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Author(s): PETER H. GOODRICH

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The Erotic Merlin

PETER H. GOODRICH

The figure of Merlin manifests exotic characteristics in the conventions of his madness, conception and birth, and his actions as seer, tryst-maker, and lover. He is both a catalyst and victim of eros. (PHG)

The game of courtly love and its erotic subtext is a fundamental dynamic in Arthurian romance, symbolizing its spiritual and sexual aspirations and fears. The figure of Merlin—who perceives but cannot expunge this dynamic even in himself—is a primary locus of the erotic, embodying it not only in his contributions to the society of Arthur's kingdom, but in his personal history. It is one of the mage's many ironies that the man whose surpassing powers conventionally depend upon separateness, and who is most often conceived of as an old man supposedly beyond sexual blandishment, should in the end fall victim to the love service that ennoble the Round Table society he helped to build. How did the autoerotic dynamic of Camelot come to be motivated and embodied in Merlin?

Answering such a question presumes either a detailed and exhaustive examination of individual sources and their influences, or a synthesizing approach that postulates a unitary tradition or 'meta-Merlin.' Lacking the space for the first, this discussion embraces the second—even though the tremendous diversity of Arthurian literature may at first appear to undermine it. For while this diversity includes widely differing treatments of Merlin, shape-shifting is perhaps his primary trope just as sexuality, gender, and the erotic are primary concerns of being human. Any unitary interpretation must be constructed with the acknowledgement that it rests upon a broad spectrum of representative texts, especially ones that have established the 'ground rules' of the legend by influencing other texts and popular conceptions of the mage. Moreover, conventional portrayals of Merlin as an old man by no means disbar his association with the erotic, which in my interpretation encompasses both creative and destructive urges. Sometimes the obvious needs to be stated: even if he were always portrayed as old in years (and he is not), Merlin would not necessarily be beyond the reach of erotic impulses himself nor incapable of arousing them in another. Erotic desire is as much a matter of mind as of body, a way of experiencing the

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world and the conjoining of self with other, that transcends even age and bodily sexual functions. Consequently, it should remain possible to explain how the erotic correlates with the figure of Merlin in Arthurian texts, however he may be portrayed. Wherever I do not refer to specific texts, I am describing this meta-figure of the mage.¹

To begin with, the erotic exists in the wizard's legendary origins as a wild man, predating the conventions of courtly romance and later Arthurianism. As a wild man, Merlin is ambivalently human. Susceptible to both bestial and natural forces, he lives like an animal and survives by foraging. As one close to animals and nature, he participates at least metaphorically in the irrational life force that expresses itself through self-preserving desires, including but not limited to the procreative urge. The earliest link figures to Merlin, the Strathclyde recluse Lailoken and his Irish analogue Suibne Geilt, both meet their ends through sexually inspired anger: the first after exposing a queen's adultery, and the second after being falsely accused of adultery with a swineherd's wife. In the Welsh 'Afallenau' from the *Black Book of Carmarthen* Myrddin laments that he used to enjoy a lovely maiden's favors beneath the apple tree he now hides in as a madman. In Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini* (*Life of Merlin*) this motif returns when friend is poisoned with an apple intended for Myrddin by a jealous lover. As in Suibne's story, the *Vita's* wild man returns from the wilderness to murder his former wife's intended bridegroom with the antlers that might otherwise have signified his own cuckoldry, and as in Lailoken's he exposes the adultery of a queen.²

The motifs of the apple tree and poisoned apple are significant examples of this symbolic complex, for they combine biblical, mythological, folkloric and courtly meanings in a single motif. The apple itself is a traditional symbol of sexual knowledge, as in the story of Adam and Eve or the mythological judgment of Paris where the 'apple of discord' is awarded to Venus. The fruit tree of Genesis thus comes to symbolize not only moral but also carnal knowledge, and apples are emblematic of the fairy otherworld in Celtic narratives (specifically Avalon in Arthurian literature). Therefore the lady whom Merlin used to court beneath this tree has usually been interpreted as a fairy mistress, behind whom lies a pantheon of pre-Christian goddesses.³ In the context of Myrddin's madness and exile, the image may also become an emblem of Adam's expulsion from the Garden into the wilderness. As with Adam, Merlin's temptation and eventual death or imprisonment by his beloved in the wilderness simultaneously confirms and displaces his roots in the wild man tradition. The wilderness environment itself has always been

associated with the uncontrolled or demonic as a place of testing; and as Richard Bernheimer observes, 'It was this unity or equivalence of demonic natural forces with the loving couples in which they were embodied that provided the artists or their patrons with their chance to recast human erotic sentiment in forms borrowed from the life of the wild man' (175). In this symbolic matrix, the wildness of Merlin became not only god's curse on his personal transgression, but a feature translated into the satisfaction or frustration of erotic drives and echoed by the occasionally overwrought distress of knights disappointed in love.⁴

Geoffrey of Monmouth and Robert de Boron successively augmented these fundamental characteristics of Merlin's legend through the story of his conception and birth.⁵ Geoffrey makes him a wonder child with no human father, who is sired by a sublunar incubus on a virgin. While Geoffrey tells us that his precedents include Apuleius (Thorpe, 168), Robert drew upon Christian tradition by making the sire a devil in hell, motivated not merely by sexual desire but by a complicated plot to circumvent the mother's natural goodness and piety to create the Antichrist. Merlin's ambivalent humanity, as the product of a virgin birth, is reinforced by Robert's innovation. He is also equivocally supernatural; his knowledge of the past, the demon sire's gift to him, is by redeemed by baptism and counterbalanced by the divine gift of foresight. His eroticism becomes doubly ingrained on both the human and supernatural levels—as a natural yet bestial instinct and also as a demonic one. And in this way, an all-encompassing knowledge of history combines with sexual generation to identify the erotic as the engine that drives worldly events.

