principle

The Reception of the *Arthuriana* of abbot  
Trithemius (d. 1516) in the Latin Glosses of Richard  
White of Basingstoke (d. 1611)

## Abstract

In his multi-volume *Historiarum Britanniae libri xi* (1597–1607), the English Catholic scholar Richard White of Basingstoke promotes an anachronistic vision of the founding and history of Britain that challenges the analytical and source critical *Anglicae historiae libri xxvi* (1534ff.) of Polydore Vergil (1534ff.). White, seeking support for his historiographical enterprise, adopts two brief accounts of the life and achievements of King Arthur by the notorious abbot Trithemius (d. 1516), then makes editorial interventions, including repositioning and textual glosses. *Veritas* is White's leading historiographical principle, as expressed, for example, when he claims to be able to distinguish between truth and the fabulous in these Arthurian texts by Trithemius. The difficulty—and the irony—are that White, as editor, imposes an unverifiable ethos of veracity upon Trithemius' *Arthuriana*. White and Trithemius do concur, in general, on the historicity of King Arthur and the credibility of both the *Historia regum Britanniae* (circa 1136) of Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Trojan foundational myth promoted therein.

## Keywords

King Arthur,  
Geoffrey of  
Monmouth,  
Johannes  
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Richard White  
of Basingstoke,  
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modern  
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*veritas* as  
historiographical  
principle

## Introduction: White and Trithemius

Richard White of Basingstoke (1539–1611), a Roman Catholic priest born in England but living in exile in Louvain, Douay, and Padua, was a prominent jurist, antiquary, professor, and university rector.<sup>1</sup> A mark of his status is the title awarded him by Emperor Rudolf II: *comes Palatinus*. White is best known for his multi-volume, neo-Latin history of Britain, *Historiarum Britanniae libri* (here *Historiae*), which seeks to reanimate the discredited Trojan foundation myth of British origins.<sup>2</sup> J. W. Binns gives the best, brief definition of this myth, which had had wide currency: “Britons were descended from Trojan Brutus, Aeneas’ great grandson, who after the fall of Troy eventually sought refuge in Britain, to which land he gave his name; that from Brutus a long line of kings descended who included ... King Arthur.”<sup>3</sup> An important vehicle for the promotion of the theory of Trojan ancestry of the British nation was the *Historia regum Britanniae* (c. 1136; henceforth *HRB*) of Geoffrey of Monmouth, a pseudo-historical, multi-millennial account of British history.<sup>4</sup> Over two-hundred manuscripts of the *HRB* survive, attesting to the popularity of a fanciful tale of a Britain inhabited by giants who were overcome by refugees from Troy. But King Henry VII of England had persuaded the Italian Humanist Polydore Vergil to write a sober history, and this Polydore achieved in his *Anglicae historiae libri xxvi* (1534ff.).<sup>5</sup> Polydore, attempting to show that the *HRB* had slight claim to veracity, directly challenged Britain’s fanciful foundation tales.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> On White, see A. MacColl, “Richard White and the Legendary History of Britain,” *Humanistica Lovaniensia* 51 (2002), pp. 245–257. See also, MacColl, “The Construction of England as a Protestant ‘British’ Nation in the Sixteenth Century,” *Renaissance Studies* 18 (2004), pp. 582–608.

<sup>2</sup> *Ricardi Viti Basinstochii comitis palatini Historiarum libri ... cum notis antiquitatum Britannicarum* (Arras: Guillaume de la Rivière and Douai: Charles Boscard, 1597–1607). See also D. R. Woolf, “Change and Continuity in English Historical Thought, c. 1590–1640,” Ph.D. Dissertation, Oxford 1983. Woolf observes that White had connections with the Counter-Reformation, p. 58.

<sup>3</sup> J. W. Binns, “Richard White of Basingstoke and the Defence of Tudor Myth,” *Cahiers Élisabéthains* 11 (1977), p. 18. See also Binns, *Intellectual Culture in Elizabethan and Jacobean England: The Latin Writings of the Age* (Leeds: Francis Cairns, 1990), pp. 183–185. For a general introduction to the role of Troy in historiography, see C. D. Benson, “The ‘Matter of Troy’ and Its Transmission in Medieval Europe,” in H. Kittel, J. House, and B. Schultze (eds.), *Traduction. Encyclopédie internationale de la recherche sur la traduction* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2007), pp. 1337–1340; T. J. MacMaster, “The Origin of the Origins: Trojans, Turks, and the Birth of the Myth of Trojan Origins in the Medieval World,” *Atlantide* 2 (2014), pp. 1–12; and N. Kivlicim Yavuz, “From Caesar to Charlemagne: The Tradition of Trojan Origins,” *Medieval History Journal* 21 (2018), pp. 251–290.

<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain: An Edition and Translation of the De gestis Britonum* (*Historia regum Britanniae*), Latin text edited by M. D. Reeve, translation by N. Wright (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2007). See for example F. Ingeldew, “The Book of Troy and the Genealogical Construction of History: The Case of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia regum Britanniae*,” *Speculum* 69 (1994), pp. 665–704; and A. Adolph, *Brutus of Troy and the Quest for the Ancestry of the British* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> See Polydore Vergil, *Anglica Historia* (1555 version). A hypertext critical edition by D. F. Sutton. Last modified May 25, 2010, <https://philological.cal.bham.ac.uk/polverg>.

