



MARY STEWART'S MERLIN: WORD OF POWER

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MARY STEWART'S MERLIN; WORD OF POWER

The Merlin of Mary Stewart's trilogy—*The Crystal Cave*, *The Hollow Hills*, and *The Last Enchantment*¹—is a man of many roles: prophet, prince, enchanter, king-maker, teacher, engineer, physician, poet, and singer. But in all of these, he is first and foremost a man of power. Merlin's power is the power of knowledge, knowledge revealed progressively through active preparation and wise waiting. "Power," says Merlin, "is doing and speaking with knowledge; it is bidding without thought, and knowing that one will be obeyed" (*LE* 448). This kind of knowledge and power is of the spirit, coming from the god, as the god wills, and resulting in the word of prophecy. In addition to embodying this word of power, Merlin also represents a kind of "bidding without thought" that comes from the confidence of acquired knowledge.

Merlin's word of power in the historical and naturalistic realm and the word of power that comes from the god—the nature of the word, its source, limitation, consequences, and progressive revelation—are intrinsic themes in Stewart's books. Each of the progressions toward truth in the trilogy emphasizes a general movement from partiality to wholeness: the unity of one God and one King, the truth of lineage, and the androgynous wholeness of the word of power.

Mary Stewart's trilogy is historical fiction, set, not in the usual, romantic Middle Ages of Malory, but in the historically more accurate Dark Ages of fifth-century Celtic Britain. Characters, place names, and events in the story carefully accord with actual historical facts. Similarly, Stewart's Merlin is not a mysterious magician inhabiting the misty peripheries of action; he is, instead, in this story, a real man, who narrates his own role in the Matter of Britain as he sees the events unfold.² Because he is a man, Merlin experiences ordinary human emotions. For instance, as a child, he suffers the taunts and humiliation aimed at a bastard child, and he learns to live by his wits. As an old man, he learns about love in his relationships with Arthur and Nimuë. And Merlin is capable of being mistaken, especially in his interpretations of the actions of women.³ Morgause's intentions toward Arthur, for example, escape him entirely until it is too late:

I have said men with god's sight are often human-blind: when I exchanged my manhood for power it seemed I had made myself blind to the ways of women. If I had been a simple man instead of a wizard I would have seen the way eye answered eye back there at the hospital, have recognized Arthur's silence later, and known the woman's long assessing look for what it was. (*HH* 377)

In the course of the trilogy, Merlin tells us his personal history, from the night Ambrosius and Niniane conceive him in the cave at Bryn Myrddin to his burial alive in the same cave by Nimuë.

Because Stewart's Merlin is a man very much grounded in the natural world, much of his knowledge is knowledge of the physical world, a knowledge that makes him the best of engineers and physicians. Although the range and depth of

Merlin's knowledge in these areas are so far beyond that of most people that his accomplishments seem supernatural, there are, in fact—as Merlin is always at pains to point out—perfectly natural explanations for these feats of power. The primary example of such a feat is the raising of the Hanging Stones of the Giant's Dance outside Amsbury. Ambrosius tells Merlin he wants "the chaos of giant stones in a lonely place where the sun and the winds strike" to become a monument to the "making of one kingdom under one King." For this it is necessary that the stones be raised. Ambrosius tells Merlin:

"I have talked of this to Tremorinus. He says that no power of man could raise those stones."

I smiled. "So you sent for me to raise them for you?"

"You know they say it was not men who raised them, but magic."

"Then," I said, "no doubt they will say the same again."

His eyes narrowed. "You are telling me you can do it?"

"Why not?"

He was silent, merely waiting. It was a measure of his faith in me that he did not smile.

I said: "Oh, I've heard all the tales they tell, the same tales they told in Less Britain of the standing stones. But the stones were put there by men, sir. And what men put there once, men can put there again."

"Then if I don't possess a magician, at least I possess a competent engineer."

"That's it." (CC 308-09)

And it is the engineer who goes to work to raise the stones and make the Dance. Using his knowledge of engineering, the guidance of the songs learned from the blind singer of Kerrec, and the strength of two hundred men, Merlin raises the stones and fits them together:

I heard it said, long afterwards, that I moved the stones of the Dance with magic and with music. I suppose you might say that both are true. I have thought, since, that this must have been how the story started that Phoebus Apollo built with music the walls of Troy. But the magic and the music that moved the Giant's Dance, I shared with the blinder singer of Kerrec. (CC 320-21)

Mathematics and music work the magic that once more links the circle of the Giant's Dance, symbol of the unity and harmony of the kingdom.