This power of bedded bodies to generate history is one of the primary motifs associated with Merlin in romance narrative and, as Donald Hoffman has recently described, in medieval art centered upon him (105ff). The iconographic image of demonic rape is embedded within Merlin himself, and the same drive, if unreleased, undermines the social order. Merlin's dual nature mirrors the inner tension of courtly love conventions with their physiological signs and psychological mood swings between exhilaration and despair. Medieval Arthurian romance from the thirteenth century onward emphasized this conception, built upon that of the wild man, by describing Merlin as hairy from birth, swarthy, lean, and able to assume a wide array of handsome or loathly, and even animal forms. This representation was joined by the physiological hypothesis of humors, particularly that of black bile, to characterize Merlin (and indeed any mage, philosopher, theologian or artist) as saturnine or melancholic and thus introspective, contemplative, and often

suggestively aware of an impending doom that all his efforts will be ultimately helpless to counteract.⁶ As the medieval writers who contributed most to the figure of Merlin were Christian clerics, as Christian doctrine officially proscribed not only Satan but pre-Christian divinities such as Saturn, and as Saturn himself was known from classical mythology to have been castrated and overthrown through a transgressive sexual compulsion for his mother and spouse Gaia or Earth, such associations coalesced to build both creation and failure through erotic drives into themes of Merlin's own generation and disposition.

Consequently, the wild man tradition, the Antichrist story, and medieval conceptions of human physiology encode Merlin's pre-Christian roots with demonology and salvation history. The power of bedded bodies to move events, including the salvation history of the Grail Quest, is not only recognized but also manipulated by Merlin in Arthurian romances, whether to his own or to divine ends. Not only a wild man, but a half-human, his inheritance prepares him to transcend social and ethical limitations to employ sexual desire in the preparation and fulfillment of King Arthur's rule. From infancy, he comments on the infiltrating power of the erotic by revealing sexual attractions and infidelities. His precocious awareness of others' sexual affairs is illustrated in the work of de Boron and his continuators and translators when he saves his mother from death by proving that her judge does not even know his own father—for the judge's mother and the priest who begat him have concealed their adulterous affair from everyone except this child with the devil's own knowledge of past sins.

Merlin's eroticism is deeply ambivalent not only in terms of his literary origins and purported powers, but in terms of sexuality and gender construction. Although his sex (even when he shifts shape) remains unequivocally masculine until twentieth-century conceptions of the anima begin to influence it, many of the roles and postures he adopts in even the earliest narratives are feminine. Such reversals can also be erotic, more obviously by evoking fantasies of sexual possession, less obviously by other forms of possession such as madness or prophetic ecstasy. They are not limited to Merlin, as may be seen, for example, from the many stories of knights who are incarcerated or rescued from incarceration by women. A prime incarcerator of knights—and his great rival—is the supersexual Morgan, described in the Middle English prose translation of the Vulgate *Merlin* as

some-what brown of visage and sangwein colour, and nother to fatte ne to lene, but was full a-pert avenaunt and comely, streight and right plesaunt, and well syngynge. But she was the moste hottest woman of all Breteigne, and

moste luxuriouse, and she was a noble clergesse, and of Astronomie cowed she I-nough, for Merlin hadde hir taught....And she hadde feire eloquense, and ful debonair she was as longe as she was in hir right witte... (507).

The parallels here between Merlin and Morgan cannot be missed, nor can the contrast between their abilities to satisfy themselves sexually, despite a statement in the *Suite de Merlin* that he became infatuated by her even during her pregnancy with Urien's son Yvain (Asher IV, 200).⁷ Like Morgan, Merlin's beloved Nimue (Ninianne in the *Suite*) is at first his pupil and then, in most narratives, frustrates his sexual advances by imprisoning and abandoning him. Yet she also counterpoises Morgan by protecting Arthur from his sister's schemes and contracts a successful marriage with one of Arthur's knights instead of indulging in destructive affairs. The linkages between such opposing yet complementary figures in Arthurian stories suggests to such commentators as Emma Jung and Marie von Franz that Merlin 'holds open the approaches to the divine-animal substrata of the psyche' (366), which encompass the erotic on all levels. Moreover, since his only significant pupils are female, the gender differences embodied in him and projected onto Morgan and Nimue are part of the 'approaches' and 'substrata' that the figure of Merlin must somehow reconcile. In their words, 'Carnal knowledge of this difference is a significant part of the instinctive and irrational depths which are employed by Merlin to compensate the disposition to rigidity in the collective unconscious' (362). As the mage's supernatural inheritance derives from his sire and his natural side comes from his mother, so the mage carries within himself the fluid potential of both genders, and externalizes it in his actions and postures if not his body.

With the erotic deeply and complexly embedded within the figure of Merlin itself, we may now trace more fully how he expresses its power in his own actions and conception of history. Cloaked in marvels, he does so in three primary ways: by predicting or commenting on the zeal of other people's loins, supporting or pandering to it, and most significantly becoming himself both seducer and seduced.

In Malory and many other versions of the legend he comments upon Arthur's choice of spouse by warning the young king that god is displeased with him for begetting Mordred upon his own sister, and that Guenevere will betray him with his own best knight. This moment is an important nexus in the text, because it is linked to the other two ways that Merlin serves eros. Arthur's incestuous sin (usually with Morgause, wife of his former opponent King Lot, but in some versions with Morgan), recapitulates the lust of his father Uther in engendering Arthur upon the Ygern, wife of his

ally Gorlois. Significantly, Merlin does not arrange their sexual encounter as he does Uther's 'night out'. The seer's failure to foretell or prevent it is variously rationalized by modern works, but appears unmotivated in medieval ones. This is a sign to careful readers, like his consent to the Mayday massacre uncharacteristically ordered by Arthur to eliminate Mordred, that Merlin may use eros to further his ends but does not fully control it. If indeed Merlin is foresightful about sexual affairs, one wonders why he does not comment on them more often. It is not for the lack of opportunity. In fact, Merlin sometimes appears to seek out such opportunity, as when he travels to Rome in the Vulgate cycle's *Grisandoles* episode to expose the nymphomania of the Empress—whose attendants are virile young men posing as women—and unite the Emperor with his seneschal—who is a lovely maiden posing as a man. Perhaps it is due to the tact of a narrator removed from Merlin himself, perhaps because eros is one power that transcends his ken.⁸ The conditional nature of his insight is driven home in Malory by Merlin's confession that despite Arthur's sin, the king will suffer a nobler end at the hands of Mordred than he himself will, helpless to forestall his ignominious desire for and burial alive by Nimue. In addition to valorizing the heroic lifestyle, his awareness of the contrast suggests that unknowing incest must be implicitly less debased than knowing carnality. The inexorability of Merlin's end as well as Arthur's usually reveals the extent to which their erotic impulses derive from the demonic—which in many works from Robert de Boron through Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, is subsumed by the divine plan for human history.