<sup>6</sup> On the achievement of Polydore Vergil, see D. Hay, *Polydore Vergil: Renaissance Historian and Man of Letters* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952). See also E. O. Porter, “Polydore Vergil: The Forgotten Historian,” *The Southwestern Social Science Quarterly* 35 (1954), pp. 56–63; F. Rexroth, “Polydore Vergil

To the full historicity of the story of King Arthur, especially, Polydore brought skepticism.<sup>7</sup>

White, undeterred by efforts to undermine the authority of the *HRB*, privileged Geoffrey's work as authoritative, so reliable, in fact, that he reproduced sections from it whole in his *Historiae*. This work, a revisionist tome intended to combat the analytical and text-critical method of history writing most closely associated with Polydore, is described as a "grand compilation of all the legends of Britain's ancient line of kings descended from Trojan Brutus. It presented the whole panoply of British history as derived from Geoffrey of Monmouth in its most complete and polished form."<sup>8</sup> For aid in recovering the status of the *HRB* and the Trojan foundation myth, White drew on testimonies of sympathetic authors. One such attestor to the Trojan foundation myth was the notorious cleric Johannes Trithemius (Heidenberg/Zelter/Tritheim; 1462–1516), who had advanced a Trojan corollary-myth to explain German origins.<sup>9</sup> Trithemius, Benedictine abbot of Sponheim and St. Jacob in Würzburg, was a polymath with a vast library. He was a chronicler, lexicographer, Hebrew scholar, cryptologist, and enthusiastic investigator of the magic arts.<sup>10</sup> Among the fields he explored were the Hermetic tradition, number mysticism, alchemy, astrology, Cabala, angelic mediation, geomancy, steganography, exorcism, witchcraft—and more. Within the vast *œuvre* of Trithemius, White located two short Latin biographical sketches of King Arthur, each different in tone and execution, but strongly laudatory. White published both, with editorial interventions, in his *Historiae*.<sup>11</sup> They derive from the Trithemian works *De septem secundeis id est intelligentiis sive spiritibus orbes post Deum moventibus* (1508; henceforth *De septem secundeis*);<sup>12</sup> and *Compendium, sive Breviarium primi*

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als Geschichtsschreiber und der englische Beitrag zum europäischen Humanismus," in J. Helmuth, U. Muhlack, G. Walter (eds.), *Diffusion des Humanismus. Studien zur nationalen Geschichtsschreibung europäischer Humanisten* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2002), pp. 415–435. The anonymous reader of this essay asks the intriguing question whether Polydore sought foremost to challenge the idea that Britain had mythical origins or to challenge the historicity of stories accepted as truth. Both issues are under assault by Polydore, I would argue.

<sup>7</sup> It is a commonplace to claim that Polydore's *Anglica Historia* struck the first hammer blow against King Arthur. Concerning the controversy over the remarks of Polydore Vergil, see J. P. Carley, "Polydore Vergil and John Leland on King Arthur: The Battle of the Books," in E. D. Kennedy (ed.), *King Arthur: A Casebook* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), pp. 185–204.

<sup>8</sup> G. Parry, *The Trophies of Time: English Antiquarians of the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 52.

<sup>9</sup> K. Arnold, *Johannes Trithemius, 1462–1516*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Würzburg: Schöningh, 1991). See also K. Arnold and F. Fuchs (eds.), *Johannes Trithemius (1462–1516): Abt und Büchersammler, Humanist und Geschichtsschreiber* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2019).

<sup>10</sup> See P. Zambelli, *White Magic, Black Magic in the European Renaissance: From Ficino, Pico, Della Porta to Trithemius, Agrippa, Bruno* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007), pp. 73–112.

<sup>11</sup> Ricardi Viti Basinstochii comitis palatini, *Historiarum Britanniae insulae, ab origine mundi ... Historiarum Britanniae liber octavus. Quo vera causa excidij, regni Britonum in insula, demonstratur. Ad amplissimum dom[i]num Vedastum Grenetium Abbatem Bertinianum* (Douai: Charles Boscard, 1600), p. 70. All citations in this paper are drawn from this volume.

<sup>12</sup> Ioan. Tritemii Abbatis Spanheimen. *De septem secundeis, id est, intelligentiis, sive Spiritibus Orbes post Deum moventibus, reconditissimae scientiae et eruditionis libellus, multa scituq[ue] digna, mira brevitate*

*voluminis Annalium sive historiarium de origine regum et gentis Francorum* (1515; henceforth *Compendium*).<sup>13</sup> It is apparent why White called Trithemius to witness. The abbot's historiographical vignettes of Arthur's life, written under the influence of the *HRB*, not only affirm King Arthur's place in the annals of British history (fifth century A.D.), but these passages also assess and celebrate his contribution to world and dynastic history (see below). Arthur emerges as a model sovereign, able to combine sterling personal qualities with an enlightened rulership, while balancing obligations to Church and crown. White includes both biographical passages in his *Historiae*, as said, but fuses them into a single text (ignoring the original chronological order of publication) and then inserts glosses for reader orientation. The appeal of these Trithemian texts is not far to seek. The *Compendium* presents King Arthur within the frame of the Trojan founding myth, a continental corollary that attempts to explain the origin of the Franks (read: Germans) as exiles after the Fall of Troy. *De septem secundeis*, a tract on angelic participation in world history, lauds King Arthur, as a small number of nationalist British historiographers had done.<sup>14</sup> Both passages that White borrows are brief, but span Arthur's career, drawing on the *HRB* to mark its trajectory. White places them under the heading *praesertim ecclesiasticos*.

These *Arthuriana* of Trithemius are little studied.<sup>15</sup> They derive from a range of sources, but the *HRB* was formative. Fortunately, we can document the abbot's close familiarity with Geoffrey's work, which represents the matrix for White's own *Historiae*. The *HRB* was not only available in the abbot's library circles, Trithemius owned an early copy of this chronicle, unusual for the era.<sup>16</sup> In the *Compendium*,

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*in se conplectens arcana, Imperatori Caesari Divo Maximiliano Aug. Pio, Sapienti dicatus* (Frankfurt am Main: Jacob Cyriacus, 1545), no pagination. Citations from this work in the present paper are drawn from "Chronologia Mystica, de Secundeis sive intelligentiis orbes post Deum moventibus," in M. Freher (ed.), *Johannis Trithemii ... Opera historica*, Part 1 (Frankfurt am Main: Typis Wecheliani apud C. Marnium et heredes J. Aubrii, 1601, rpt. Frankfurt am Main: Minerva, 1966), no pagination. The transcription of some Latin words has been slightly changed.