Much earlier, when he is still a boy living as a bastard at his grandfather's court, Merlin has the power that comes from listening and observing. His first "cave" of knowledge is in the tunnels of the unused underground heating system, a "secret labyrinth" (CC 19) which the six-year-old finds "a curiously strong pleasure in exploring" (CC 18), mostly because it provides him a place "to be alone in the secret dark" (CC 20). But it also provides him a hiding place in which to learn information that gives him power over events that affect his life. At this early age,

Merlin learns the value of letting others believe his knowledge comes from magic, even though there is a reasonable, natural explanation:

One night, creeping beneath his bedchamber on the way to my “cave,” I chanced to hear [Dinias] and his pack-follower Brys laughing over a foray of that afternoon when the pair of them had followed Camlach’s friend Alun to his tryst with one of the servant-girls, and stayed hidden, watching and listening to the sweet end. When Dinias waylaid me next morning I stood my ground and—quoting a sentence or so—asked if he had seen Alun yet that day. He stared, went red and then white (for Alun had a hard hand and a temper to match it) and then sidled away, making the sign behind his back. If he liked to think it was magic rather than simple blackmail, I let him. After that if the High King himself had ridden in claiming parentage for me, none of the children would have believed him. They left me alone. (*CC* 38-39)

Later, the twelve-year-old Merlin is able to escape to Ambrosius because he tells Ambrosius’s men, “Oh, yes, there’s a lot I could tell you” (*CC* 94). He offers Ambrosius “valuable information and five languages” (*CC* 118) and, eventually, dreams and prophecies. When Merlin is seventeen, Vortigern, the High King opposed to Ambrosius, is trying to build fortifications against Ambrosius at King’s Fort; however, the foundations keep collapsing. Vortigern’s soothsayers tell him that only the sacrificial blood of one who is no man’s son will hold the foundation. Hearing the story of Merlin’s demon ancestry, Vortigern intends to sacrifice Merlin. However, from his own exploration of the caves at King’s Fort when he was a boy, Merlin knows the answer to the problem:

If I had no power to use, I had knowledge. I cast my mind back to the day at King’s Fort, and to the flooded mine in the core of the crag, to which the dream led me. I would certainly be able to tell them why their foundations would not stand. It was an engineer’s answer, not a magician’s. But, I thought, meeting the oyster eyes of Maugan as he dry-washed those long dirty hands before him, if it was a magician’s answer they wanted, they should have it. (*CC* 225)

King Vortigern, following Merlin’s bidding to the cave within the hill, hears the engineer’s answer. But as Merlin and the king and the king’s people stand at the edge of the pool, the cave becomes like Galapas’s crystal cave “come alive and moving and turning . . . like the starred globe of midnight whirling and flashing” (*CC* 237) as Merlin speaks the word of power that comes from the god:

I stopped. The light had changed. Nobody had moved, and the air was still, but the torchlight wavered as men’s hands shook. I could no longer see the King: the flames ran between us. Shadows fled across the streams and staircases of fire, and the cave was full of eyes and wings and hammering hoofs and the scarlet rush of a great dragon stooping on his prey. . . .

A voice was shouting, high and monotonous, gasping. I could not get my breath. Pain broke through me, spreading from groin and belly like blood bursting from a wound. I could see nothing. I felt my hands knotting and stretching. My head hurt, and the rock was hard and streaming wet under my cheekbone. I had fainted, and they had seized me as I lay and were killing me: this was my blood seeping from me to spread into the pool and shore up the foundations of their rotten tower. I choked on breath like bile. My hands tore in pain at the rock, and my eyes were open, but all I could see was the whirl of banners and wings and wolves' eyes and sick mouths gaping, and the tail of a comet like a brand, and stars shooting through a rain of blood.

Pain went through me again, a hot knife into the bowels. I screamed, and suddenly my hands were free. I threw them up between me and the flashing visions and I heard my own voice calling, but could not tell what I called. In front of me the visions whirled, fractured, broke open in intolerable light, then shut again into darkness and silence. (CC 238)

What Merlin prophesies is the victory of Ambrosius and the coming of Arthur. Several things about the power are made clear in this incident. First, there is mystery in power. The god comes when and as it will, in its own time and its own way. Second, there is a price to be paid for the word of power; pain and suffering are necessary accompaniments. Third, Merlin is the *word* of power, the medium, the vehicle for the god. Often, he does not know the meaning of what he has said at the time of speaking, and the revelation must be a gradual unfolding. Finally, when Merlin becomes the word of power, what he speaks is truth. As he says to Cadal after the Vortigern prophecy:

There will be something there. Don't ask me what, I don't know, but if I said so. . . . It's true, you know. The things I see this way are true. . . . I'm not on my own. Remember that; and if you can't trust me, trust what is in me. I have learned too. I've learned that the god comes when he will, and how he will, rending your flesh to get into you, and when he has done, tearing himself free as violently as he came. Afterwards—now—one feels light and hollow and like an angel flying. . . . No, they can do nothing to me, Cadal. Don't be afraid. I have the power. (CC 243, 245)

Throughout the three books, the presence of the god is imaged as the wind. After Merlin enters the crystal cave of vision for the first time, he tells Galapas, "I feel all right, only a headache, but—empty, like a shell with the snail out of it. No, like reed with the pith pulled out." "A whistle for the winds. Yes" (CC 60), responds Galapas. And as Merlin leaves to go home, he says, "I'm still in the god's path. I can feel the wind blowing" (CC 85). The blowing wind of the natural world is often the foreshadowing of the word of power. As in one of the scenes with Vortigern, there will be a gust of wind and then another gust until, in this case,

Vortigern's banner streams out "like a sail holding the full weight of the wind" and then tears free to sink into a pool of water at the king's feet. The wind dies, and Merlin says, "Can any doubt the god has spoken?" (*CC* 248-49). Another time, planning for Arthur's safe-keeping after his birth, Merlin says, "Something was moving; there was a kind of breathing brightness in the air, the wind of God brushing by, invisible in sunlight. Even for men who cannot see or hear them, the gods are still there, and I was not less than a man" (*HH* 81). The wind is blowing the night Arthur is born, and Merlin says to Ralf that in Arthur's crowning, "We whistled up a strong wind" (*LE* 17).

There is, in addition, a cluster of images that denote the presence of God. Like the "breathing brightness" of the wind of God, references to wind are often accompanied by references to fire and to music, particularly harp music. It is this cluster of images that authenticates Arthur's role when Merlin takes Arthur to Ector. "And this is the one," says Merlin to Ector.

"Your stars tell you this?"

"It has been written there, certainly, and who writes among the stars but God?" . . .

"What's that? That sound?"

"Only the wind in the bowstrings."

"I thought it was a harp sounding. Strange. What is it, boy? Why do you look so?"

"Nothing." He looked at me doubtfully for a moment longer, then grunted and fell silent, and behind us the long humming stretched out, a cold music, something from the air itself. I remembered how, as a child, I had lain watching the stars and listening for the music which (I had been told) they made as they moved. This must, I thought, be how it sounded. (*HH* 115)

It is the breath and light of God that made the harmony of the world.

And it is this harmony for which Merlin is the hollow reed, the medium for the Word. As Merlin speaks the word of power from the god, he becomes the Word. Speaking to Cadal, Merlin is explicit: "I am a spirit, a word, a thing of air and darkness, and I can no more help what I am doing than a reed can help the wind of God blowing through it" (*CC* 357). In *The Last Enchantment*, Merlin explains to Nimue that when one becomes a word of power, one is "merely a seer, an eye and a voice for a most tyrannous god" (*LE* 329). The god is tyrannous; it comes and goes as it will. Merlin says, "I would not importune God for the smallest breath of the great wind. If he came to me, he came. It was for him to choose the time, and for me to go with it" (*LE* 270). God often chooses the least expected time, and where Merlin goes in vision is into the Otherworld of spirit. When Guinevere disappears with Melwas, Merlin looks into the fire and finds himself suddenly carried away: "I did not hear him go. I was already far from the firelit room, borne on the cool and blazing river that dropped me, light as a leaf loosened by the wind, in the darkness at the gates of the Otherworld" (*LE* 270). In the Otherworld, Merlin finds himself in caves that go "on and on for ever," dreaming of the "legendary hall

of Llud-Nautha, King of the Otherworld" (*LE* 271). Then this dream dissolves, and Merlin sees Guinevere where Melwas has her hidden away.

Caves of one sort or another abound in the trilogy. Merlin is conceived in the cave at Bryn Myrddin; he is buried alive in the same cave; and it is there that he first visits Galapas and later makes his home for much of his life. Within that cave is a smaller crystal cave, the crystal cave of vision. The cave represents the mind, the power of thought and sight and insight. The crystals of the cave throw light into darkness and bring the god-vision. Truth is often hidden, underground, invisible, and there is some form of cave present in almost every instance of vision in the trilogy. For example, there are the "caves" of the hypocaust and the mining cavern at King's Fort—which Merlin sees once in vision and twice in actuality. As the boy Merlin wakes outside Ambrosius's military camp to see Mithras (who was born in a cave [*CC* 131]) and the bull, he first sees that "the brilliant arch of stars about [him] was like a curved roof of the cave with the light flashing off the crystals" (*CC* 111). Again, in a temple of Mithras which is below ground, cave-like, Merlin finds Macsen's sword and the grail. As Merlin replaces the grail, the plaster from the apse tumbles down and buries it, and the wall shows "blank, like the wall of a cave" (*HH* 261). The sword he takes and hides in a deep cavern on Caer Bannog, the Castle in the Mountains "said to be haunted by Bilis the dwarf king of the Otherworld. It was reputed to appear and disappear at will, sometimes floating invisible, as if made of glass" (*HH* 281-82). The place is called the "isle of glass," and the cavern is another crystal cave:

The place was a temple, pillared in pale marble and floored with glass. Even I, who was here by right, and hedged with power, felt my scalp tingle. *By land and water shall it go home, and lie hidden in the floating stone until by fire it shall be raised again.* So had the Old Ones said, and they would have recognized this place as I did; as the dead fisherman did who came back from the Otherworld raving of the halls of the dark King. Here, in Bilis' antechamber, the sword would be safe till the youth came who had the right to lift it. (*HH* 284)

The Old Ones, "keeping faith in their cold caves with the past and the future" (*HH* 247), live in the hollow hills of faery, speak the Old Tongue, and are the guardians of the knowledge of the sword. They live in the woods, so much a part of nature that they come to look like the trees around them. Almost entirely at one with the natural world, they consider themselves descended from the gods. They, like Merlin, eat the offerings people leave for the gods, and, again like Merlin, they know that knowledge is power. Their leader says, "There are things we must know. Knowledge is the only power we have" (*HH* 235-36). When Merlin, gone crazy from Morgause's poison, wanders the woods, the Old Ones look after him. Merlin speaks the Old Tongue, as does Arthur. The hollow hills in which the Old Ones live are the gates to the Otherworld, and "it is not possible to keep secrets from the Old Ones" (*HH* 98). The Otherworld is the world of dream, myth, and spirit. "Magic," explains Merlin, "is the door through which mortal man may

sometimes step, to find the gates in the hollow hills, and let himself through into the halls of that other world" (*LE* 129).

One does not enter the halls of the Otherworld with impunity; there is a price to be paid: "There is no power without knowledge, and no knowledge without suffering" (*HH* 337). "Moments of vision have always to be paid for, first with the pain of the vision itself"—what Merlin calls "Nails of pain" (*LE* 424)—then "afterwards in the long trance of exhausted sleep" (*LE* 432). Those who have had to do with the gods know that when those gods make promises they hide them in light, and a smile on a god's lips is not always a sign that you may take his favor for granted. Men have a duty to make sure. The gods like the taste of salt; the sweat of human effort is the savour of their sacrifices (*HH* 396). Merlin knows he is "not immune from the god's fire" (*LE* 17), and he likens the physical "whirling pain" (*LE* 252) to the last pains of childbirth, the pain necessary to complete creation: "Prophecy . . . is like being struck through the entrails by that whip of God that we call lightning. But even as my flesh winced from it I welcomed it as a woman welcomes the final pang of childbirth" (*HH* 292). The vision and the suffering are one. After Arthur has taken the sword of Macsen from the stone, Merlin remembers "How my body ached, and how at length, when I knelt again, my sight blurred and darkened as if still blind with vision, or with tears" (*HH* 436).

At its deepest level, the suffering that comes from knowledge is not physical, but spiritual. Merlin learns this as a child, when, coming to Merlin in the garden, his uncle offers him, in seeming innocence, a piece of fruit, an Edenic apricot filled with poison. Camlach urges Merlin to eat it, but Merlin says, "I don't want it. It's black inside." Camlach hurls the apricot against the wall where

. . . it burst in a golden splash of flesh against the brick. . . . I stood where I was, watching the juice of the apricot trickle down the hot wall. A wasp alighted on it, crawled stickily, then suddenly fell, buzzing on its back to the ground. Its body jack-knifed, the buzz rose to a whine as it struggled, then it lay still. I hardly saw it, because something had swelled in my throat till I thought I would choke, and the golden evening swam, brilliant, into tears. This was the first time in my life that I remember weeping. (*CC* 33-34)

The knowledge that there is evil which would betray innocence brings suffering. The major betrayal of innocence in the story, with its attendant and inevitable suffering, is, of course, Morgause's seduction of the innocent Arthur. The rose-gold Morgause carries the poison:

This morning she wore red, the color of cherries, and over the shoulders of the gown her hair looked rosy fair, larch buds in spring, the color of apricots. Her scent was heavy and sweet, apricots and honeysuckle mixed. . . . But death was here, in a form and with a smell I did not know. A smell like treachery, something remembered dimly from my childhood, when my uncle planned to betray his father's kingdom, and to murder me. (*HH* 388, 376)

