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Source: *Arthurian Interpretations*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Fall 1988), pp. 61-78

Published by: [Scriptorium Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27868651>

Accessed: 09/06/2014 19:11

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THE MANY FACES OF MERLIN IN MODERN FICTION¹

Merlin, Arthur's enchanter and prophet, a figure of mystery, of magic, and of awesome power, is a name that has been part of our literature for more than eight centuries. But the same creature is never conjured, for, as Jane Yolen says, was he not "a shape-shifter, a man of shadows, a son of an incubus, a creature of the mists" (xii)? Or, to quote Nikolai Tolstoy, as a "trickster, illusionist, philosopher and sorcerer, he represents an archetype to which the race turns for guidance and protection" (20).

Merlin's current popularity cannot be denied, and some critics have been tempted to account for it in psychological terms. Taylor and Brewer suggest that today's decline in orthodox religious belief, the rise of fringe movements such as theosophy and occultism, the interest in all kinds of paranormal experience and the belief in the power of the mind over the body have all inclined readers to turn to figures of supernatural mystery such as Merlin (239-41).

Other writers see the late twentieth century as a time of increasing disillusionment and a period in which more and more people cynically reject any possibility of political leaders ever putting things right. Thus new kinds of heroes are sought—benevolent figures of authority who can almost by magic make all things right again. Only such a deeply felt subconscious wish can explain the tremendous appeal that a figure such as Gandalf has for thousands of young students. Merlin can be seen as a wizard of the same kind. But even if Merlin cannot put things right, his prophetic role makes him useful in a different way. He now steps forward to warn mankind of dangers that lie ahead and, more positively, he can be used to offer a vision of a brighter future.

Yet another reason can be advanced for Merlin's popularity. A trip to any bookstore will show how popular fantasy writing has become today. This cannot be explained solely in terms of a desire for crude adventure which extols physical violence and blatant sex. Some of it comes from a desire to escape into a world where moral values are clearer, a world where good is pure and uncomplicated and where evil is black and total. In fantasy worlds, man's duty to fight for the good with his

whole being is never in doubt and is never laughed at. Readers of such fiction naturally accept Merlin as one of their heroes.

Although there may be truth to some of these suggestions, some other less dramatic reasons for Merlin's current popularity may be offered. Speculation can be kept to a minimum by looking at how Merlin actually appears in a selection of modern novels and by objectively describing what appears there. If the resulting conclusions are modest, their being based on direct observation may at least make them the more acceptable.

The starting point must be the recognition that there has been a huge outpouring of fiction dealing with every aspect of the Arthurian legend in the last three decades. In 1985, Raymond Thompson wrote that since 1954 about forty short poems, eleven long poems, ten plays, five short stories, and more than 100 novels have been published on this subject (7). And the flood goes on, for at least ten more novels have been published since Thompson's book appeared only three years ago.

Not unexpectedly, this interest in the Arthurian story is partly responsible for the fascination we have today for Merlin. He is, after all, one of the central characters in the legend. To some degree, this is explanation enough, for so popular is the legend in contemporary fiction that there is hardly any Arthurian character, however minor, who has not taken on new life because of renewed interest in the legend.

Because there is so much material available in modern literature which deals with Merlin, some arbitrary limits have had to be imposed. This study will be restricted to just twelve representative authors. They are: C. S. Lewis (*That Hideous Strength*), John Cooper Powys (*Porius*), Edward Eager (*Half Magic*), T. H. White (*The Once and Future King*), Susan Cooper (*The Dark Is Rising* series), Peter Dickinson (*The Weathermonger*, *Heartsease*, and *The Devil's Children*), Mary Stewart (*The Crystal Cave*, *The Hollow Hills*, and *The Last Enchantment*), Warner Munn (*Merlin's Ring* and *Merlin's Godson*), Parke Godwin (*Firelord*), Marion Bradley (*The Mists of Avalon*), Andre Norton (*Merlin's Mirror*), and Jane Yolen (*Merlin's Booke*).