<sup>13</sup> Joannes Trithemius, *Compendium, sive Breviarium primi voluminis Annalium sive historiarium de origine regum et gentis Francorum* (Mainz: Johann Schöffler, 1515). Citations from this work in the present paper are drawn from "Compendium sive Breviarium primi voluminis Chronicorum sive Annalium, de origine gentis et Regum Francorum," in Freher (ed.), *Johannis Trithemii ... Opera historica*, Part 1 (rpt. Frankfurt am Main: Minerva, 1966), pp. 1–62.

<sup>14</sup> In the Tudor period, scholarly defenses of Arthur were few. Two of the most prominent advocates were John Leland (*Assertio inlytissimi Arturii*, 1544) and Sir John Prise (*Historiae Britannicae Defensio*, published 1573). See F. Roche, "The Battle of the Books: An Attack on Nationalism," *Medieval Forum* 6 (2007), no pagination; and P. Schwyzer, "King Arthur and the Tudor Dynasty," in J. Parker and C. Wagner (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Medievalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 23–33.

<sup>15</sup> The present author is exploring the role of Emperor Maximilian of Habsburg (d. 1519) in the promotion of the *Arthuriana* of Trithemius. The results will surely complement the recently published essay by A. D. Curry, "King Arthur of England, Count of Habsburg: The Use of Arthurian Imagery in Habsburg Diplomacy," *Historical Research* 20 (2023), pp. 1–16. Note that Maximilian granted a privilege for the publication of the *Compendium* and that Trithemius dedicated *De septem secundeis* to the emperor.

<sup>16</sup> See J. C. Crick, *The Historia regum Britanniae of Geoffrey of Monmouth*, vol. 4: *Dissemination and Reception in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1991), p. 210.

he labels the *HRB* the *historia narrante Galfredo Monemutense* (see below). White recognized the utility of the Arthurian passages by Trithemius under review, not least because the abbot and White agreed both on the historicity of King Arthur and the credibility of the Trojan founding myth. Trithemius' texts, White recognized, could contribute to the ongoing historiographical debate over early British history. One aspect of that debate, promoted by White, was a return to conditions before Polydore Vergil's *Anglica historia*, that is, to a kind of *status ante quem* in history writing.

## A Word on White's Glosses and Editorial Practices

In the history of book publishing, Richard White holds a secure place. He is identified as one of the trailblazers in the history of hypertext<sup>17</sup> and is credited with very early use of endnotes, *notae*, thus transforming the scholarly apparatus.<sup>18</sup> In fact, our Trithemian passages under discussion appear in *notae* to the eighth book of White's *Historiae*. In addition to the mechanics of book preparation, he undertook editorial tasks. White, when borrowing literature for his British history, saw himself as no mere anthologizer; he was, to use modern parlance, a very active content editor. Although White recognized in Trithemius a friendly witness to the Trojan legend and the role of King Arthur in history, he re-positioned Trithemius' Arthurian passages, omitted a crucial statement, and inserted skeletal glosses into both texts. White discovers two cleanly cleaved realms in the abbot's texts, the one representing the miraculous and fabulous (*miranda/fabulosa/mira*) and the other standing for the true and truthful (*veritas/vera*). This oppositional pairing is expressed by White in his glosses to Trithemius as: *de fabulosis* and *de veris*, as we shall see. White's concern is that his readership, in Arthurian stories, might fail to distinguish between an untrustworthy zone of fabrications and a reliable realm of truth. White's final gloss, *historica veritas de Arcturo*, encapsulates this preoccupation. The reader, he believes, deserves truth, although he leaves that concept amorphous and is content to advance his theory of literary and historical writing through omissions and contrary pairings.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Dr. Nicholas Gibbons, University of Southampton, in identifying forerunners of hypertext, cites White's phrase (without attribution): "As bees take honey from different flowers, so we must take materials from all sorts of different authors and, once they have been systematically collected, store them away, as it were, in the proper combs," <https://edshare.soton.ac.uk/8003/13/temp.pdf> (accessed Oct. 6, 2023).

<sup>18</sup> See the review article of the book by A. Grafton, *The Footnote* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), by E. H. Berry, "Colonizing the Space Below: Expansive Scholarship and Forceful Notes," *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 35 (2008), p. 365.

<sup>19</sup> Here I express sincere gratitude to the anonymous reader of this essay, who has recognized the impact of Richard White's contention, as laid out in these pages, to be able to separate believable parts of his Trithemian source texts from unbelievable parts of the same. Thanks, too, are owed the medievalist and independent scholar Travis C. F. von der Burg, as well as to the classics professor Dr. Andrew Merritt for helpful and ready advice.

We can state preliminarily that White consigns Merlin's actions to the realm of the marvelous, hence to the legendary precinct, whereas he interprets Athur's deeds to be real and believable. The modern reader smiles, of course, at the notion that King Arthur might represent truth. But White and Trithemius insist not only on the historicity of King Arthur, but on the believability of the events of his life, as reported by Geoffrey of Monmouth in the *HRB*. Taken to the extreme, this would imply, of course, that Arthur had battled giants and slain hundreds of the enemy during a single battle. White and Trithemius do not openly warrant everything in the *HRB*, but their affirmation of its basic premises is sufficient to make the point. Their Arthur was a British king who ruled in measurable time, to which the historical frame of both Trithemian passages attests. Accordingly, King Arthur belongs in the pages of Trithemius to world history, as well as to ethnic history. White attempts to anchor Arthur to British history in one way by including these Trithemian biographies in a section of the *Historiae* treating kings who succeeded King Arthur.