Contributing to the woman's role of receptacle or object in the sexual relationship is her idealization by the courtly conventions of love, softening the brute impulses of the knight and inspiring him to gentleness and deeds of valor in her service. These conventions survive even in modern conceptions of romantic love, and lurking behind them are what Ruth Karras describes as a 'hydraulic model of masculine sexuality: people believed that pressure builds up and has to be released through a safety valve (marriage or prostitution), or eventually the dam will burst and men will commit seduction, rape, adultery, and sodomy' (Karras 6). The love code purports to sublimate natural sexual desire into socially desirable conduct, and exalts chastity as the woman's particular responsibility to exemplify in herself and instill in her knight, so frank admission of carnal appetites on the part of the woman was proscribed however common it may have been in medieval society. Yet however socially channeled or conditioned, natural sexual desire may become the practical core of power in the relationship, the inner demon

of courtly love. The figure of Merlin releases its inner erotic tension when he sublimates his own sexual drive into enabling other men to satisfy theirs—Uther with Ygerne, Ban with Agravadain's daughter, and Arthur with Lysanor and even Guinevere. Each case of tryst-making overcompensates the threat that eros poses to the political and social order with the goodly offspring of their nights' work.

Merlin arranges for the future glory of the realm by taking advantage of the sexual desire that threatens to unravel Uther's reign when Igraine unites with Uther under the misapprehension that he is her husband. Their relationship is uncourtly, and this is part of its point, for the mage turns it to good, divinely ordained purpose just as he himself had been turned to good. Yet this use of the power comes with a cost that is signaled at first by small oversights, such as Merlin's lack of explanation or apology to Ygerne for the rape and, crucially, his separation of mother and child which allows Arthur to grow up in ignorance of his female sibling(s). The same unconscious and irrational depths prove as double-edged as Merlin's nature when they lead to Arthur's incest with Morgause, often ironically placed at the very gathering where he draws the sword from the stone and is proclaimed king. Eventually linked with the consequences of Guinevere's and Lancelot's adulterous passion, this sin obviates Merlin's conscious and rational achievements for Britain. Permitting the young king to sheathe his sword on at least one occasion between battles with rebellious barons and Saxons, he brings together Arthur and Lysanor, whose child later becomes a knight of the Round Table. What may be either Arthur's sexual initiation or foresampling of the medieval marriage market also prepares us for the mage's arrangement of Arthur's wedding in the Vulgate *Merlin* (where he encourages Arthur's and Guinevere's mutual attraction and does not warn the king of its childless and adulterous outcome).

Another instance of apparent pandering occurs when Merlin and King Ban visit Agravadain's castle. The wizard, his desire awakened by Viviane according to the Vulgate cycle, covets Agravadain's daughter, but to remain chaste he casts a sleeping spell over the castle and leads her to Ban instead. Both the young lady and Ban, a married man, suffer guilt pangs the morning after and do their best to redeem the affair by vowing courtly fealty to one another, and another worthy knight is conceived by the union. The episode gives a unique medieval insight into Merlin's sexual impulses and self-denial, once more rationalizing them by conventionally providing a valorous son as its issue. Merlin exploits eros not as a 'right-to-lifer' but as an empire-builder, so it is revealing that neither Lysanor's son nor Ban's by Agravadain's

unnamed daughter subsequently plays a significant part in the Arthurian narrative that the mage is orchestrating. We must conclude that he is still his father's son, holding his lustful patrimony barely in check.

In modern fiction, one of the most concupiscent yet sharp-witted portrayals of the mage as the devil's son is Robert Nye's *Merlin*.⁹ This novel explains the mage's pandering as complicated, by compulsive voyeurism. There Merlin satisfies his own ambivalent sexual desires by abetting and observing the pillow play of others (especially if combined with punishment or other coital perversions). When he notices that Igraine's husband carries a black whip, he speculates to Uther, 'to keep his wife in order?'—and is 'thrilled' by his remark's effect upon the king. The erotic fantasy is soon translated into fact, and Igraine proves more than willing to suffer Uther's lust. On many occasions thereafter the wizard disguises himself as some object in Igraine's bedroom—candle, book, spider, even bedsheet—to observe her and Uther exercise Kama-Sutra ingenuity, gratifying his own erogenous instincts in their hypereroticism. Later, he makes another fatal remark to Arthur when Morgan le Fay visits Camelot. The young king is inflamed by desire as the wizard says, 'To see the naked body of your half-sister?' (168) Merlin's horror of his own perverse fascination with this fantasy is fulfilled when he uses hallucinogenic fly-agaric and psychological auto-suggestion to stimulate Morgan's complaisance for sexual athletics, only to find one night when he has not administered the drug that the real Morgan comes to make the erotic dreams earnest, and trick the trickster. The wizard's voyeurism eventually becomes a narcissistic self-embrace, which traps him forever.

The tradition of Merlin's imprisonment begins in the earliest documents about him, mentioned above. In these, he has a mistress, a sister, and a wife. In Welsh poems and Geoffrey's *Vita Merlini*, he has both sister (Gwenddydd or Ganieda) and wife (Gwendoloena) as well as the apple tree and poisoned apple mistresses. Among them, they provide some of Nimue's characteristics—most notably her house or enclosure for Merlin in the wilderness, her assumption of his power, and her desire to take another lover. All of these women seem to be rolled into Nimue, the beloved given to him by French romance and subsequent versions of his story. And this relationship immediately joined his birth, prophecies, and association with King Arthur as the most enduring parts of his legend.

