MALORY'S MERLIN: AN AMBIGUOUS MAGICIAN?

In a 1975 article titled "Merlin's Miscreation and the Repetition Compulsion in Malory's *Morte Darthur*," Arthur Samuel Kimball recognizes Merlin's ambiguous nature. He writes:

> . . . the figure of Merlin is central to an understanding of the ultimate cause of the order-chaos tension and final disintegration of the Arthurian world. . . . [He is] the half-formed trickster who miscreates the world, not because of any malefic intent but rather because of the incompleteness of his creative power. He occupies an equivocal position half-way between god and devil; his creative power is replete with the ambiguities of the demi-urge, an ironically creative force that somehow goes awry. (29)

Muriel Whitaker is also aware of Merlin's dual nature. In *Arthur's Kingdom of Adventure*, published in 1984, she writes:

> Merlin appears in the forest as a shapeshifting prophet, and an architectural engineer with the power of turning up unexpectedly, performing some task, and then disappearing as if by magic. The relation between creation and prophecy is particularly apparent at the end of 'The Knight with Two Swords.' . . . [Finally he is] a tragic figure whose great achievement in establishing Arthur's kingdom is undermined by a humiliating and destructive passion for a woman. (57)

Both writers suspect that Malory's Merlin—only Malory's Merlin, not the strange composite necromancer that readers of the Arthurian legend in its multiple forms tend to think of—may not be a "mervaylous man" (44) despite the fact that Arthur calls him one.

Perhaps we should not be surprised to find Merlin's character mysterious. Lewis Thorpe traces one strand of the Merlin story through several early sources. In each source, Merlin's sardonic laughter teases the other characters in the story. Thorpe describes it as "the theme of sardonic laughter by . . . [a] demon soothsayer" (339).

But only a few critics have examined Merlin's nature in any detail. Kimball's Freudian account of his character is fascinating and probably accurate. Yet Malory's narrative—sometimes called "realistic"—gives readers the opportunity to judge Merlin in the simpler terms of his own actions in his own world. Since his role in the creation of Malory's Arthurian world looms large, Merlin's nature matters. In order to examine Merlin's character closely, I have posed these questions: First, what does Merlin *say*? For his words must reveal his nature. Second—and more important—what does Merlin do? And third, how do other characters respond to Merlin? Since Malory makes the *Morte* a dramatic work

which demonstrates his implications, others' responses will delineate the magician's nature. A digest of the answers follows.

Vinaver titles book I of *The Tale of King Arthur* "Merlin." Aptly so, for Merlin dominates the action in that book. Merlin strikes a bargain with Uther as the book opens, his voice ringing with confidence:

> 'Syr,' said Merlyn, 'I knowe al your hert every dele. So ye wil be sworn unto me, as ye be a true kynge enoynted, to fulfille my desyre, ye shal have your desyre.' (8)
>
> 'Syre,' said Merlyn, 'this is my desyre: the first nyght that ye shal lye by Igrayne ye shal gete a child on her; and whan that is borne, that it shal be delyverd to me for to nourisshe thereas I wille have it, for it shal be your worship and the childis availle as mykel as the child is worth.' (9)

And then, in a speech that makes clear the extent of his magical powers, Merlyn tells Uther how to achieve the assignation with Igraine.

> 'Now make you redy,' said Merlyn. 'This nyght ye shalle lye with Igrayne in the castel of Tyntigayll. And ye shalle be lyke the duke her husband, Ulfyus shal be lyke syre Brastias, a knyghte of the dukes, and I will be lyke a knyghte that hyghte syr Jordanus, a knyghte of the dukes. But wayte ye make not many questions with her nor her men, but saye ye are diseased, and soo hye yow to bedde and ryse not on the morne tyll I come to yow, for the castel of Tyntygaill is but ten myle hens.' (9)