### ***Compendium***

White, without explanation, melds Trithemius' texts, placing the passage written second, the *Compendium*, in first position. This disrupted order seems easily explained, since the *Compendium* both embraces a corollary to the founding myth that White promotes and applies it to Frankish history. The *Compendium*, studied today under the name *Compendium de origine gentis Francorum*, arose in 1514, in two versions, dating from the fifth century B.C. to the ninth century A.D. This sweep of history concludes with a report of the division of the Frankish kingdom at the death of King Ludwig:

Anno dominicae nativitatis DCCCXLI ab introitu Sicambrorum sive Francorum in Germaniam sedesque acceptas ad ostia Rheni, anno millesimo CCLXXX, indictione Romanorum quarta, anno ab excidio Troiano bis millesimo tricesimo, Francorum latissimum regum [regnum—W. McD.] tres Ludovici regis et Imperatoris filii cum imperio Romanorum inter se diviserunt.<sup>20</sup>

Trithemius, making no clear linguistic distinction between "Franks" and "Germans," composes here an adjunct to the Trojan founding myth of Britain, highlighting the role played by the Habsburgs, his patrons in the ruling dynasty. The abbot argues that the Franks are descended from Trojan exiles and that the Habsburgs are heirs to the

<sup>20</sup> Johannes Trithemius, "De Origine gentis Francorum compendium," in M. J. Kuelbs and R. P. Sonkowsky (eds.), *An Abridged History of the Franks* (Dudweiler: AQ-Verlag, 1987), Paragraph 347.

Franks.<sup>21</sup> The genealogical circle is thus set. Inspired by the chronicles of Fredegar and others, Trithemius argues the proto-Germans on the continent (called Sicambri) were also descended from refugees of Troy, who had reached the mainland after the city fell. The Sicambri had settled near the mouth of the Danube. They relocated circa 430 B.C., when, under military attack, the Sicambri called on the Saxons (also from Troy) for aid. The Saxons complied and invited the Sicambri to settle between the Rhine and Saxony. Trithemius tells that the name “Franks” is derived around 40 B.C. from a Sicambrian king named Francus. Trithemius catalogs the whole line of “Frankish” kings, from Anthenor in deep Sicambrian history to Ludwig the German, Charlemagne’s heir in the ninth century. The historical value of the *Compendium* is slight. It represents the “mythic genealogy” of which Marie Tanner speaks, tendentious history, rife with invented sources, offered to the Habsburg court of Maximilian for purposes of authenticating his ancestry.<sup>22</sup> A lapidary sentence from the prestigious website of the Bavarian Academy of Sciences renders the final verdict on the historical credibility of the *Compendium*: “(Seine) Geschichte des fränkischen Volkes ist größtenteils erfunden.”<sup>23</sup>

Into this line of ancestral rulers, Trithemius places King Arthur. This man is a doughty *dux bellorum*, in conformity his depiction in the *HRB*. With admirable concision, Trithemius crafts a minibiography of this king that weds personal virtue, military prowess, and the love of Christ. The passage concludes with a reference to Merlin’s vatic activities. The abbot dates this brief, but full picture of Arthur’s rule to the year 463 A.D. where it appears in the first book of the *Compendium*:

His quoque temporibus mortuo Utherpendragon rege Britanniae (quae nunc Anglia dicitur), sublimatus fuit regno eius filius, nomine Arcturus, de quo non solum historia Britonum

<sup>21</sup> Claims to Trojan ancestry, as Marie Tanner points out, made evident Emperor Maximilian’s legitimacy to rule the Roman *imperium*. See her study *The Last Descendant of Aeneas: The Hapsburgs and the Mythic Image of the Emperor* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), esp. pp. 106–107. For a useful summary of Trithemius’ historical theories on the origin of the Franks, see F. Borchart, *German Antiquity in Renaissance Myth* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), pp. 127–135. On the continental myth of Trojan origins itself, consult H. Hommel, “Die Trojanische Herkunft der Franken,” *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* 99 (1956), pp. 323–341; and E. Ewig, “Trojamythos und fränkische Frühgeschichte,” in D. Geuenich (ed.), *Die Franken und die Alemannen bis zur ‘Schlacht bei Zülpich’* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1998), pp. 1–30.

<sup>22</sup> Tanner, *The Last Descendant of Aeneas*, pp. 67–118.

<sup>23</sup> “Compendium de origine gentis Francorum,” in *Geschichtsquellen des deutschen Mittelalters*. *Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften*, <https://www.geschichtsquellen.de/werk/4565> (accessed Oct. 6, 2023). On the reputation of the *Compendium* and Trithemius’ historical work, see H. von Jan, “Johannes Trithemius, ein Historiker und Geschichtsfälscher,” *Blätter für pfälzische Kirchengeschichte und religiöse Volkskunde* 18 (1951), pp. 33–42; K. Arnold, “Die Frankengeschichte des Johannes Trithemius, von Peutingier als Fälschung verurteilt,” in R. Laube and H. Zäh (eds.), *Gesammeltes Gedächtnis. Konrad Peutingier und die kulturelle Überlieferung im 16. Jahrhundert* (Luzern: Quaternio Verlag, 2016), pp. 216–219; and N. Staubach, “Auf der Suche nach der verlorenen Zeit. Die historiographischen Fiktionen des Johannes Trithemius im Lichte seines wissenschaftlichen Selbstverständnisses,” in *Fälschungen im Mittelalter. Internationaler Kongress der Monumenta Germaniae Historica, München, 16.–19. September 1986*, Part 1: *Kongreßdaten und Festvorträge. Literatur und Fälschung* (Hannover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1988), pp. 263–316.



narrante Galfredo Monemutense, sed etiam voces populorum Angliae miranda personant, usque in praesentem diem, licet plura magis sint fabulosa, quam conformia veritati. Qui Arcturus multa probitate morum, prudentia, mansuetudine simul et humanitate pollens, se cunctis amabilem venerandumque praestare omni studio curabat. quia cum virtute animi, etiam mira liberalitate affluebat in omnes, et maxime in ecclesiasticos, quibus pro Christi amore plura conferebat munuscula, simul et donaria. Saxones et Pictos de Britannia expulit: Scotos Hibernicos et Orchadas, suo regno potenter subiecit. Quod cum reges Daciae, Norvvegiaeque audissent ultro venientes eius se dominio subdiderunt. Mira de huius Arcturi nativitate, simul et gestis futura genitori eius Utherpendragon, praedixit vates Anglorum Merlinus, quorum in primo volumine annalium fecimus mentionem.<sup>24</sup>