Jung and von Franz point out that even in roles such as seer and counselor, 'the task of the realization of the Self' is psychologically 'incarnated in the figure of Merlin' (399), and sexual knowledge is essential to that task. Yet it is in fact the part that most often gives Merlin trouble—the one part he

never quite masters.¹⁰ This is because such knowledge and self-integration means coming to terms with sexual difference and the Other, or that part of the Other incorporated within the self. Here both the courtly idealization of women and the antifeminist condemnation of them as venal and lustful come into play. By rejecting or overcoming the demonic part of himself, the wizard is repressing not only his carnal masculine instincts, but his feminine aspect—only to bring them together in others. By accepting his nature he risks the release of both psycho-sexual polarities, which themselves contain both courtly and anti-courtly aspects. The resulting conflict proves catastrophic for Camelot and for himself. Despite his sexed maleness, gendered ambivalence thus becomes one of Merlin's characteristics, and his relationships with Morgan and especially Nimue typically reveal the imperfection and even narcissism of his own self-realization.

The mage's paternal inheritance, especially in works like the Post-Vulgate *Suite du Merlin* and Malory, is the primary reason for Ninianne/Nimue's fear and hatred of him. That she dissembles her loathing in those works and pretends to revere him is partially motivated by Merlin's unique power as a wizard and the king's chief counselor, by her expressed desire to learn his secrets, and by her implicit desire to do so in compensation for her dependant status as a young woman in a society dominated by men. No matter how benevolent he may seem, Merlin is a very dangerous person, and doubts about the extent or permanence of his redemption carry more complex narrative interest than any assumption of perfectibility. In this light, Ninianne's loathing is as fully understandable as the love of Viviane in the Vulgate, who remains true to him.¹¹ Yet modern readers find it difficult to appreciate how equivocal a love-hate response the medieval audience may have had towards his demonic side. Whatever the medieval audience's feeling may have been, the early modern audience soon lost its superstitious awe of Merlin as well as its hypothetical sympathy for Nimue. Yet the fascination with him at least remains, for since the nineteenth-century we have been powerfully enlisted in his favor by most narratives.

The main literary feature that allowed Merlin's demonic power to be rationalized and reduced was the model of the fabliau, associated with the *senex amans* convention. Wise men and wizards—nearly always hoary, it seems—are a little like unicorns: they will insist on laying their heads in a maiden's lap. When Merlin foresees his end in Malory, it appears 'shameful' for two reasons—because a woman will outwit him, and because he will at last forsake his divinely ordained quest of the kingdom's welfare for the sake of self-gratification. Yet his compulsion, like that of the unicorn, is irresistible.

So is hers: in Freudian terms, their relationship can represent the implicitly erotic attachment of father and daughter. This repressed sexual feelings are finally resolved when the daughter matures, transfers her erotic attention to a lover her own age, and thus 'betrays' her father by replacing him as lover and 'imprisoning' him in a sexually inactive posture towards her. The *senex amans*' simultaneous loathing and longing for death is answered in the young woman he desires, so betrayal by Nimue may even be interpreted as fulfilling Merlin's own secret death wish. He seems aware of this possibility even upon first seeing her in the Vulgate cycle: '...He looked at her for a long time before he said a word. And he said to himself that he would be most unwise to fall asleep in sin and lose his mind and his knowledge just to know the delights of a young lady, to shame her and to lose God' (Pickens 282). 'Would be' is not necessarily subjunctive in meaning here.

We may also speculate that if medieval romance had not put Merlin away relatively early in Arthur's reign, but forced him to endure rather than simply foresee the kingdom's decline, he might well have become a Hamlet-like figure. In terms of Saturnian melancholy as pictured in the Renaissance, Hamlet exhibits the disillusioned, malcontented, and even suicidal behavior of the Night viewing 'the lustful activities of the Day' (Yates 141). In fact, the wizard does come to adopt this attitude in Tennyson's 'Merlin and Vivien' and E. A. Robinson's 'Merlin.' In most treatments of Arthurian legend, seduction of or by Nimue forestalls this tendency of the mage before things begin to go awry in Arthur's kingdom; however, many other treatments show a Merlin not only well aware of the decline (as in Tennyson) but surviving it (as in Robinson). The medieval theory of humours even considered such a relationship to be potentially beneficial: the severity of Saturn must be softened by the influence of Venus and the nighted humor by the cooling light of the moon (Yates 143–44). This balance was not often achieved in medieval and early modern romances outside of the Vulgate; his involvement with Nimue generally became a means of chastising him for consorting with demons, and only much later of restoring him to a lost harmony with creation.

Both creative and destructive relationships have been increasingly explored for the couple. Tennyson's *Idylls* provides an influential example, for it splits the two traditional personas of Nimue—as chaste Lady of the Lake and seductive woodland maiden—into two opposing characters with contrasting relationships to the wizard. Merlin and the Lady are compared in terms that both emphasize their white magic and suggest their complementarity as Saturnine and Venusian or lunar creations:

And there I saw mage Merlin, whose vast wit
 And hundred winters are but as the hands
 Of loyal vassals toiling for their liege.
 And near him stood the Lady of the Lake,
 Who knows a subtler magic than his own—
 Clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful.... (28)

The association of the Lady with love and chastity and of Merlin with wisdom and loyalty is attuned to Christian imagery, where they respectively become images of the patriarchal Fathers and the Church, symbolic bride of Christ. Yet this also strips the eroticism from their relationship.

Quite different is Tennyson's pairing of Merlin and Vivien. In his most care-worn moments, the saturnine wizard becomes susceptible to the sexual intrigue at which young Vivien as the unchaste side of Venus excels. Merlin's darkness and melancholy posture in Burne-Jones' painting 'Merlin and Vivien' have precedents in the Saturnian humor portrayed by Renaissance engravings (Durer's *Melencolia I*, for example). The treacherous fay's effect upon him deepens rather than balances or mitigates his mood, until he, 'overtalked and overworn, /... yielded, told her all the charm, and slept' (167). This Vivien is revealed not as the bride of Christ but as the whore of Babylon. Many other writers have followed Tennyson in multiplying Nimue's personas, if not Merlin's. John Cowper Powys's novel *Porius* presages the current fashion, however, by representing him as ultimately the incarnation of Saturn or Chronos himself, and Nimue as a handmaiden of the moon and incarnation of the Earth Mother. While it may seem odd to relate a medieval and renaissance theory to a Victorian or twentieth-century work, the history of ideas makes such an intertextual overlay conceivable, and demonstrates both the complexity and staying power of the mage's relationship with his beloved. Moreover, the late twentieth-century revival of paganism—conflating pop psychology with an esoteric pot-pourri of religious traditions, pan-celticism, ecology and feminism—have stirred up a heady brew of speculation about their various personas and affair. Jean Markale is only one among many who suggest that the possibility Morgan and Nimue are the same 'may well be symbolic of the goddess' basic ambiguity!' (138). Following Paton, Loomis, and neopagan Celticists like John and Caitlin Matthews, the idea is that they are part of a palimpsest-like reconstruction of this multiple goddess. And considering the fluid nature of the human imagination; the eternal dichotomies between appearance and reality, fantasy and history, spirituality and sensuality; and the fundamental tensions inherent in chivalry—given all these, how can we be surprised that such multiplicity of meaning is

represented in a multiplicity of characters or, if in one character, in apparently contradictory roles?¹²