From the very beginning there have been many Merlins. In the early twelfth century Geoffrey of Monmouth gave readers

the boy born without a father. Begotten by a devil upon a human mother, Merlin tells Vortigern that his tower will not stand because a red dragon fights with a white dragon in a pool beneath its foundations. There follows his ecstatic trance and that tremendous list of frightening and puzzling prophecies that still intrigue and tantalize readers today. It is this Merlin that subsequently builds Stonehenge and by trickery brings Uther to Igraine's bed.

Ten or fifteen years later Geoffrey told a different story of Merlin. King in South Wales, he fights a war with Peredur of North Wales as his ally. All of Peredur's brothers are killed in the battle and in horror and grief Merlin flees into the woods. He becomes mad. Eventually he returns, apparently recovered, but soon loses his senses once more and returns to the forest. In this poem, Merlin is essentially famous for his prophecies.

In the fifteenth century Sir Thomas Malory presents a different Merlin. Malory's work has no place for anything before the time of Arthur. Though retaining the idea that Merlin was begotten of the devil, in general Malory plays down Merlin's magical powers, preferring instead to present him as God's agent here on earth. In Malory, Merlin becomes all too fatally human. Subject to a destiny that he knows but cannot avoid, he is degraded and ends as a mere voice pathetically echoing from beneath the stone where his own lustful desire for Nimue has placed him. Merlin's fate thus pointedly anticipates the downfall of the whole Round Table, for it is human weakness and human imperfection that ultimately bring to ruin the noble chivalric ideal that Arthur had created out of the world of anarchy which he had inherited.

Among other Middle English depictions of Merlin² are those based on the French *Vulgate*. In these, Merlin moves from one role to another. He begins conventionally as the devil-begotten child who turns to good rather than evil. He shows a sense of humor, for he delights in appearing in disguise and then laughing ironically at people's gullibility. When Arthur becomes king, Merlin recedes into the background, keeping his magical powers and becoming more of an adviser telling Arthur how he can win his battles. He even becomes a soldier and fights in hand to hand combat like other men.

Turning to modern literature, it is apparent that very little of the medieval Merlin appears. This should not be entirely

surprising, for less than one third of the works studied attempt to retell the familiar tragic history of Arthur's rise and fall. Freed from the constraints of this story, authors have a much wider scope as to how they can draw Merlin, and their taking and using this opportunity is to be expected.

Nevertheless, some traditional material is repeated. First of all, in both *The Crystal Cave* and *The Mists of Avalon* Uther comes to Igraine in the guise of Gorlois though there is no magic and little trickery. The ruse succeeds only because Igraine wants it to.

Second, Merlin builds Stonehenge in *The Crystal Cave* as a tremendous monument of light for Ambrosius. In *Merlin's Mirror*, Merlin brings the King's Stone from Ireland but he does not build Stonehenge. In *Merlin's Godson*, Merlin seals Arthur's tomb with a huge rock so that "the massive and ponderous boulder rose in the air to the height of a tall man" (22). This action no doubt reflects Merlin's traditional power over stones that he used to build Stonehenge.

Third, Vortigern's tower, which will not stand, appears three times in these authors, but interestingly in none of them does Merlin claim that he used any form of magic. In Norton's work Merlin says to Ambrosius:

Lord, I am of the mountains and I know this land.
I only said what the High King's men should have
known, that there can be no firm foundation where
a spring eats under the crown of a hill. (39)

In *The Crystal Cave*, Merlin's explanation is even more explicit. Long before Vortigern summons him, Merlin finds the underground workings which are to weaken the tower's foundations. Consequently when he later stands in the king's presence, he thinks:

I could tell them the truth, coldly. I could take the
torch and clamber up into the dark workings and point
out faults which were giving way under the weight
of the building . . . but what Vortigern needed now
was not logic and an engineer; he wanted magic. (CC
288)

So Merlin puts on a show of pretended magic. The performance is convincing but it is all deliberate make-believe.