Trithemius offers here an encomium celebrating King Arthur. The perfect prince, Arthur is admirable in all respects and worthy of memorialization. However, the abbot places a perhaps surprising note of skepticism into his Arthurian biography. Recall that he states: *Arcturus, de quo non solum historia Britonum narrante Galfredo Monemutense, sed etiam voces populorum Angliae miranda personant, usque in praesentem diem, licet plura magis sint fabulosa, quam conformia veritati.* The issue for Trithemius is that many Arthurian *gesta*, whether written or oral, conform more to the fable, or legend, than to real life. Said exaggeration, in turn, can leave the viewer perplexed as to where the truth lies. We have discovered that the final portion of this phrase (*licet ... veritati*) is not original to Trithemius but is a rhetorical figure, traceable to earlier medieval chronicles and popular in his epoch.<sup>25</sup> This formula, in turn, owes a debt to Cicero's definition of *fabula*, which, like Trithemius and his topos, sets the word-family *fabula* opposite a form of *verus/veritas*: *fabula est, in qua nec verae nec veri similes res continentur* (*De inventione*, 1: 27).

Returning to the Trithemian (adopted) phrase, ... *licet plura magis sint fabulosa, quam conformia veritati*, we note its potential impact on Arthurian aesthetics. Trithemius speculates, after all, to which degree the *HRB* and the populace have too eagerly celebrated *fabulosa*, hence deeds not conformant with truth, and in which measure they have exaggerated the achievements of King Arthur. These are fundamental matters, involving veracity and verisimilitude, and addressing the boundaries between the fantastic and the fictitious. Definitive answers are few. Among the implications are the credibility of Trithemius' own biographical sketch of King

<sup>24</sup> Joannes Trithemius, "Compendium sive Breviarium primi voluminis Chronicorum sive Annalium," p. 39.

<sup>25</sup> W. C. McDonald, "*Licet plura magis sint fabulosa, quam conformia veritati*: Trithemius (d. 1516), King Arthur, Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Reception of a Latin Locution from circa 1150," *Latomus* 82 (2023), no. 4, pp. 735–750. Trithemius' phrase: *miranda ... licet plura magis sint fabulosa, quam conformia veritati* is based on a linguistic formulation appearing in the continuation of the twelfth-century *Chronicon* of Sigebert of Gembloux by an anonymous monk of the Ourscamp monastery. This formula was adopted by Vincent of Beauvais in his *Speculum historiale*. On the complex story of the continuations of Sigebert's *Chronicon*, see G. Tournoy, "A First Glance at the Latin Arthur in the Low Countries," in W. van Hoecke (ed.), *Arturus Rex, Volumen II. Acta Conventus Lovaniensis 1987* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1991), pp. 215–221.



Arthur, under review here. How is the reader to know to trust Trithemius to tell the truth about King Arthur? One thing is certain. The locution cited by Trithemius, in its open-endedness and irresolution, certainly brought no aid to White's efforts to rehabilitate the *HRB* or to revivify faith in the Arthurian record.

One is eager to see White's response to the passage in the *Compendium*, which follows here. Note that White affixed the text with the title: *Compendium: Trithemius lib. I. compendij annalium in vita Hilderici Francorum Regis*. (White is referring to the Frankish ruler Childericus I (d. 481 A.D.), of Merovingian descent.) His editorial changes appear here in **bold print**:

**Quibus temporibus** mortuo Utherpendragon rege Britanniae, quae nunc Anglia dicitur, sublimatus fuit regno filius eius, nomine Arcturus, de quo non solum historia Britonum, narrante Galfredo Monemutense, sed etiam voces populorum Angliae miranda personant, usque in praesentem diem, licet plura magis sint fabulosa, quam conformia veritati. **deinde post paulum de fabulosis addit**: Mira de huius Arcturi nativitate, simul et gestis futura genitori eius Utherpendragon, praedixit vates Anglorum Merlinus. **Tum de veris adjicit**: Qui Arcturus multa probitate morum, prudentia, mansuetudine simul, et humanitate pollens, se cunctis amabilem venerandumque praestare omni studio curabat. quia cum virtute animi, etiam mira liberalitate affluebat in omnes, et maxime in ecclesiasticos, quibus pro Chrifiti amore plura conferebat munuscula, simul et donaria. Saxones et Pictos de Britannia expulit: Scotos, Hibernicos, et Orchadas, suo regno potenter subiecit. Quod cum reges Daciae, Norvegiaeque audissent ultro venientes eius se dominio subiecerunt.<sup>26</sup>

White's editorial interventions are several. The first is cosmetic and involves a chronological marker: *Quibus temporibus* for *His quoque temporibus*. The second change is striking, and fundamental, however, involving no less than a repositioning of Trithemius' material on Merlin. Recall that the Arthurian passage in the *Compendium* concludes with substantial Merlinian wonders, his miraculous foretelling of events in the life of Utherpendragon and King Arthur: *Mira de huius Arcturi nativitate, simul et gestis futura genitori eius Utherpendragon, praedixit vates Anglorum Merlinus*. Since Trithemius places his words on Merlin at the end of his biographical passage, he views them as a kind of summary. In contrast, White, unwilling to close the text borrowed from Trithemius with a scene of oneirocritical wonders (*mira*), moves the abbot's words on Merlin from the end to the middle. Next, White crafts a gloss on the Merlin material: *deinde post paulum de fabulosis addit*. His intention is to mark the Merlin passage as incredible, and thus unworthy of reader attention.

Finally, White contrasts the realm of the fabulous with the precinct of truth and credibility, the transition marked by the gloss *Tum de veris adjicit*. The exemplar of truth for White is King Arthur, whose every virtue and course of action is credible and real. Trithemius had lauded both Arthur's generosity to the Church and his

<sup>26</sup> Ricardi Viti Basinstochii comitis palatini, ... *Historiarum Britanniae liber octavus*, p. 71.

brilliant geopolitical maneuvers. White endorses this perspective fully. For White, Arthur's achievements, be these secular or ecclesiastical, reside under the sign of truth.