In the face-off between purity and corruption, the safest course for humankind may seem to be celibacy, and herein lies another feature of Merlin's eroticism—attempted repression and sublimation of its power through sexual abstinence. The rapid spread of the ascetic lifestyle in medieval Christianity provided another model that dovetailed with the wild man convention and demon-lover motif to recapitulate his origins and influence his relationship with Nimue—whether she is portrayed as the demon who tempts him, or he as the demon who attempts her. Whether druid, shaman, or Christian ascetic, a wilderness or cell dweller as Merlin is often paradigmatic of the attempt to reconcile one's self with nature and one's demonic side with divine potential. Thus his celibacy assumes a feminine posture in relation to god, and strives toward an ideal of androgyny that restores wholeness to the psyche which was split and sexed by the Fall. It is a sign of his power to see through history, which consistently follows generative patterns. Merlin's androgynous control of history itself is ultimately undercut by male sexual passion—Arthur's, Lancelot's and his own, but (until recent feminist rewritings of the Arthurian legend) even more by female sexual passion—Morgan's, Morgause's, Guinevere's, or Nimue's—both of which subvert as much as support the aristocratic ideal. His submission to divinely ordained destiny and his mastery of magic are therefore interdependent and central to the motif of his sexual abstinence.

The mage's failure or imprisonment in tree, tower, tomb, or cave therefore functions simultaneously as an image of male or female sexuality, feminine inaccessibility or virginity, and androgynous abstraction. Folk wisdom has it that a male wizard loses his powers, or transfers them to his partner, through sexual intercourse. For example, not only does Nimue take over Merlin's knowledge in medieval romance, but Mary Stewart's *The Crystal Cave* invents an episode in which Merlin is tempted by a young girl before he fully understands his powers, and in a terrifying moment perceives the potential deadliness of her sexual embrace, while the fourth volume of Jack Whyte's *Camulod Chronicles* develops the idea that Merlin will shape and concentrate his sorcerous capabilities by avoiding sexual attachments.

Through the motif of his celibacy, Merlin sometimes sublimates and transcends his own sexual desire at the cost of perceiving it in others; through their whoredom Morgan and Morgause exploit this loophole in his power as the core of theirs. The implicit view that a woman's power is inherently passive and sexual while a man's is active and intellectual is considered to be

sexist nowadays, yet it has had a powerful gendering influence on the figures of Arthurian romance. Merlin's relationship with Nimue is crucial to our final understanding of all the wizard represents in Arthurian legend, for it portrays the manifold ways in which the erotic works through human experience—not merely the zeal of the loins or the fantasy of a demon/fairy lover.

Nimue's mythic roots in the mother goddess figure and especially with the cult of Diana (emphasized in the Vulgate and Post-Vulgate) connect her with the whole range of female symbolism—chthonic to lunar. The many forms her name itself takes—a series of minims variously interpreted—indicate a multivalence of character paralleling Merlin's. They make of her a maiden both pure and knowing, and a forest-dweller like the mage himself. Furthermore, as Diana is a huntress and Merlin was from his beginnings associated with (and sometimes takes the form of) the stag, so he implicitly becomes her prey. So many attributes and associations allowed writers to pick and choose which to emphasize, thus allowing Nimue to be presented either as Morgan's deadly enemy or helper and alter ego, as nubile virgin, wife, or harlot, and as Merlin's mother, sister, daughter, lover or despiser. Such variety is particularly evident in twentieth-century treatments, which seek out unexplored corners of possibility to assert their own originality and revitalize the well-worn legend.¹³ In fact, these wide swings of relationship and personality only represent contrasting attitudes toward the archetypal female. Nimue's role as the Lady of the Lake or her handmaiden represents the chaste lunar aspect of Diana's cult and the benevolent aspect of the Great Goddess; and the Lake of Diana in the Broceliande of French romance had its British counterpart in Ynys Witrin (Isle of Glass), which is commonly associated with Glastonbury. In this way she is both nurturing and destructive, signifying perpetual sexual availability and renewal in the manner of a fertility goddess, but also tantalizing resistance to masculine advances. As such, she disposes Merlin's fate like any women worshipped as divine, enshrined by the courtly love convention, or debased by the alternative convention of *fabliau*. Their relationship consequently illustrates various attraction-repulsion scenarios, defined but not necessarily limited by the contractual agreements they make with one another. The *fabliau* view in particular critiques the courtly convention while preserving the woman's essential independence and subversive potential, and the two conventions have since acted as the poles of the wizard's beguilement. John Steinbeck's retelling of Malory has Merlin himself give the conventional reason for his vulnerability: 'Because I am wise. In the combat between wisdom and feeling, wisdom

never wins.' (122). Or as Tennyson says more darkly, it admits 'the meanest having power upon the highest/ And the high purpose broken by the worm' (147).

In Tennyson as in Malory and the Post-Vulgate, the great wizard's 'wish in age for love' betrays him to the feminine serpent's lies and death. Yet for Tennyson as for the writers of Genesis, the doom of fallen nature is primarily a consequence of the spirit's mixed nature—Adam's and Merlin's desire for the woman, plus the serpent's envy motivating Eve's curiosity in Vivien. John D. Rosenberg explains that Vivien's intense lust is in itself not carnal, though manifested through carnal means. 'Her need for Merlin goes deeper even than the need for sex; it is the need to soil and destroy, and shows itself in her attitude toward death, but which she is at once fascinated and horrified, as befits her birth among corpses' (112). A major character in her own right she nonetheless also personifies Merlin's suppressed desire for death.