Merlin controls the action perfectly; all goes according to plan. Arthur is born after Uther and Igraine are married, and Merlin reappears to dictate how the boy shall be raised and by whom. Two years later, as Uther lies sick, Merlin urges him into the field, and when Uther suffers a stroke on his return, Merlin says, with a significant lack of humility:

> 'There nys none other remedye,' said Merlyn, 'but God wil have His wille. But loke ye al barons be bifore kynge Uther to-morne, and God and I shalle make hym to speke.' (11)

When the nobles have gathered, Merlin says: "Syre, shall your sone Arthur be kyng after your dayes of this realme with all the appertenaunce?" (12). Uther says yes and dies. To reinforce Uther's decision—or is it his own?—Merlin sets up the sword-in-the-stone test. The reader who remarked that Merlin created Arthur and his world and then crowned him king exaggerated only slightly.

Merlin, several pages later, announces Arthur's exact and legitimate lineage: his word is not questioned. Merlin is usually believed; he is doubted once by Lot, and Lot is soon afterwards killed. We are not, however, told that Merlin played a part in his demise.

Merlin is extremely active in the ensuing battles, sometimes magically increasing the knight's provisions, sometimes traveling at great speed as a

messenger. One knight tells another that he marvels at the army's coming into the forest without its defenders knowing. "'Hit was by Merlions advice,' seyde a knyght" (32). Merlin appears as leader; Arthur does as he is told. Finally, Merlin stops the battle, saying to Arthur:

> 'Thou hast never done. Hast thou nat done inow? Of three score thousande thys day has thou leffte on lyve but fyftene thousand! Therefore hit ys tyme to sey "Who!" for God ys wroth with the for thou woll never have done.' (36)

Merlin claims to know God's will. In addition, he uses a reproachful tone for the first time.

Next, Merlin plays three tricks on Arthur: he appears before him as a churl, as a child of fourteen, and disguised as an old man. Arthur does not recognize him. The three instances of disguise surround three sexual episodes for Arthur. He sleeps with Lyonors and begets Borre; shortly thereafter, he sees Guinivere "and ever afftir he loved hir" (39). Then he meets Morgawse, and not realizing that she is his own half-sister, Arthur sleeps with her and begets Mordred. Merlin is conspicuously absent from all of these incidents, only framing them with the disguise trick. In his final costume, as the old man, he reproaches Arthur again:

> '. . . ye have done a thynge that God ys displesed with you, for ye have lyene by youre syster and on hir ye have gotyn a childe that shall destroy you and all the knyghtes of your realme.' (44)

Once again, Merlin purports to know God's will, and—this time—Arthur might reproach Merlin for not telling him of this half-sister, as well as for being absent when advice was needed. Helen Adolph suggests that Arthur's union with Morgawse arises from his own strange conception. She writes:

> Uther's fraud, so it seems, brings upon Arthur the vengeance of his half-sister Margawse. . . . His irregular birth called for some kind of irregular union, making him, in an extenuated version of the Gregorious story, typical of the human condition. (28-29)

That possibility is reinforced when Arthur's lineage comes immediately into question. And if Merlin was responsible for Arthur's "irregular birth," then perhaps we must—as Adolph sees it—hold him responsible for Mordred's incestuous conception.

James Douglas Bruce believes that the specific story of Mordred's incestuous birth came into the Arthurian legend through the author of the *Mort Artu*, the real originator of the *motif*. Bruce ascribes a purpose to that writer which seems to apply to Malory's inclusion of it:

> He endeavored to intensify the tragedy of Arthur's downfall by representing the chief agent in this catastrophe as being the offspring of the monarch's incestuous relations with his own sister. (197-98)

Merlin is reproached in the next scene, concerning Arthur's lineage. Ulphius says: "Ye are more to blame than the queene" (46). Ulphius's words and Merlin's failure to prevent Mordred's conception mark a change in the reader's perception of Merlin: Merlin is not always right, nor perfectly powerful after all; he becomes vulnerable.