There is a different twist in Jane Yolen's "Dream Reader." Merlin, a boy of eight, is adopted by Ambrosius, a travelling magician. They are invited to perform before the Duke of Carmarthen and his wife, the Lady Reinwein.³ There, Merlin narrates a dream of "a tower of snow that in the day reached high up into the sky but at night melted to the ground" (56). Ambrosius interprets the dream but again the explanation is the prosaic story of broken Roman conduits, underground leakage and a pool of water beneath the foundations.

The traditional elements mentioned so far—bringing Uther to Igraine, building Stonehenge and Vortigern's tower—are deeds that Merlin does. They are little self-contained stories and if a modern writer would use them he would have to incorporate them somehow into his own plot. It seems that few authors are willing to do this as they prefer to follow new plots of their own making. The other traditional features that are connected with Merlin do not relate to his deeds but to his nature or character. Perhaps because these traits are less limiting to the characterization of Merlin, they are more easily used by today's creators of Merlin in today's novels.

From early in the twelfth century, Merlin has appeared as a prophet and this feature is well-represented in modern fiction. Sometimes it is only light-heartedly and fleetingly present as in *The Dark Is Rising*:

Merriman said [to James] absent-mindedly, "In point of fact you will become a most accomplished tenor. Almost professional standard. Your brother's voice will be baritone-pleasant, but nothing special." (103)

The prophetic strain is equally minor in *Firelord* though its subject matter is more serious. Merlin warns Arthur that Ancellius will betray him, then goes on "You will be king, Arthur. There will be victories at first and a kind of defeat in the end, but that won't last. You'll be remembered" (54-55). In *Merlin's Godson*, Merlin, speaking of the Saxon slaves that he frees, says, "Not one of these men will ever see his homeland. They are doomed men" (31). Prophecy is more important in Powys's *Porius*. Myrddin Wyllt, which is the name Powys gives to Merlin, is called "this mad prophet" (108) by Porius early in the book and "the only true prophet there's been on this

planet since Tiresius" (597) at the end. But here, Merlin's powers are also questioned. Henog, for example, says:

All that you see of the future are clouds and mists and vapours! All of it is dark and obscure. . . . Many are the interpretations of what you announce; and bitter to the end of time will be the disputes between the interpreters. . . . Your prophecies . . . can never be more than the magical guesses of an inspired imagination. (97-98)

It is Mary Stewart who most clearly makes Merlin a prophet, and this power comes from his very nature. He makes two kinds of prophecy. There is the wild frenzy in which Merlin cries aloud before Vortigern:

All wrapped up, it was, with eagles and wolves and lions and boars and as many other beasts as they've ever had in the arena and a few more besides, dragons and such—going hundreds of years forward. (CC 294)

Such a prophecy is not specific; it is capable of many interpretations; it can even be ignored or forgotten if it turns out to be wrong.

But other visions are private, not intended to hoodwink a gullible audience. An example is Merlin's foreknowledge as he waits outside Igraine's bedchamber where Uther has gained entrance by his arts that he will one day have the care of Arthur and the shaping of his destiny:

Someone was coming softly down the stairs; a woman, shrouded in a mantle, carrying something. She came without a sound. . . . It was Marcia. I saw the tears glisten on her cheeks as she bent her head over what lay in her arms. A child, wrapped warm against the winter night. She saw me and held her burden out to me. "Take care of him," she said. (CC 440)

Such visions cannot be dismissed as coincidences or lucky guesses. They have to be accepted as genuine. Certainly Merlin believes them and he has a ready explanation. He has what he calls the Sight and he thinks that he is the agent through whom the gods speak. He calls himself "a reed" with "the wind of God blowing through it" (CC 434).

A second aspect of Merlin that is inherited from medieval times is his avoidance of any commitment to women until, in old age, he is foolishly attracted to the enchantress Nyneue. In Malory, this infatuation leads him to give up all the secrets of his magic and to his imprisonment under a rock from which he can never escape. For Malory, Merlin exemplifies man's weakness before the power of a woman.