Yet many other Arthurian narratives dispute such interpretations of his submission to Nimue, either by adopting the precarious loving relationship of the Vulgate or by rejecting her power to imprison him forever. At first, his return is only incorporeal. For example, in Ariosto and Spenser his apparition prophesies from the tomb, describing the illustrious descendants of Bradamante's (Britomart's) union with Ruggiero (Arthegall). Even works that display little other knowledge of Merlin's literary history, such as Lewis Theobald's *The Devil of Stonehenge*, follow their lead. Later, English local legend has him reappear to demand a farmer's horse for Arthur and his sleeping knights, and by the twentieth-century, the permanency of his beguilement and the figure of Nimue herself came to be reevaluated. The wizard was often avowed too great to be overcome by a simple 'fay' and imprisoned forever in fairyland; if she is not made ineffectual, then she is made lenient. If Arthur could still be living somewhere ready to come again at need, surely Merlin, who was already half immortal, must be living and able to return as well. Edwin Arlington Robinson presents one common solution by making the wizard's sojourn with Vivian voluntary. He reclaims her from Tennyson's calumny even while retaining her serpentine traits, portraying her as a complex and loving woman who knows better than to certify love by constraint. Another common solution is to minimize Nimue's accomplishments and attractions; in James Branch Cabell's *Something About Eve* the mage stayed in his lover's tower simply because he chose to, and he leaves for the same reason. Cabell's Nimue typifies the reduction of her role: she is a dear but minor enchantress whose prattling domesticity ultimately pales for Merlin. To the mage, Nimue and even

Arthur's kingdom are playthings for his restless mind. Revealingly, eros here transcends lust, affection, or any other satisfaction afforded in this world; it impels us by a force that moves initially through yet ultimately beyond Eve's incarnating (or Nimue's disincarnating) power. Although Nimue remains forever young and beautiful to please him, the mage eventually abandons her to seek greener pastures in Antan—an imaginary and indefinable place which serves as the grail for all human desires.

In ways limited only by the imagination of the storyteller, therefore, their relationship thus becomes a sexual metaphor for eros, and eros motivates a transcendent quest for self-realization and power. Sometimes the power resides in Merlin, sometimes in Nimue; sometimes the mage willingly transfers it, sometimes it is stripped from him despite his surpassing capabilities. In her various literary incarnations, Nimue becomes all Merlin fears as well as all he desires: she represents an equal and opposing power principle with which he may not come to terms except through death and the destruction of Camelot, and the formation of a new equilibrium. They are essential to each other.

Merlin succumbs to her, therefore, because she represents alternative aspects of himself as well as the archetypal female. As Morgan usually reflects Merlin's untamed, demonic side, and the Lady of the Lake his positive or angelic side (clothed in white samite)—in Nimue these figures coalesce into a unified image of the wizard's female self. United, the wizard's male and female selves bear an androgynous relationship to history—both governing and being governed by it, serving the kings of Britain, both passively and actively directing the deeds and quests of the realm. As the sexual agent who finally takes him out of history and replaces him in it, the figure of Nimue is most powerfully interpreted by modern readers as the final projection of Merlin's dual nature—his *anima*, or female-gendered personality. In this context, however, the mage does more than make a cyclical return to the womb through her, and Nimue becomes more than a surrogate Merlin. Despite their sexual difference, they unite as male and female aspects of one character.

The most explicit deployment of the *anima* archetype is, once again, in Robert Nye's *Merlin*, where the wizard first twins himself to arrange Arthur's conception. Fascinated by female sexuality and its power over men, which is beyond his understanding, he assumes the identity of Nineve to get Uther into Tintagel with the password, 'Anima.' Nineve magically enters a tapestry to watch the royal lovemaking, moving as a ghostly or sleep-walking double of the wizard: 'What she is doing is not necessarily what she wants to do,

but has been ordained and predestined and she does it. And some dark part of her wants it too, and hastens to the consummation' (130). Merlin is finally trapped when he falls in love with Nineve, now physically separated from him and projected as Nimue. Her face is literally like a mirror, which reflects his unconsummated desires for his mother, Igraine, and Morgan le Fay. Seeking regeneration, he turns into his own lover, his own *esplumoir*. Obeying the rule that 'the opposite, in terms of behavior, is always implicit in the psyche,' he unites with her only to become 'a man shut in a maze of himself' (68, 118).

Such a narcissistic merger confirms not only the inwardness of human perception, but the mutability of nature and the impermanence of magical achievements in mundane time and space. It finally places the figure of Merlin at the mercy of an irrational life force, whose consequences are death — or at least sleep and a surcease of consciousness. But it is not always corrupt solipsism or pitiable. In Swinburne's 'Tristram and Lyonesse,' the mortal lovers Tristram and Iseult try to imagine Merlin's sleep under his love's spell. Compelled by their own mutual desire, they imagine the great wizard dissolving into nature's erotic and eternal cycle of being:

He hears in spirit a song that none but he
Hears from the mystic mouth of Nimue
Shed like a consecration; and his heart,
Hearing, is made for love's sake as a part
Of that far singing, and the life thereof
Part of that life that feeds the world with love:
Yea, heart in heart is molten, hers and his,
Into the world's heart and the soul that is
Beyond or sense or vision; and their breath
Stirs the soft springs of deathless life and death,
Death that bears life, and change that brings forth seed
Of life to death and death to life indeed,
As blood recircling through the unsounded veins
Of earth and heaven with all their joys and pains.
Ah, that when love shall laugh no more nor weep
We too, we too might hear that song and sleep! (116)

In these ways, Nimue and the *esplumoir* of his incarceration come to represent the erotic principle of the wizard's transforming powers, reabsorbing him into the vast mystery of generation. The Middle Ages was not the only period when male desire has been projected onto women, making them appear tools of the devil. Yet both the male and the female gaze entertain the possibility of transcending such limiting and misogynistic notions, and this

possibility separates the quality of gender from the biological inevitability of sex. In gendering paradigms whereby the feminine is associated with earth and generation, Nimue is the erotic Merlin. In many contemporary works, the aspects of nubile maiden, matron, and crone shared between the characters of Nimue, Morgan le Fay, and the Lady of the Lake, are balanced by the mage's aspects of wonder child, wonderworker, and senile dotard or wise old man.¹⁴