Merlin and Arthur enjoy a strange relationship: their rivalry nearly overcomes their mutual affection. Arthur saves Merlin from churls who are chasing him and says, "A, Merlion! . . . here haddist thou be slayne for all thy crafftis, had nat I bene" (49). Merlion's reply is churlish indeed, and flavored with arrogance as well:

> 'Nay,' seyde Merlyon, 'nat so, for I cowde a saved myselffe and I had wolde. But thou arte more nere thy deth than I am, for thou goste to thy dethe warde and God be nat thy frende.' (49)

In two incidents that follow, Merlin saves Arthur's life. Arthur is bested by Pellinore in a fair fight, and Pellinore is about to kill him when Merlin puts Pellinore to sleep. When they pass Pellinore later, Merlin renders himself and Arthur invisible. These incidents with Pellinore bracket the acquisition of Excalibur, engineered by Merlin.

Shortly after their return to Camelot, Arthur orders the "slaughter of the innocents." Merlin is blamed in part:

> Than kynge Arthure lette sende for all the children that were borne in May-day, begotyn of lordis and borne of ladyes; *for Merlyon tolde kynge Arthure that he that sholde destroy hym and all the londe sholde be borne on May-day* [italics mine]. (55)

And again,

> So, many lordys and barownes of thys realme were displeased for hir children were so loste; and many putte the wyght on Merlion more than o[n] Arthure. So what for drede and for love, they helde their pece. (55-56)

The barons, I suspect, dread Merlin and love Arthur.

Thus, in the first book, Merlin has stage-managed events. He has been egocentric and ambitious. He has also revealed a dictatorial and arrogant personality; he is often reproachful of others, but never of himself. He may well be feared more than he is loved, for how many prophets of our literary tradition both know the future and participate in present action in order to affect the future? Cassandra and Teiresias, for example, try to stand outside the plot they inhabit. Not so Merlin; either his knowledge of coming events is incomplete—which he never admits—or he believes that he can change the patterns of events to come.

In book II, "Balyn Le Sauvage or The Knight with Two Swords," Merlin participates in the brutal tale on eight separate occasions. More than once, however, his significance for the story resides in his conspicuous absence. Merlin is conspicuous by his absence from nearly the first quarter of "Balin." Book II opens

with Arthur's call for a council general and jousts to prepare to combat the invasion of King Royns. Since Merlin has established himself in book I as Arthur's premier counselor, where is he? Why is he not there? Had Merlin been there when Lady Lyle's damsel offered the sword test to Arthur and his barons, he could have warned them against her. Merlin could have saved Balin and his brother and Lanceor and Columbe; he could, in fact, have prevented the dolorous stroke.

Nor does Merlin appear when the Lady of the Lake comes to claim her gift in return for Excalibur. Merlin was with Arthur—and full of advice—when Arthur received the sword; should he not, in fairness to Arthur, be present now? In sum, Merlin affects book II by his absence from its crucial opening scenes; he affects the book's later progress by entering the action briefly on several occasions. Merlin's prediction of the dolorous stroke, the fact that he blames Balin for Columbe's death, may drive Balin to seek death in combat with his brother. Although he is warned to turn back, he goes forward to that battle. Can Merlin, who has laid the blame and made the prophecy, properly be considered blameless? Robert L. Kelly implies that he cannot (92-96). In contrast with book I, however, Merlin operates largely as a prophet in book II; except in the case of King Lot and in the case of his preparation of Galahad's sword, Merlin stands outside events rather than manipulating them extensively as he did in book I. Most important, he fails, conspicuously, to prevent certain unfortunate events from occurring. He certainly reveals, in this book, that he is much less than omnipotent.