Modred is the seed of suffering engendered by the betrayal of innocence. Morgause is even able to use her treachery on Merlin, poisoning his wine at Morgan's wedding feast:

I must have drunk far more than I was accustomed to, because I well remember how the torchlight beat and swelled, bright and dark alternately, while talk and laughter surged and broke in gusts and with it the woman's scent, a thick sweetness like honeysuckle, catching and trapping the sense as a lime twig holds a bee. The fumes of the wine rose through it. A gold jug tilted, and my goblet brimmed again. Someone said, smiling "Drink, my lord." There was a taste of apricots in my mouth, sweet and sharp; the skin had a texture like the fur of a bee, or a wasp dying in sunlight on a garden wall. . . . And all the while eyes watching me, in excitement and wary hope, then in contempt, and in triumph. (*LE* 211-12)

The result is that Merlin spends seven months "stark crazy" (*LE* 222), wandering in the woods, his words garbled. Poisoned magic brings madness, not vision.

No one is exempt from suffering, nor is it clear what the price will be. "It is God who keeps the price secret, Uther, not I," Merlin tells Uther. It is God who exacts the price, and he does so for his own purposes. Men are merely vehicles through whom the purpose is accomplished: "The gods sit over the board, but it is men who move under their hands for the mating and the kill" (*HH* 104). As Merlin explains to Moravick: "I don't know if I can make you understand, Moravick: Visions and prophecies, gods and stars and voices speaking in the night . . . things seen cloudy in the flames and in the stars, but real as pain in the blood, and piercing the brain like ice. But now . . ." I paused again. ". . . Now it is no longer a god's voice or a vision, it is a small human child with lusty lungs, a baby like any other baby, who cries and sucks milk, and soaks his swaddling clothes. One's visions do not take account of this" (*HH* 155). Merlin speaks of himself as one "who had been used by the driving god for thirty years" (*HH* 432) for the god's own purposes. What those purposes are is usually revealed only gradually.

The progressive revelation of Truth, or the searching after final truth, can be seen in a number of ways throughout the course of the novels. In each of the progressions, there is a movement from division to unification, from partiality to wholeness. Merlin's personal search is for the source of his power. He says his power comes from the god, but there are many religions and many gods in Merlin's world: "And dreamed again . . . a dream half-waking, broken and uneasy, of the small gods of small places; gods of hills and woods and streams and crossways; the gods who still haunt their broken shrines, waiting in the dusk beyond the lights of the busy Christian churches, and the dogged rituals of the greater gods of Rome" (*HH* 229). Mithras, the druids, Roman gods, the Christian God—Merlin says, "I believe in giving due honour to whatever god confronts you. . . . That's common sense in these days, as well as courtesy. Sometimes I think the gods themselves have not yet got it clear" (*HH* 303). Merlin explains to Ambrosius: "My lord, when you are looking for . . . what I am looking for, you

have to look in strange places. Men can never look at the sun, except downwards, at his reflection in things of earth. If he is reflected in a dirty puddle, he is still the sun. There is nowhere I will not look, to find him" (CC 174-75). One of the first gods Merlin traffics with is Mithras, Mithras, who, as Ambrosius says, is another face of Christ: "For, 'said my father to me afterwards when we were alone, 'as you will find, all gods who are born of the light are brothers, and in this land, if Mithras who gives us victory is to bear the face of Christ, why, then, we worship Christ'" (CC 289). Mithras is:

the soldier's god, the Word, the Light, the Good Shepherd, the mediator between the one God and man. I had seen Mithras, who had come out of Asia a thousand years ago. He had been born, Ambrosius told me, in a cave at mid-winter, while shepherds watched and a star shone; he was born of earth and light, and sprang from the rock with a torch in his left hand and a knife in his right. He killed the bull to bring life and fertility to the earth with its shed blood, and then, after his last meal of bread and wine, he was called up to heaven. He was the god of strength and gentleness, of courage and self-restraint. (CC 131)

But Merlin is neither a worshipper of Mithras nor a Christian. Galapas tells Merlin in their first meeting: "[Myrddin] lends me his spring, and his hollow hill, and his heaven of woven light, and in return I give him his due. It does not do to neglect the gods of a place, whoever they may be. In the end, they are all one" (CC 51). And this is also Merlin's belief: "I think there is only one. Oh, there are gods everywhere, in the hollow hills, in the wind and the sea, in the very grass we walk on and the air we breathe, and in the bloodstained shadows where men like Belarius wait for them. But I believe there must be one who is God Himself, like the great sea, and all the rest of us, small gods and men and all, like rivers, we all come to Him in the end" (CC 165). Throughout the story, Merlin respects each of the individual gods, but the word of power which he speaks is from the one God, the god who is the light: "I only know that God is the source of all the light which has lit the world, and that his purpose runs through the world and past each one of us like a great river, and we cannot check or turn it, but can only drink from it while living, and commit our bodies to it when we die" (CC 372).