Impelled by the symbolic logic of their sources and makers, both medieval romances and subsequent accounts developed the tradition of Merlin's end in terms of sexually suggestive associations. His wilderness imprisonment by Nimue—in a tree, tower, hawthorn bush, rock or cave—recapitulates and reverses his origins in accordance with both mythic interpretations of reality and psychological interpretations of human nature. This transformation also problematizes his gender, for Merlin's *esplumoir* is a feminine enclosure—not merely like a molting cage, but like a disrobing one, a boudoir, and the encloser is a woman who has mastered his own masculine spells. It is, in a way, a reversal of the Rapunzel motif—'Merlin, Merlin, let down your beard!'—in which the Nimue as summoner unites the possessive desires of both witch and rescuer.

In fact, the text itself may be seen as a body—all that remains of Merlin, as he has narrated it to Blaise. As Rita Copeland describes misogynist medieval hermeneutics, a vernacular text—the Middle English *Merlin*, for example—is also symbolically identified with the female body, a 'feminized object, a female body reserved only for the gaze of initiates, but reading is figured as a kind of sexual mastery...' (258). The predominant male gaze which produces the text thus possesses and immures itself as Merlin does when Nimue subsumes him into his own erotic narrative, or as one medieval female reader of the Middle English Prose *Merlin* manuscript, Elyanor Guldeford, did in possessing and annotating it like a male scribe, 'in a masculine performance enacted on a feminine text' (Copeland 258).¹⁵ In Jungian terms, reading transmutes and engenders the text into the *anima* or *animus* of its own narrator.

This is significant for Merlin, since his dual nature and semi-divine power enables him to read the book of history as a sexual act performed upon a feminized body, and to treat history—even the high history of the grail—as a text 'that benefits from the ministrations of an active reader' (Copeland 258). The problem is that the same medieval hermeneutic disavows the literal or carnal text in favor of the spiritual or allegorical. By this model, women make bad readers, and a woman reading the feminized body of the vernacular

text signifies transgressive sex. According to the gendering medieval hermeneutic of text, the carnality of a female reader like Elyanor Guldeford would prevent her from reading beyond the literal level. This view indeed appears to be borne out in the literalness of the surviving annotations that she has left upon the manuscript's body. Consequently, 'good reading' is masculine—it objectifies and allegorizes, thereby avoiding the fall into false interpretation and sin. So the literalness which Merlin orchestrates for Arthur's sake, and reads into his serial history of the grail narrated to Blaise, paradoxically reveals his own carnal and cultural shortcomings. For he, too, reads himself into the narrative and thereby becomes feminized textual body. Once Merlin's carnality recognizes itself in his mistress and imprisons him, no effective reader of Arthurian history remains within the text to master the narrative. Merlin and Elyanor assume their opposite genders through the act of reading, but in so doing simultaneously attain androgyny on one level, only to confirm their own sexuality on another. Despite our sophisticated methods of analysis, modern readers—male and female—may well have a similar problem for which modern feminist revisions of reading and textuality provide alternatives but do not fully resolve.

Thus the figure of Merlin is finally the problematic figure of a master reader mastered by his text. He understands like no other the erotic nerves and capillaries underlying its courtly integument. If there is a lesson to be learned from the persistence of his legend, it is that our own erotic imaginations necessarily operate upon his story and engender us, too, in his narratives. Merlin's gaze comprehends Arthurian history as narrative body created by God but driven by desire. The question that remains is, whose desire?

NORTHERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

Professor of English Peter H. Goodrich has published *The Romance of Merlin* (1991) and articles on Merlin, fairy tale, and fantasy. He is completing *Merlin: A Casebook* for Garland Publishing, and researches the fantastic, pan-Celticism and medievalism in English fiction, and Irish literature.

NOTES

- 1 In this essay, I denote this unitary concept of Merlin and of other characters by using the chief spelling of their names in the glossary of Norris J. Lacy and Geoffrey Ashe with Debra N. Mancoff, *The Arthurian Handbook*, Second Edition (New York: Garland, 1997): 274–359. Thus 'Ygerna' equals 'Igraine,' and 'Nimue' refers not only to Malory's version of Merlin's beloved, but other versions of her with variant spellings such as Ninianne, Viviane, and so forth. Where I refer to

- a specific work, however, I use that work's spelling. A risky business, perhaps, but necessary to ensure readability.
- 2 Alfred Jarman has produced the clearest accounts of these figures, especially in 'The Merlin Legend and the Welsh Tradition of Prophecy,' *The Arthur of the Welsh*, ed. by Rachel Bromwich, A.O.H. Jarman, and Brynley F. Roberts, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1991): 117–46. For dual-language editions, see Works Cited; translations of all except the *Buile Suibne* are printed in *The Romance of Merlin*.
 - 3 A pioneer of such analysis was Lucy Allen Paton, whose primary work on the subject is *Studies in the Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance*. 2nd edition. New York: Burt Franklin, 1960. Others who have adopted the approach and extended it to Merlin's place of durance include W.A. Nitze, 'The *Esplumoir* Merlin,' *Speculum* 28 (1943): 69–79; A.C.L Brown, 'The *Esplumoir* and Viviane,' *Speculum* 20 (1945): 426–32; and R.L. Loomis, 'Morgan la Fee and the Celtic Goddesses,' *Speculum* 20 (1945): 183–203, 'The *Esplumeor* Merlin Again,' *BBSIA* 9 (1957): 79–83, and *Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1927. Most scholars now consider their conclusions to be perhaps over-enthusiastic and speculative, but that is not to deny the importance of pre-Christian analogues and models. Many of their ideas have recently been revived by Celtic neopaganists and reworked into a latterday Arthurian mythology.
 - 4 Lancelot, Tristan, and Yvain notably suffer such episodes.
 - 5 The Latin manuscripts of Geoffrey's *Prophetiae Merlini* (Prophecies of Merlin) and *Historia Regum Britanniae* (History of the Kings of Britain) are being re-edited by Neil Wright and Julia Crick, with several volumes now in print. Sommer's and Micha's French editions are standard for the Vulgate cycle, as Paris and Ulrich's is still for the Post-Vulgate. Key translations of these are in Works Cited: Lewis Thorpe's for Geoffrey, and Norris Lacy's edition of the *Lancelot Grail* for de Boron and his continuators.
 - 6 Lynn Thorndike's classic eight-volume *A History of Magic and Experimental Science* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1923–1958) offers a detailed overview of the subject, provided one follows the index references. Volumes 1–IV (through the fifteenth-century) are particularly relevant to my analysis. The four bodily fluids or humors (blood, phlegm, yellow bile, black bile) are associated with the four cardinal elements (air, water, fire, earth) to describe a person's character and temperament. A healthy physiology balances them, so a melancholic or saturnine person is out of balance, cold and dry like earth. These conceptions also combined with astrology and alchemy for a comprehensive natural philosophy that emphasized correspondences between natural and supernatural bodies, making of Merlin a perfect medium, within whose body and soul all influences are contained.
 - 7 Morgan's similarities to Merlin tend to underline the ways, such as gender, in which she is his opposite; for example, he brings Arthur into the world, she takes him out of it; he gives or takes Arthur to his sword, she steals it; he gives Arthur good counsel, she gives false counsel. Like Merlin, she also counterpoises