"Torre and Pellinore" opens with a discussion of Arthur's lineage and then a discussion of marriage that remains central to the whole *Morte*. Part of it is often quoted but at the expense of the passage's tone. The entire discussion reads:

> 'My barownes woll let me have no reste but nedis I muste take a wyff, and I wolde none take but by thy counceile and advice.'
>
> 'Hit ys well don,' seyde Merlyon, 'that ye take a wyff, for a man of youre bounté and nobles sholde not be withoute a wyff. Now is there ony,' seyde Marlyon, 'that ye love more than another?'
>
> 'Ye,' seyde kyng Arthure, 'I love Gwenyvere, the kynges doughtir of Lodegrean, of the londe of Camelerde, the whyche holdyth in his house the Table Rounde that ye tolde me he had hit of my fadir Uther. And this damesell is the moste valyaunte and fayryst that I know lyvyng, or yet that ever I coulde fynde.'
>
> 'Sertis,' seyde M[e]rlyon, 'as of her beauté and fayrenesse she is one of the fayrest on lyve. But and ye loved hir not so well as ye do, I scholde fynde you a damesell of beauté and of goodnesse that sholde lyke you and please you, and youre herte were nat sette. But thereas mannes herte is sette he woll be loth to returne.'
>
> 'That is trouthe,' seyde kyng Arthur. (97)

It is the narrator's commentary, immediately following the dialogue, that tends to be quoted:

> But M[e]rlyon warned the kyng covertly that Gwenyver was nat holsom for hym to take to wyff. For he warned hym that Launcelot sholde love hir, and sche hym agayne, and so he turned his tale to the aventures of the Sankegreal.
>
> Then Merlion desyred of the kyng for to have men with hym that scholde enquere of Gwenyver, and so the kyng gr[a]unted hym. (97)

Merlin asks Arthur for *his* choice in wives. And when Arthur suggests Guinevere, Merlin warns him, yet does not attempt, in the dialogue quoted, to dissuade him. The narrator's account of Merlin's warning gives no hint of Arthur's response. Instead, *Merlin*—not Arthur—apparently changes the subject, while the narrator does not finish the sentence. Next, without further suggestion from Arthur, Merlin goes on to bring about the marriage. Merlin appears to be in charge and to be promoting Guinevere. Merlin, without further direction, fetches Guinevere for Arthur to marry. Merlin deliberately arranges a marriage that he knows will be disastrous.

Pellinore comes to the court and is much pleased with his newfound son, Torre. Merlin—not Arthur—makes much of Pellinor, seating him next to the Sege Perelous, and saying "Thys [is] your place, for beste ar ye worthy to sitte thereinne of ony that here ys" (102). Gawain's angry reaction—certainly fed by Merlin's lack of tact in preferring Pellinor above *all* others—marks the first overt evidence of the sons-of-Margawse/Pellinore feud, the feud which eventually pits Gawain and Lancelot against each other. Merlin insists that this adventure be taken up and that Torre and Pellinore accompany Arthur's choice, Gawain, on the quest. During the same quest, Gawain strikes off the head of a damsel who has thrown herself across her knight to reinforce his plea for mercy, a plea which Gawain should have granted. Merlin and Arthur agree that he must tell the court every detail of his shameful adventure, thus reinforcing the incipient break between Arthur/Guinevere and Gawain. Then Torre tells of his triumph, by implication emphasizing that he—not Gawain—is current court favorite. Merlin feeds the Lot-Pellinore feud even as he sees it developing.

When Pellinore, in his first adventure, does not stop for a lady who begs for his help for a wounded knight, she kills herself in anguish. Much later, Pellinore finds the heads of the lady and the wounded knight. Lions and other wild beasts have eaten their bodies. When he tells the tale at court, expressing his regret, Merlin reveals that Alyne—the lady—was Pellinore's natural daughter. This revelation, Merlin's continuous reproaches, and his arrogance seem brutal. The reader wonders why Merlin does not keep *some* facts to himself.