Because modern writers tend to make Merlin a man of power and wisdom and because he often fights as a champion of righteousness, when they use the theme of Nimue they turn it round. Merlin's conquest of his rival thus becomes a triumphant demonstration of his new characterization. In Yolen's story, "In the Whitethorn Wood," Merlin awakes in the dark, puzzled, not knowing where he is or even who he is. As he muses aloud, a low throaty woman's voice answers his questions with the words "dark-Whitethorn wood-old one-magic maker." As he ponders the riddle he has been set, he eventually remembers who he is. He says Nimue's name and breaks her spell. When she returns centuries later to laugh and taunt him, he has gone.

In *Porius* things are less clear. Merlin does not love Nineue but for some reason he pretends he does. He lets himself be captured and is fastened to a rock with ponderous chains. The crucial matter though is that Porius rescues him and Nineue's plans are thwarted.

Mary Stewart makes dramatic use of the episode. In *The Last Enchantment*, Ninian is first Merlin's apprentice, disguised as a boy, and then later she becomes his lover. Their brief time together is the happiest time Merlin has known. He willingly teaches her everything he knows so that when his powers leave him there will be another prophet ready to serve Arthur in his place.

At the end of the novel Merlin is drugged and thought to be dead. He is entombed in royal state in his cave in the hollow hills. It was a great public occasion and after it the king "shut himself up alone for three days, and would speak to no one" (439). As for Nimue, far from betraying him, she "went back to the cave, but the door was blocked still, and she called and called" (479). He dramatically escapes from his tomb and miraculously, it seems, comes back to life. No more triumphant reversal of the medieval theme than this could be imagined.

Andre Norton makes Nimue the Lady of the Lake and Merlin's implacable enemy. Merlin, who serves the Light, says to her:

You are the servant of the Dark Ones and you have wrought such a bloodletting in Britain as will not be forgotten for a thousand of man's years, maybe more.
(202)

She seeks to trap him by seduction and after she fails she tries to kill him. But Merlin defeats her, and the story ends with his voluntary entombment, where he will sleep, suspended in time, until a "better day" (204) arrives when again the forces of good will attempt to win the earth for mankind.

Bradley alone lets Nimue have her traditional victory but this only after Merlin has committed a great sin. Kevin is the Lord Merlin. Convinced that the old religion is dying and that it can survive only by being fused with Christianity, he takes the sacred relics from Avalon and gives them to the priests. To punish this blasphemy, Morgaine sends Nimue, a priestess of Avalon, to Camelot and she seduces Kevin and binds him with a spell he cannot break. She takes him to Avalon and delivers him to Morgaine. Sentenced to death, he is led away but as he is executed lightning flashes from the sky and splits the great oak tree. Kevin is buried in the cleft tree in a grave that the Goddess seemingly has made. This is the only instance in all the novels under examination where Merlin falls from grace. His death is not then a defeat by a woman but an appropriate act of justice sanctified by the Goddess herself.

Merlin's nature varies from novel to novel. Few writers still use the tradition that he was devil-begotten. Munn suggests that he was "sired by a demon" (7) but adds realistically that more probably he was "a foundling brought up in childhood by Druids" (8).

Yolen alone uses the old myth literally. She retells the story in graphic detail:

Merlin's mother is a nun who had lived in the nunnery for ten years from the age of eight. She is miraculously visited at night in a locked room by "a young man, clothed in light and as beautiful as the sun." When the child is born he is half-human with "the most

beautiful face, like an ivory carving of an angel, and eyes the blue of Our Lady's robe," but he is also born with a tail and sharp claws. As Blaise, the priest, anoints them with holy oil "The imp screamed as if in terrible pain and its tail burst into flames, turning in an instant into ash. All that was left was a scar at the top of the buttocks." (15)

The child was suddenly and wholly human. Clearly it is not any innate goodness in Merlin or his mother that saves him but only the priest's prompt action in administering the holy oil.