Merlin's word of power and his movement toward one God parallels the word of power spoken by a king. The Matter of Britain is a movement from many kings to one King, from divided kingdoms to one, unified Kingdom within which there can be harmony. The idea of one country and one king is first instilled in Merlin by Galapas: "He spoke as if it were all one country, though I could have told him the names of the kings of a dozen places that he mentioned. I only remember this because of what came after" (CC 55). It is Merlin's role to establish Arthur as the one King, and just as there is one God of light and truth, so, prophesies Merlin at Ambrosius's burial, there will be in Britain one King:

And while the King lies there under the stone the Kingdom shall not fall. For as long and longer than it has stood before, the Dance shall

stand again, with the light striking it from the living heaven. And I shall bring back the great stone to lay upon the grave-place, and this shall be the heart of Britain, and from this time on all the kings shall be one King and all the gods one God. And you shall live again in Britain, and for ever, for we will make between us a King whose name will stand as long as the Dance stands, and who will be more than a symbol; he will be a shield and a living sword. (*CC* 309)

When this has been accomplished, God's purpose for Merlin is also accomplished, and Merlin says, "The god, who was God, has indeed dismissed his servant, and was letting him go in peace" (*LE* 469).

There are two other progressions in the novels that emphasize the general movement from partiality to wholeness. The first has to do with the issue of lineage, and the second involves the role of Nimuë. Just as there is a succession of gods, each heirs of the former, and just as one king succeeds another in search for one King, so do individual characters search for the truth of their origins. There are a good number of bastard children in the novels: Merlin, Morgause, Modred, and—for much of his life—Arthur. The search for legitimacy is an overriding one for Merlin and for Arthur, and the two cases have many parallels.⁴ Neither is conceived in wedlock, but each is finally proclaimed the legitimate heir by a father who is king. They are enough alike that Arthur for a time believes that Merlin is his father. And Merlin is Arthur's father in spirit and in love, a fact which Arthur never forgets. He calls Merlin "the man who was more to me than my own father" (*LE* 428); and when Merlin tells Arthur the truth about his parentage and of his own role in bringing Arthur to the throne, Arthur responds: "'You,' he said quietly, 'you, from the very beginning. I wasn't so far wrong after all, was I? I'm as much yours as the King's—more; and Ector's too'" (*HH* 384). Cador says to Merlin of Arthur: "Did you know he was more like you than ever like the King?" (*HH* 339). There are many kinds of fathers. Galapas and Ambrosius are father to Merlin; Merlin and Ector and Ralf and Uther are father to Arthur; and Merlin is father to Niniane.

Ninian, as Niniane is called when Merlin thinks she is a boy, or Nimuë, once she becomes the King's enchantress, is first the "son" Merlin could have had in no other way and then the only lover he could ever have had. And, finally, Nimuë becomes the heir of Merlin's word of power. That Merlin comes to see her as that heir denotes a movement from partial to whole truth on his part. Merlin begins by making a clear distinction between the magic of women and his own power. His mother, Niniane, has the Sight and something of power, but she loses it. Merlin explains to Ambrosius that he gets his Sight from his mother, "but it is different. She saw only women's things, to do with love. Then she began to fear the power, and let it be" (*CC* 128). When Merlin sees his mother after a five year absence, he says: "I found her much changed. She was pale and quiet, and had put on weight, and with it a kind of heaviness of the spirit that she had not had before. It was only after a day or two, jogging north with the escort through the hill, that it suddenly came to me what this was; she had lost what she had had of power. Whether time

had taken this, or illness, or whether she had abnegated it for the power of the Christian symbol that she wore on her breast, I had no means of guessing. But it has gone" (*CC* 215). Morgause also has something of the power, but when she asks Merlin to teach her his arts, he refuses:

I've told you it isn't possible. You will have to take my word for that. You are too young. I'm sorry, child. I think that for power like mine you will always be too young. I doubt if any woman could go where I go and see what I see. It is not an easy art. The god I serve is a hard master. . . . He only lends his power for his own ends. When they are achieved, who knows? If he wants you, he will take you, but don't walk into the flames, child. Content yourself with such magic as young maids use. (*HH* 202-03)