Arthur himself gains ascendancy in "The Death of Merlin and the War with the Five Kings," and toward the end of the section, Pellinore usurps the role of adviser. Merlin, as is clear from the beginning of this book, has lost control of Arthur's world. In describing Merlin's relationship with Nenyve, the narrator lets the reader know that Merlin is no longer in command of his own actions:

> Merlyon felle in dotage on the damesell. . . . . And ever she made Merlion good chere tylle sche had lerned of hym all maner of thynges

> that sche desyred; and he was assoted uppon hir, that he myght nat be from hir. (125)

To Arthur, Merlin predicts his own death. Although Arthur asks him to avoid it in order to continue advising him, Merlin and Arthur's parting does not move the reader as he/she might expect. Merlin simply makes it clear that he cannot avoid his fate and moves on. He leaves the court with Nenyve; they seem tied together by an adversarial link, and he behaves foolishly in giving up his power to enchant her.

Merlin and Nenyve meet the young Lancelot and Merlin offers happy prophecies about his prowess. But after that short-lived interlude, Merlin and Nenyve seem locked in destructive distrust: nor can either leave the other. Finally, Nenyve takes control of events and imprisons him beneath a huge stone.

At the end of the book, Bagdemagus, disgruntled at not becoming a Round Table knight, leaves the court and comes upon the stone where Merlin is imprisoned and hears his cries. The narrator says:

> Bagdemagus wolde have holpyn hym, and wente unto the grete stone, and hit was so hevy that an hondred men myght nat lyffte hit up. Whan Merlyon wyste that he was there, he bade hym leve his laboure, for all was in vayne: for he myght never be holpyn but by her that put hym there. (132)

Merlin, who began by creating Arthur's world, has been rendered powerless and whimpering. The narrator explains how Bagdemagus "herde [Merlin] make a grete dole" (132). All subsequent references to Merlin in the *Morte* are essentially brief references to past prophecies and actions.

In conclusion, then, what does Merlin say? He offers prophecy and reproach. What does Merlin do? At times he intervenes in the action, and at other times, he fails to appear when he is needed. How do others respond to Merlin? Sometimes he elicits fear or amazement; he certainly elicits too little affection and admiration. In strength and wisdom, Merlin regresses as the "hoole book" progresses. Physically, Merlin degenerates from rapid-moving, effective enchanter to helpless, imprisoned old man. At worst, Merlin is an evil designer deliberately miscreating Arthur's world; at best, he is an ambiguous character who simply fails to achieve his goals. In book I, Merlin creates a world which he cannot, in books II through IV, control. Like each of Malory's characters, he is, after all, only human. Perhaps, ultimately, the reader must see him as Merlin, the bumbling magician.

Wendy Tibbetts Greene
Methodist College

WORKS CITED

Adolph, Helen. "The Concept of Original Sin as Reflected in Arthurian Romance." *Studies in Language and Literature as Presented to Margaret Schlauch.* Ed. Mieczyslav Brahmer, Stanislav Helsztynski, and Julian Grzyzanowski. Warsaw: Warsaw Scientific Publications, 1966. 437-44.

Bruce, James Douglas. "Mordred's Incestuous Birth." *Medieval Studies in Honor of Gertrude Schoepperle Loomis.* Ed. Roger Sherman Loomis. New York: Columbia UP, 1927. 197-208.

Kelly, Robert L. "Malory's 'Tale of Balin' Reconsidered." *Speculum* 54 (1979): 85-99.

Kimball, A. S. "Merlin's Miscreation and the Repetition Compulsion in Malory's *Morte Darthur." Literature and Psychology* 25 (1975): 27-33.

Malory, Sir Thomas. *Works.* Ed. Eugène Vinaver. 2nd ed. 3 vols. Oxford: Clarendon, 1967.

Thorpe, Lewis. "Merlin's Sardonic Laughter." *Studies in Medieval Literature and Languages in Memory of Frederick Whitehead.* Ed. W. Rothwell, et al. New York:Barnes, 1973. 323-39.

Whitaker, Muriel. *Arthur's Kingdom of Adventure.* Cambridge: Brewer, 1984.