Norton alters the incubus tradition completely. In her version a space capsule has circled the heavens for centuries until the appointed moment when it comes to earth. From it emerges a creature that "was all light, clothed with radiance and warmth" (13). He carries the seed of the ancient Skylords and this is what Merlin is—an alien, half-human and half non-terrestrial.

Two writers, Peter Dickinson and C. S. Lewis, are deliberately hazy about what Merlin is. Lewis makes him simply a creature that has slept in Bragdon Wood for 1500 years. Rather similarly, in Dickinson's *The Weathermonger*, Merlin is discovered in an underground cave by Willoughby Furbelow:

I found myself in a low cavern, full of a dim green light. I thought it must be an ancient burial chamber, for on a slab in the centre there was the body of a very big man, and very hairy. I thought he must be dead, and preserved by some freak which produced the green light too, but when I touched him his flesh was firm and far colder than the coldest ice. It burned like solid CO₂. (151)

Edward Eager in his book for children *Half Magic* is content to make Merlin merely a magician but other writers create altogether new forms for Merlin to take. Susan Cooper's books deal with the eternal battle between the forces of good and evil or the Light and the Dark. For her, Merlin, in the form of Merryman Lyon, is "the first of the Old Ones, the strongest, and wisest" (*GK* 37) and one who has lived "in every age" (*DR* 86).

Much more puzzling is the figure of Myrddin Wyllt in Powys's *Porius*. Critics have had difficulties with him. He has been called "an exploration into the dark recesses of mythic thought," "a weird, grotesque and repulsive figure," "a magician of extraordinary powers," "a lord of the animal kingdom" and "the original hermaphroditic unity before love and strife."⁴ The trouble arises because Powys himself seems far from clear what his creation is. At one point Myrddin is explicitly called "the latest incarnation of the god of the Golden Age" (276) but elsewhere he is just as precisely not divine—he is merely a human funnel through whom "the Son of the Morning speaks, the god at whose word the heavens shiver and shake. . . . Cronos is his name and he speaks through me" (99).

Another but different dichotomy appears in Godwin's *Firelord*. Appearing first in the story as a dazzlingly beautiful boy with blond curly hair and grey eyes who produces colored balls that he tosses in the air like a skilled juggler, Merlin is an externalized alter ego of Arthur. He represents the king's dreams, his hopes, his ambitions, and even his conscience. In this role Arthur finally recognizes him and calls out "You're only myself, a shadow-me" (318).

But he is more than this. He also exists apart from Arthur. He has lived "for ages" (365) and when Arthur dies he will leave him and go to another so that "another dreamer [can] be born in the same old place where he's needed" (364). Thus Merlin also stands for destiny, fate, or even the hand of God, a role indicated by the chessboard image:

All of it was coming true: move by move. Merlin placed them on the board. Morgana, Guenevere, and now Lancelot. Pawn, queen, knight, and—king? (129)

Only three writers make Merlin a human being and two of them in a sense duck the problems that this involves. Bradley makes Merlin a title or an office. Its holder is the chief Druid, the Lord Merlin, the Merlin of Britain. The occupants of the office, however, are certainly human—first Taliessin and then Kevin. T. H. White's Merlin is also human, but as a comic figure who "was born at the wrong end of time" so that he has "to live backwards from in front, while surrounded by a lot of people living forwards from behind" (29), he does not

confront readers with any real problems of credibility. They merely enjoy him and ask no questions.

Only Mary Stewart takes the bold step of making Merlin clearly and unambiguously human.⁵ He is the offspring of the Lady Ninian and Ambrosius. Stewart creates a convincing figure but only by altering her opening premises. Even before *The Crystal Cave* is ended, Merlin is recognized to be a creature of fantasy and a magician who exists outside the parameters of human beings.