While it is true that if Morgause knows nothing of the god and wants to use the power for her own ends rather than being used by the god, she could never speak the word of power, it is also true that at this point, and for most of his life, Merlin doubts that any woman could go where he goes and see what he sees. He believes in women's magic—distinct from his own power—and in women's power over men because of their ability to incite physical desire. He himself, "knowing what a girl could do to rob a man of power" (*HH* 375), avoids relationships with women: "I had known, that day at twenty when I fled from the girl's angry and derisive laughter, that for me there had been a cold choice between manhood and power, and I had chosen power" (*HH* 375). Merlin is eager to teach Niniane because he believes her at first to be the drowned Ninian returned:

The boy Ninian—so young and quiet, and with a grace in look and motion that gave the lie to the ugly slave-burn on his arm—he had had about him the mark of coming death. This, once seeing, any man might have wept for, but I was weeping, too, for myself; for Merlin the enchanter, who saw and could do nothing; who walked his own lonely heights where it seemed that none would ever come near to him. In the boy's still face and listening eyes, that night on the moor when the birds had called, I had caught a glimpse of what might have been. For the first time, since those days long ago when I had sat at Galapas' feet to learn the arts of magic, I had seen someone who might have learned worthily from me. Not as others had wanted to learn, for power or excitement, or for the prosecution of some enmity or private greed; but because he had seen, darkly with a child's eyes, how the gods move with the winds and speak with the sea and sleep in the gentle herbs; and how God himself is the sum of all that is on the face of the lovely earth. (*LE* 128-29)

Merlin is lonely; the very power which is the force of his life also isolates him, separates him from others. What Nimue brings him is wholeness. She allows him to love, to be a lover, and to share his knowledge and power. They become one in

body and in spirit: "At last I was free to give, along with all the rest of the power and effort and glory, the manhood that until now had been the god's alone. The abdication I had feared, and feared to grudge, would not be a loss, but rather a new joy gained" (*LE* 349). The similarities between Merlin and Nimuë become apparent as Arthur questions Nimuë about her desire to study magic and Nimuë says of that desire, with "a look straight at [Arthur], equal to equal. "You must have known it. I was still unborn, hammering at the egg, to get out into the air" (*LE* 358-59). The "burning to be free," the desire to be bound by no man, is something both Arthur and Merlin understand.

What Merlin learns is that freedom is finally not a matter of isolation and separation but a matter of unification and wholeness. Merlin and Nimuë have chosen to live outside the traditional masculine and feminine roles which they view as confining to their spirits. Thus, both have become, not sexless, but androgynous. The two remain individuals, yet the two become one:

So, toward the end of my life, I found a new beginning. A beginning it was in love, for both of us. . . . Between myself and Nimuë was a bond stronger than any between the best-matched pair in the flower of their age and strength. We were the same person. We were part of each other as are night and daylight, dark and dawn, sun and shadow. When we lay together we lay at the edge of life where opposites fuse and make new entities, not of the flesh, but of the spirit, the issue as much of the ceaseless traffic of mind with mind, as of the body's pleasure.

We did not marry. Looking back now, I doubt if either of us even thought of cementing the relationship in this way; it was not clear what rites we could have used, what faster bond we could have hoped for. With the passing of the days and nights of that sweet summer, we found ourselves closer and yet more close, as if cast in a common mould: we would wake in the morning and know we had shared the same dream; meet at evening and each know what the other had learned and done that day. And all the time, as I believed, each of us harboured our own private and growing joy: I to watch her trying the wings of power like a strong young bird feeling for the first time the mastery of air; she to receive this waxing strength, and to know, with love but without pity, that at the same time the power was leaving me. (*LE* 364-65)

And so, Merlin gives Nimuë the sum of his life on which to build her own. She will inherit the word of power which is Merlin's word and the word of the god. The quest for the sword and the grail, the quest for the truth of one Kingdom and the quest for the one God are all one in the end: "It is time the gods became one God, and there in the grail is the oneness for which men will seek, and die, and dying, live" (*LE* 374). Successful in his own quest, Merlin can echo the words of Christ's fulfillment: "I said to the ghosts, to the voices, to the empty moonlight: 'It was

time. Let me go in peace.' Then, commanding myself and my spirit to God who all these years had held me in his hand, I composed myself for sleep" (*LE* 375).

There is a final thing to be said about Merlin as word of power. Merlin explains that he is "a spirit, a word" (*CC* 357), a voice through which the god can speak. In the course of the novels, however, Merlin, who is the word of power, becomes so closely associated with the Word that is God that he also becomes that Word and, thus, is a maker, a creator of the story of history. The identification of Merlin with divinity begins with his name and comes for the first time in the revelation scene between Merlin and Ambrosius:

"Emrys, she called you. Child of the light. Of the immortals. Divine.
You knew that's what it meant?"