- Arthur; see Raymond H. Thompson, 'The First and Last Love: Morgan le Fay and Arthur,' *Arthurian Women: A Casebook*, ed. Thelma S. Fenster (New York: Garland 1996): 331–44 for a summary of this relationship. Morgan often serves as Arthur's female shadow self where Nimue becomes Merlin's. Or are the men the women's shadows?—in the recent spate of Arthurian fiction a matriarchal perspectives increasingly counteract the patriarchal one, redressing the conventional focus upon male characters and perspectives.
- 8 For the Grisandoles episode in translation, see Pickens 323–29. Medieval romances portray his knowledge as complete, but the possibility that it is incomplete has gained adherents ever since. Several modern treatments such as Mary Stewart's *Merlin* trilogy address this point by explaining that his supernatural insight makes him in some ways human-blind, and his male sex makes him female-blind. Such interpretations rationalize his inaction at critical moments like Mordred's conception and contrast with the medieval view of him as all knowing.
 - 9 There are more lascivious interpretations still, like the comic book series *Arthur Sex*, but such pornography tends to be self-parodic.
 - 10 According to at least one other Freudian critic, a 'miscreation compulsion' is the result, whereby the mage repeatedly makes the same mistake of asserting control over a human nature that transcends him. See Arthur Stanley Kimball, 'Merlin's Miscreation and the Repetition Compulsion in Malory's *Morte Darthur*,' *Literature and Psychology* 25 (1975): 27–33. Recent psychoanalytical interpretations of the figure that support Jung and von Franz are James Gollnick's 'The Merlin Archetype and the Transformation of the Self,' *Studies in Religion* 19 (1990): 319–29, and 'Merlin as Psychological Symbol: A Jungian View,' *Comparative Studies in Merlin from the Vedas to C.G. Jung*, ed. James Gollnick (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1991): 111–29. Jungian and New Age interpretations, starting with Jung and von Franz, make particular use of alchemical ideas. In some manuscripts Merlin is portrayed as adept or even as the *prima materia* that is transformed: see my 'The Alchemical Merlin,' which precedes Gollnick's essay in *Comparative Studies*, 91–110.
 - 11 For the Vulgate passage in English, see Pickens 416–17. The text makes clear that she does not abhor him, but wants to keep him all to herself. The passage was made known to English readers by Robert Southey's 1817 edition of Malory, thus making opposing interpretations of Nimue's feelings for Merlin available to the nineteenth-century Arthurian revival. The Vulgate and Post-Vulgate thus differed markedly, the former stressing Merlin's *fin amor*, the latter his *fol amor*—another sign of his equivocal eroticism.
 - 12 For Paton and Loomis, see above; Jean Markale and John and Caitlin Matthews are better scholars than most neopaganists, while remaining enthusiasts and popularizers. My article 'The New Age Mage: Merlin as Contemporary Occult Icon,' *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 5.1: 42–73, critiques this cauldron of esoteric ideas and archetypes.
 - 13 To be sure, relationships other than lover/despiser are more often metaphorical rather than literal. Usually, of course, she is an object of desire young enough to

be his daughter. In Charles Williams' knotty Taliesin poems, *Charles Williams*, ed. David Llewellyn Jones, *Arthurian Studies* 24 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1991) Nimue is the name given to his mother; in Mary Stewart it is Niniane, and in Robert Nye, Vivien. Anne Eliot Crompton's *Merlin's Harp* (New York: Donald I. Fine, 1995) portrays Merlin and the Lady of the Lake, Nimway, as Nimue's parents. As in Stewart, Nye and Crompton, different forms of Nimue's names often multiply her personalities and roles in the same work to correspond with Merlin's varied guises or incarnations. Another example is Marion Zimmer Bradley's immensely popular *The Mists of Avalon* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1982) where Viviane, Niniane, and Nimue are separate characters and 'Merlin' becomes an honorific for the Lady of the Lake's chief male priest or bard, held by several men in succession.

- 14 A succinct summary of this interpretation is in R.J. Stewart's *The Mystic Life of Merlin* (London: Arkana, 1986): 135–36. Needless to say, Bradley's novel and others draw upon such patterns to delineate the theological dimensions of their texts, with the danger that their characters may sometimes appear more as ideological stereotypes than as complex individuals.
- 15 Concerning Elyanor, see Carol M. Meale, 'The Manuscripts and Early Audience of the Middle English *Prose Merlin*,' *The Changing Face of Arthurian Studies: Essays on Arthurian Prose Romances in Memory of Cedric E. Pickford*, eds. Alison Adams, Armel H. Diverres, Karen Stern, and Kenneth Varty, *Arthurian Studies* 16 (Cambridge: Boydell, 1986): 92–111. and Karen Stern, 'The Middle English *Prose Merlin*,' pages 112–22 in the same volume. What she chooses to annotate, and how, raise interesting questions about late medieval readership of romance and especially the concerns of female readers.

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