With such a diversity of origins, it is no wonder that Merlin physically assumes many forms. When he is conceived semi-realistically in a historical setting he must appear as a conventional medieval figure wearing the appropriate contemporary dress. This is how Bradley, Stewart, and Norton present him. He is the comic conventional picture of a wizard in T. H. White "in a flowing gown . . . which had the signs of the zodiac embroidered over it . . . a pointed hat like a dunce's cap . . . a wand . . . and a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles" (22-23).

In *That Hideous Strength*, Merlin is very tall and very fat, a giant figure with red-grey hair. He is equally gigantic, more than eight feet tall in *Weathermonger*, but he has black hair like a mane and his palms are covered with fine black hairs. The most terrifying thing about him, however, is his eyes which "were so deep in the huge head that they looked like the empty sockets of a skull" and they shone with a "green glow" (164).

The most gruesome figure is in *Porius*. Myrddin

spoke in a low, hoarse, guttural whisper. . . . [He had] a straggly black beard. . . . His eyes . . . looked like the bosses of two metal shields . . . [and] were unnaturally circular in shape. . . . His ears were very hairy and resembled those of a horse. His mouth had a tendency to fall open . . . while from his . . . lower lip there was a constant dribbling. . . . Nothing could disguise the ape-like lowness of his primeval forehead or alter the sub-human manner in which his skull bulged.⁶

These last representations of Merlin as physically grotesque are interesting because they suggest that even today the old superstitious idea that the repulsive and the ugly symbolize

mystery, the occult, the supernatural, and the alien still lives. Even Kevin in *The Mists of Avalon* is deformed and twisted so that Guenevere cannot stand him in her presence.

Modern presentations of Merlin rarely make him a magician in the conventional sense. In Cooper's *Greenwitch*, he flies through the air and swims under the sea, talking to all the creatures there; in *That Hideous Strength*, he escapes mysteriously from a tunnel and has unusual powers of hypnotism; in *Merlin's Ring*, he has a magic ring with all the usual powers associated with such things; and in *The Once and Future King* he tries spells that sometimes work but just as often do not. But this kind of trickery no longer impresses modern readers or audiences the way it did medieval ones. Magic is passé today—it is associated with magicians and children's parties. Fantasy writers as a group rarely even use the word "magician" preferring instead "enchanter" or "sorcerer" or even the more august "mage."

Merlin's powers today are not those of a magician. He is instead partly seer and prophet, affirming that there are gods and that they concern themselves with men's affairs. His voice like that of an Old Testament prophet warns men when they are doing wrong or when some danger threatens them or it comforts them and brings hope in times of despair.

Whether they are directly about Arthur or some other knight, Arthurian stories as well as many other fantasy novels, are tales about heroes. A standard motif in such stories is the preparation of the hero as he comes to maturity. Such training demands a teacher sufficiently wise and skillful to mould the champion-to-be and perhaps this is one reason why Merlin's traditional role as a tutor is so popular today.

Merlin is Arthur's tutor in *The Hollow Hills* in which as the Hermit of the Green Chapel he trains Arthur to be king. He has the same role of tutor or counselor in *Firelord*, *The Mists of Avalon*, and *Porius*. *The Once and Future King* presents a more comic version of this part. Today's novels even extend this role making him the mentor of Gwalchmai in *Merlin's Ring* and as Merryman, the tutor of Will in *The Dark Is Rising*.

More and more Merlin is associated today with wisdom, power, and authority. Often he fights for the right against the forces of evil in a cosmic battle that will never cease, tending

to put a streak of implacability, even righteousness, into Merlin's character that has to be accepted as necessary and admirable. However, this trait can make him in some versions very remote and cold. In *Firelord* Merlin forces Arthur to leave the only woman he ever loved so that he can warn the Britons of a huge Saxon invasion. Even in *The Dark Is Rising* Merryman is ready to sacrifice the life of his vassal, Hawkins, when the case demands it. John Rowlands in *The Grey King* puts into pointed words the philosophy that Merlin, as an Old One, believes in:

at the very heart . . . things like humanity and mercy and charity . . . do not come first for the Light. . . . The concern of you people is with the absolute good. . . . At the centre of the Light is a cold white flame. (145-46)

Because Merlin is such a figure of authority and power and because through his prophetic skills he can see more than other men, one might assume another role for him, namely that authors would make him into their mouthpieces and use him as a channel for their own views. But since most of the Arthurian tales are not propagandist and have no view of the world to preach, this is not a temptation for most writers. Consequently, Merlin rarely speaks for his author.