### *De septem secundeis*

White appends to the passage from the *Compendium* a second, this from a slender tractate by Trithemius, *De septem secundeis*, written in 1508. Although Trithemius' Arthurian passages are fundamentally different, they share an indebtedness to the *HRB* and references to Troy. The abbot, who observes world history from the perspective of angelology, argues here that God has appointed spirits to govern the planets. The work is difficult to categorize. Trithemius' anthologist Marquard Freher, publishing the abbot's works posthumously in White's era, classifies the work as a *chronologia mystica*.<sup>27</sup> *De septem secundeis* has consistently appealed to students of the esoteric tradition, given its combination of astral magic, celestial hierarchies, Cabalistic wisdom, occult philosophy, and formulae for Firdaria-calculations. Trithemius constructs here an astrological world chronicle, under the primary influence of Pietro d'Abano of Padua (d. c. 1315), that proposes angelic governance over precisely demarcated historical cycles.<sup>28</sup> Accordingly, periods of human history experience a confluence of planetary conjunctions and divine dominion. The frame for this cosmographical amalgam is a world history that draws on an "angelic-planetary system," to borrow the phrase of Noel L. Brann,<sup>29</sup> a scaffolding that sustains both astrological and angelic conceptions of historical periodization. Scripture provides inspiration for *De septem secundeis*. In *Enoch I* (Ethiopic), for example, angels are dispatched to earth to watch over humans.<sup>30</sup> Troy holds a prominent place in the story of the world that Trithemius relates. The destruction of Troy he includes under the dominion of Samuel, the angel of Mars. Any reference to Troy was welcome to White, of course, since he vigorously advocated the Trojan foundation myth. Trithemius supports that myth in *De septem secundeis*, for instance, when referencing a claim of citizens of Venice that their city and its inhabitants are of Trojan descent. The abbot, speaking in the first person, assures the reader of the truth of the Trojan diaspora and city founding. To arrive at this truth, which is supported by many *nationes* stretching to Asia, the author claims that he has sought out evidence of Trojan origins:

<sup>27</sup> "Chronologia Mystica, de Secundeis sive intelligentiis orbis post Deum moventibus" (no pagination).

<sup>28</sup> For a general orientation regarding *De septem secundeis*, see Ch. Däppen, *Die etwas andere Weltgeschichte des Johannes Trithemius. Enthaltend: Chronologia mystica de septem secundeis in deutscher Übersetzung* (Norderstedt: Books on Demand, 2013).

<sup>29</sup> N. L. Brann, *Trithemius and Magical Theology: A Chapter in the Controversy over Occult Studies in Early Modern Europe* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), esp. pp. 134–135.

<sup>30</sup> R. H. Charles (ed.), *The Ethiopic Version of the Book of Enoch. Edited from Twenty-Three MSS. Together with the Fragmentary Greek and Latin Version* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1906).

Veneti ab hoc tempore ex Troanis [sic] computant initium et gentis suae, et urbis. Et notandum quod et aliae nationes plurimae tam in Europa, quam in Asia suam praetendunt originem se sumpsisse a Troianis, quibus tamen accommodare fidei duxi, quantum ipsi veritatis mihi sufficienti testimonio poterunt persuadere.<sup>31</sup>

The sufficient testimony of which Trithemius speaks comes, in part, from Homer, Dares Phrygius, and Dictys Cretensis. These authorities, he contends, were at the razing and sacking of Troy. As supposed eyewitnesses, they experienced events first-hand, and therefore might offer a credible account for the contemporary destruction and subsequent Trojan diaspora:

Homerus poeta graecus Troiani scriptor excidii, Dares Phrighus, Dictis Cretensis qui excidio ipsi interfuerunt, et similiter descripserunt, fuisse leguntur his temporibus in humanis.<sup>32</sup>

Just as Trithemius identifies the Trojan foundation story as having an historical basis, so too does he attest to the historicity of King Arthur. Arthur's epoch unfolds, for Trithemius, under the governance of Zachariel, the angel of Jupiter, and dates to the year 5669, which is 463 A.D. Word of Merlin comes first in the passage followed by a swift biography of King Arthur. Note that the Arthurian passage, which follows here, is lengthier than most, for example, even than Charlemagne's:

Merlinus in Tumbe natus miranda praedixit in principio huius regiminis.<sup>33</sup> Arcturus quem uulgo Arcum appellat. Rex Britanniae famosissimus Barbaros uicit, pacem ecclesiae reddidit, multa praelia uictor gessit, fidem Christi ampliauit, Galliam totam, Noruegiam, Daciam et

<sup>31</sup> Ioan. Tritemii Abbatis Spanheimen. *De septem secundeis* (no pagination).

<sup>32</sup> Trithemius dates the Trojan war between the years 3897 and 4252, under the Angel Samuel (Samael): *Duodecimo autem ordine mundum denuo regere caepit Samael Angelus martis ...* (no pagination). Regarding the works mentioned by Trithemius, see A. Beschorner, *Untersuchungen zu Dares Phrygius* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1992); S. Merkle, "Telling the True Story of the Trojan War: The Eyewitness Account of Dictys of Crete," in J. Tatum (ed.), *The Search for the Ancient Novel* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), pp. 183–196; V. Prosperi, "The Trojan Chronicles of Dictys and Dares in the Early Italian Humanism: A Reassessment," *Atlantide* 2 (2014), pp. 1–10; and E. Ewig, "Troja und die Franken," *Rheinische Vierteljahrsblätter* 62 (1998), pp. 1–16. Further, we identify here two fifteenth-century editions: Dares Phrygius, *De excidio Troiae historia* (Venice: Florentius de Argentina, 1472); and Dictys Cretensis *Historia Troiana* (Milan: [Simon Magniagus], 1477). Editions of Homer were accessible in the fifteenth century, for example, Homerus, *Iliados libri aliqui* (Rome: Johannes Philippus de Lignamine, 1474). See P. Ford, *De Troie à Ithaque. Réception des épopées homériques à la Renaissance* (Genève: Droz, 2007), pp. 1–30.