"Yes."

"Didn't you know it was the same as mine?"

"My name?" I asked, stupidly.

He nodded. "Emrys. . . . Ambrosius; it's the same word. Merlinus Ambrosius—she called you after me."

I stared at him. "I—yes, of course. It never occurred to me." I laughed.

"Why do you laugh?"

"Because of our names. Ambrosius, prince of light. . . . She told everyone that my father was the prince of darkness. I've even heard a song about it. We make songs of everything, in Wales." (*CC* 175)

Merlin Emrys, "Child of the light. Of the immortals. Divine," has from the beginning been the occasion of song and legend. Merlin lives in a cave of legend, Bryn Myrddin, a hollow "hill sacred to the sky-god Myrddin, he of the light and the wild air" (*LE* 70), a hill the people associate with Merlin "rather than with the god, calling it Merlin's Hill" (*CC* 327), a hill Merlin is willing to share with the god, becoming "their god made flesh" and taking the people's offering to the god as his own:

I know that the wine and bread, like the thrown coins, had been left as much as an offering to the god as to me; in the minds of the simple folk I had already become part of the legend of the hill, their god made flesh who came and went as quietly as the air, and brought with him the gifts of healing. (*HH* 30)

Merlin, like Myrddin, is associated with the light and the wind. Merlin once says of a dog that barks at him that the dog is wise since "he's one who can see the wind" (*LE* 50). And, again, Merlin observes: "So the year went by, and the lovely month came, September, my birth-month, the wind's month, the month of the raven, and of Myrddin himself, that wayfarer between heaven and earth" (*LE* 318). As the word and the Word, Merlin can say to Ninian, "'You will be welcome.' I added, softly, as much to myself as to him: 'By God himself, you will be welcome'" (*LE* 290). Because he is the Word of power, Merlin can say to Morgause—when she

curses him, saying, "In the end you will only be a shadow and a name" (*HH* 393)—"I am nothing, yes; I am air and darkness, a word, a promise. I watch in the crystal and I wait in the hollow hills. But out there in the light I have a young king and a bright sword to do my work for me" (*HH* 394). As Word of power, Merlin uses Arthur to build the one Kingdom, a kingdom whose legend will last forever.

A legend is itself a word of power, a story which has the power to capture the imagination of the listener. Mary Stewart's Merlin is a man very much aware of his own legend in the making and of his part in creating and fostering that legend. Throughout the trilogy, Merlin carefully explains the "supernatural" events in which he participates. His explanations revise and reinterpret the stories of Mary Stewart's sources, while becoming in that very process the source of his own legend. Who could be a more authoritative narrator of the events than Merlin himself? Because he is seer, he knows how the stories will be passed down in the future, but because he is Merlin, word of power, he is the word of truth, telling us the truth of the legend—a legend which, over time, assumes its own truth and power. The stories of Stewart's sources—Merlin's demon origins, the red and white dragons beneath Vortigern's tower, the magical transformation of Uther into the shape of Gorlois, the story of the Hanging Stones of the Giant's Dance, the sword in the stone, Nimuë's betrayal and Merlin's death-in-life—all have, as Merlin testifies, perfectly natural and reasonable explanations based on boyhood escapades, mathematics, the superstitious credulity of the general populace, and the emotion of human love. At the same time, there is still mystery in each of these "truths," so that the explanation is not, nor ever can be, the whole truth. There is mystery in truth; and it is out of this mystery, which is ultimately the god, that the word of power comes. And it is for this power that Merlin is the word.

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NOTES

¹For the convenience of the reader, I have cited the popular paperback editions of the novels: *The Crystal Cave*. Greenwich: Fawcett, 1970. *The Hollow Hills*. Greenwich: Fawcett, 1973. *The Last Enchantment*. New York: Fawcett, 1980. The hardback editions were published by Morrow in New York, 1970, 1973, and 1979, respectively. The abbreviations *CC* (*The Crystal Cave*), *HH* (*The Hollow Hills*), and *LE* (*The Last Enchantment*) are used throughout this essay.

²Maureen Fries, in "The Rationalization of the Arthurian 'Matter' in T. H. White and Mary Stewart," *Philological Quarterly*, 56, no. 2 (Spring 1977): 258-65, discusses the problems inherent in Stewart's choice of a first person narrator, as well as Stewart's use of the fifth-century historical context.

³For a discussion of the characterization of women in the trilogy, see Harold J. Herman, "The Women in Mary Stewart's Merlin Trilogy," *Interpretations*, 15, no. 2 (Spring, 1984): 101-14.

⁴Fries also discusses the parallels between Merlin and Arthur.