Merryman has one brief passage where he tells Will what an awful responsibility power is and how most people would avoid it if they could.⁷ Only three other writers use Merlin to express their own personal ideologies. Powys has Myrddin attack tyranny and say "What this world wants is more common-sense, more kindness, more indulgence, more leaving people alone" (276). White through Merlin criticizes war, nationalism, and territorial boundaries. Munn depicts a Merlin who violently condemns the English as cruel, arrogant, and unjust and who is strongly pro-Catholic.

Having looked briefly at how these authors present Merlin leads to the last and most important topic: What does each writer use Merlin for? First, except for Stewart's trilogy, Merlin is never the hero of a book, but only an ancillary character. He is not the stuff, then, that heroes are made of. Stewart is different because she tries a new approach to the familiar legend of Arthur, telling it from the point of view of Merlin. To do

this she has to get inside him and this compels her to give a more human and a more credible portrait of him than any other already given. He gains human sympathy and complexity of character but he loses much of his mystery and remoteness.

The least significant use to which Merlin is put is the mercenary one of being put into a novel to capitalize on any sales appeal that this might generate. Munn's *Merlin's Godson* seems a case in point. The front cover of the Ballantine edition carries a grotesquely-comic picture of a robed figure that more properly belongs in *The Wizard of Oz*. The cover describes the novel as "An outstanding fantasy epic of Arthurian romance," while the summary on the back cover begins "Camelot was gone and Arthur lay in the sleep of the forever dead." The same summary mentions Merlin by name three times and Arthur twice, but the hero of the book, Ventidius Varro, once only. But the Arthurian connection is slim. It gives a plausible reason for people to sail the Atlantic in search of new land though their leader's loyalty is to Rome not Britain. But after that the tale is pure fantasy. A sorcerer is needed and Merlin fills the need.

Not quite so crudely done but along the same lines even so are *Weathermonger* and *That Hideous Strength*. Dickinson supplies nothing of the traditional Arthurian Merlin. A voice does shriek "Mordred" but there is no explanation why. It has no relevance to the story and its significance would be lost if the reader did not already know it. The truth of the matter is that the author needs a mysterious power to change the world and Merlin is ready at hand. He plays no part in the first two novels and even in the third his identity is kept secret as long as possible since we know him most of the time simply as the Necromancer.

In *That Hideous Strength* the situation is the same. Again, no Arthurian material appeared in the first two novels of the trilogy,⁸ so its presence in the last one seems out of place. Merlin once more is a character of convenience—a *deus ex machina* figure who steps in to resolve a conflict somewhat arbitrarily in favor of the good.

Though Merlin has a more dominant role in the plot, the same strain of convenience exists in Norton's *Merlin's Mirror* and Cooper's *The Dark Is Rising*. Both present a conflict between good and evil and both put it in the same terms, a

struggle between the Light and the Dark. A suitable champion to lead the forces of the good is needed and both authors choose Merlin. Neither, however, either by an appeal to tradition or by careful characterization in the novels themselves, justifies this choice. Both novels merely demonstrate that Merlin's name is currently popular and that he has come to be associated with goodness and benevolence to mankind.

Powys in *Porius* seems to be thinking along the same lines but in a more complex way. Myrddin stands for some potent primordial force associated with nature, but he is a force that will not interfere directly in human affairs. What he does is add a sense of mystery and strangeness to the novel as well as extending both the scope of the work by bringing in all forms of nature and the scale of the work by including times long past and future and other lands and worlds. There is a sense that the immediate struggle that is the novel's plot is but a tiny fragment of a much vaster conflict.