<sup>33</sup> Enigmatic is this reference to *tumbe* as Merlin's place of birth. Whether Trithemius confused it with legends of Merlin's entombment and burial is uncertain, but *tumba*/Gk. *týmbos*, can indicate a burial mound, thus affirming the British legend of the Wiltshire mound, Merlin's supposed burial spot. Since Merlin was reputedly the offspring of a union of incubus and human, it is possible that our phrase *Merlinus in tumbe natus* is a corruption of *Merlinus incubo natus*, the latter as witnessed, for example, in the thirteenth century by Martinus Oppaviensis in his *Chronicon Pontificum et Imperatorum* (= *Merlinus vates ex filia regis sanctimoniali et incubo demone natus*). Cited by J. E. Cross, "King Arthur in the Old Swedish Legendary," *Medium Aevum* 30 (1961), p. 83. My gratitude to Prof. Dr. P. J. Smith of Leiden for consultation on this matter.

multas provincias suo imperio subiugavit. Erat omnium sui temporis, regum gloriosissimus, qui post multa egregia patrata, nusquam comparauit, multis annis expectatus a Britonibus redire, de quo mirabilis olim Mimi cantilenas aediderunt, quo regnante, Anglia in flore fuit, cui terdena regna servierunt.<sup>34</sup>

Here Trithemius foregrounds Arthur's spirituality and deep religious conviction, not his heroism, as was the case in the *Compendium*. A devout ruler, this Arthur is a soldier for Christ who battles barbarians and zealously promotes the Holy Faith. In fact, of all the historical portraits that *De septem secundeis* brings, Arthur's is closest to the angelic ideal. King Arthur, having lived during a time of political, social, and environmental turmoil, not only survives prodigious events, but he also guides Britain to exceptional achievements. This he attains in a world under threat of sidereal forces, while blood rains from the sky. Despite every challenge and threat, Arthur's nation, as well as the Church and Christendom, thrive under his guidance. Trithemius makes a swift allusion to Arthur's hoped-for return, should Britain reach a perilous state (... *multis annis expectatus a Britonibus redire*). We interpret this salvific reference as inspired by the *HRB*.

White again makes editorial interventions. His version follows, with his changes in bold print:

**Idem in libello de septem Secundeis**, Arcturus quem vulgus, inquit, Artum appellat, Rex Britanniae famosissimus, Barbaros vicit, pacem Ecclesiae reddidit, multa praelia victor gessit, fidem Christi ampliavit, Galliam, Norvegiam, Daciam et multas provincias suo Imperio subiugavit. Erat omnium sui temporis, Regum gloriosissimus, qui post multa egregia patrata facinora nusquam comparauit, multis annis expectatus a Britonibus redire, de quo **mirabiles** [Trithemius: mirabilis] olim Mimi cantilenas aediderunt, quo regnante Anglia in flore fuit. **Haec Trithemius, mimorum cantilenas separans ab historica veritate de Arcturo.**<sup>35</sup>

Two striking editorial emendations mark White's treatment of the Arthurian passages in *De septem secundeis*. The first involves Merlin. Here, as in the *Compendium*, Trithemius acknowledges the vatic powers of this wizard. Whereas in the *Compendium*, Merlin's activities were so described: *Mira de huius Arcturi nativitate, simul et gestis futura genitori eius Utherpendragon, praedixit vates Anglorum Merlinus*, in *De septem secundeis* these words appear: *Merlinus ... miranda praedixit in principio huius regiminis*. For the former of these, recall that White had dismissed the statement with the gloss: *de fabulosis*. Now, for the second Merlinian allusion, he has another solution. He leaves it out entirely. So suspicious is White of the vatic realm that Merlin represents, that he omits all trace of it, even Trithemius' words that Merlin had helped usher in the angelic government. For White, the *miranda* of the passage are antipodal to *veritas*, as becomes clear from his second gloss in the passage.

<sup>34</sup> Ioan. Tritemii Abbatis Spanheymen. *De septem secundeis* (no pagination).

<sup>35</sup> Ricardi Viti Basinstochii comitis palatini, ... *Historiarum Britanniae liber octavus*, p. 71.

White's second textual intervention in *De septem secundeis* concerns Trithemius' enigmatic reference to an increasing number of marvelous songs concerning King Arthur: (... *Arcturus*) *de quo mirabilis olim Mimi cantilenas aediderunt*. Once again, Trithemius reaches for the vocabulary of wonderment. His reference to *mirabilis* joins others in the brief biographies discussed above, *mira*, *miranda*, etc. Not surprisingly, White whose guiding star is historical plausibility, reacts to Trithemius' words. He counters these wondrous *cantilena*e with a final gloss intended to close off the marvelous world entirely: *Haec Trithemius, mimorum cantilenas separans ab historica veritate de Arcturo*.<sup>36</sup> For White, the story of King Arthur has a clear, definable trajectory. In his view, the biographical lines were laid down, principally, by Geoffrey of Monmouth in the *HRB*, and admit no embellishments, certainly no flights of fancy by minstrels who exaggerate and abuse an established life story. His target is Arthurian songs that pretend to be true, but are fabricated, instead.<sup>37</sup> What White proposes, in opposition to these *cantilena*e, is authentic history, characterized by fidelity to historical truth, and devoid of any trace of the numinous, vatic, or fantastic. The subtext of White's gloss is that those seeking the historical truth about Arthur, need look no further than to the *HRB* and to White's own *Historiae* for guidance.

Up to this point, White's editing here holds no surprise for us, because (perceived) truth has been his guiding hand. The surprising element lies in the introductory phrase to the gloss: *Haec Trithemius*. White cites Trithemius himself as authority for the oppositional pairing discussed above, wondrous songs versus the historical truth about King Arthur. However, in the original, when the abbot reports on the marvelous songs of the minstrels, he neither judges the truth value of the account, nor casts a negative light on *mirabilis*. His tone is neutral, in contrast to White, who applies a corrective, intended to distinguish the world of wonder from the world of truth—and then attributes this to Trithemius. The attribution is without foundation, however. Nowhere does Trithemius deny the existence of a world of wonder. He is, in fact, infamous for tolerance of shadowy realms, and for involvement in the

<sup>36</sup> The locution *historica veritas* (more frequently *veritas historica*) is the subject for a future study. Preliminarily, we can state that, during the Counter Reformation and in the wake of the Tridentine decrees, this phrase was closely associated with the pictorial arts and addressed the faithful, historically accurate rendering of images. I thank here Prof. Jasmin Mersmann, authority on *veritas* in the early modern period, for kind cooperation on the topic. See Mersmann's studies: "What was Truth? Lodovico Cigoli and Conflicting Truth Claims around 1600," *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews* 41 (2016), pp. 71–90; and *Lodovico Cigoli. Formen der Wahrheit um 1600* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2016).

<sup>37</sup> See a contemporary reference to song-types that celebrate the Round Table by the historian Cyriacus Spangenberg (d. 1604): *Die weil aber in den alten deutschen Heldenbüchern/Reimen vnd Liedern/offt der Ritter der Taffelrunde gedacht wird*. Cited by J.-D. Mueller, "Alte Heldenbücher im Kreis Maximilianians. Zu einer umstrittenen Bezeichnung," in M. Klarer (ed.), *Kaiser Maximilian I. und das Ambraser Heldenbuch* (Wien, Köln, and Weimar: Böhlau Verlag, 2019), p. 54. See also J. Tahkokallio, "Fables of King Arthur: Aelred of Rievaulx and Secular Pastimes," *Mirator* 9 (2008), pp. 19–35. Useful, too, for information on early Arthurian lyrics and *exempla* is the essay by R. Capelli, "The Arthurian Presence in Early Italian Lyric," in G. Allaire and F. R. Psaki (eds.), *The Arthur of the Italians: The Arthurian Legend in Medieval Italian Literature and Culture* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2014), pp. 133–144.

arts that border on magic.<sup>38</sup> In simple point of fact, Trithemius was far more willing than White to accept the ambiguities of prophecy and wonder. For proof, we need look no farther than the very text that White is glossing. *De septem secundeis*, which is controversial for its fantastic lore and chronological manipulations.<sup>39</sup> In sum, it is White who sets up the antagonistic pairing of *cantilenae mirabiles* and *historica veritas de Arcturo*, not Trithemius, and it is White who bends the historiographical standards of Trithemius to his own. We repeat White's editorial assessment: *Haec Trithemius, mimorum cantilenas separans ab historica veritate de Arcturo*. The beneficiary of his criteria for judging credibility is, beyond Geoffrey of Monmouth and the *HRB*, White himself and his own *Historiae*, as suggested. White emerges as a self-proclaimed arbiter of truth who professes, on authority of a personal fiat, to limn the borders of the fabulist realm.

## Conclusion

As a very late defender of Geoffrey of Monmouth and the *HRB*, Richard White has entered our literary histories. The sparse secondary literature on his work refers to his *Historiae* as "flanked by associated texts and protected by a heavy armor of commentary."<sup>40</sup> This study has considered two such associated texts by Trithemius which White has larded with brief, but blunt glosses.

White welcomes both Arthurian biographical passages by Trithemius for inclusion in his multi-volume revisionist work as support for the story of Trojan origins, of the *HRB* in general, and of the story of King Arthur in particular. He is an active editor; he comments on the texts that he adopts and intervenes by rearranging (and eliminating) sentiments of the original. White's chief concern is *veritas*, and a sober attitude of verifiability connects the two offerings. Twice, he makes textual emendations in favor of credibility, the first time, when segregating the Merlin story from that of Arthur through the opposition of fabulous things and truthful things (*de fabulosis/de veris*), and again, when perceiving a lack of historical truth (*historica veritas*) behind the wondrous songs of King Arthur. In the process of editing, however, White departs from the historiographical principles of Trithemius, who conjectures that some of the Arthurian exploits (even in the *HRB*)

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, W. C. McDonald, "In pago Wormaciensi videbatur: The Reception of an Anecdote of Ekkehard von Aura by Trithemius," *Neulateinisches Jahrbuch* 20 (2018), pp. 393–418; and McDonald, "Trithemius and the Legend of the Wild Hunt," *Fabula* 59 (2018), pp. 195–216. Rumors of necromancy haunted Trithemius.

<sup>39</sup> Brann, in *Trithemius and Magical Theology*, notes, for example: "(*De septem secundeis* is) an amalgamation of astrological with Cabalistic theory about occult influences upon human behavior, which drew on the same system of planetary angels enlisted in the controversial steganographical tract and identified by critics such as [the French scholar Carolus] Bovillus with the demonic servants of Satan" (p. 9).

<sup>40</sup> MacColl, "The Construction of England as a Protestant 'British' Nation," p. 606.

might be embellished, but who nevertheless accepts the Arthurian songs of the *mimi* without obvious prejudice.

Finally, although White celebrates *veritas* throughout, he strangely sees no contradiction in accepting the fanciful Trojan origin story (even in the wildly fictional treatment by Trithemius in his *Compendium*) and in affirming the historicity of King Arthur on the authority of the *HRB*—a source text whose credibility had been challenged for centuries. White, in the Trithemian passages under review, reserves his challenges for Merlin, the realm of the marvelous, and songs about King Arthur. The modern reader is amazed at the tenacity of the Trojan founding myth and of the premises of the *HRB*, both of which had seduced leading intellectuals of the early modern era. White and Trithemius stand among them. They, as others, were all too willing to accept premises that, ironically, contravene historical truth.

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*Ioan. Tritemii Abbatis Spanheimen. De septem secundeis, id est, intelligentiis, sive Spiritibus Orbis post Deum moventibus, reconditissimae scientiae et eruditionis libellus, multa scituq[ue] digna, mira breuitate in se complectens arcana, Imperatori Caesari Divo Maximiliano Aug. Pio, Sapienti dicatus* (Frankfurt am Main: Jacob Cyriacus, 1545).

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