Another literary function that Merlin has is joining the familiar to the unfamiliar. This may take the form of the traditional alongside the untraditional, as in the case of Jane Yolen where new materials are cleverly woven into the older fabric of Arthurian legend and Merlin, who appears in all the stories, is the device that joins it all together. Alternatively the familiar and the unfamiliar may be the real world and the supernatural world. In *The Mists of Avalon*, Avalon is essentially the heart of an older, earth-centered religion. It is a real, solid place where people live but it is also a magical place existing partly out of this world in some other dimension. Merlin's role is to be the link between Avalon and the world of secular authority at Camelot. He becomes a man of two worlds—a politician and a priest-philosopher.

Because Merlin is associated with goodness, modern writers always treat him with respect. Even in *The Once and Future King*, despite his human foibles, Merlin is viewed benignly. Of course readers laugh at him, but it is good-natured laughter. And if his methods of teaching young Wart are unusual, they are at least successful. Again Eager's *Half Magic* is light-hearted but Merlin is not ridiculed though other characters are. Morgan le Fay, for example, slides off her horse and lands in a muddy pool while the Black Knight has a round plum pudding aflame with blue brandy stuck on his nose. But when

the fellowship of the Round Table disintegrates, Merlin, "thin, wise and gray-bearded," takes charge. He firmly but kindly tells the children to return to their own time and never to meddle with history again. He brings a moment of seriousness to an otherwise comic story.

Mary Stewart's attempt to make Merlin totally human does not really work; nevertheless her novels are a significantly new way of presenting Merlin; for she has blazed an original trail that others will follow. But the most inventive *use* of Merlin as opposed to just a new presentation of the traditional character is that in *Firelord* by Parke Godwin. Combining the traditional elements of Merlin as prophet, teacher, and divinely-inspired agent of the gods, Godwin makes Merlin totally a figment of Arthur's imagination seen only by him and no one else. In this way Arthur's character can be shown in its complexity by externalizing the debates and conflicts in his mind as well as showing his hopes and dreams. Yet at the same time this method demonstrates how Arthur is pushed along a predetermined path that he cannot avoid and how in the last resort he is no more than a pawn in the hands of fate. It is ironic but entirely appropriate that this presentation of Merlin should in the most literal sense be a non-presentation for he never has any external reality. If, then, Merlin exists somewhere asleep in his cave awaiting a second coming, Godwin's presentation would appeal as immensely to his sardonic sense of humor as it does to modern ones.

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NOTES

¹This is a revised version of a paper first given at a Medieval Studies Symposium at the University of Victoria in November 1988.

²Henry Lovelich, *Merlin* ed. E. A. Kock (EETS ES 93 and 112, OS 185, 1904-32), *Merlin, A Prose Romance* ed. H. B. Wheatley (EETS 10, 21, 36, and 112, 1899), *Of Arthour and of Merlin* ed. O. D. Macrae-Gibson (EETS 268 and 279, 1973-79).

³The name is chosen deliberately, one assumes, to remind us of Rowena, the Saxon princess whom Vortigern married and so to provide a further link with the traditional episode.

⁴See respectively Tolstoy, 18; Taylor and Brewer, 287; G. Wilson Knight. *The Saturnian Quest*. London: Methuen, 1964, 78; Glen Cavaliero. *John Cooper Powys: Novelist*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1973, 121; Morine Krissdottir. *John Cooper Powys and the Magical Quest*. London: Macdonald, 1980, 137.

⁵I have discussed the problems associated with Stewart's humanized Merlin in a paper given at Kalamazoo, Michigan, in May 1988. It is to be published shortly by the Edwin Mellen press.

⁶See 54, 55, 63, 89.

⁷See DR 35.

⁸*Out of the Silent Planet* and *Perelandra*.

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