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Merlin's Magical Writing: Writing and the Written Word in *Le Morte Darthur* and the English Prose *Merlin*

KATHY CAWSEY

This article explores the image of the written word in *Le Morte Darthur* and the prose *Merlin*, and examines the way in which writing is enmeshed with the character of Merlin. (KC)

Despite the current trends in critical theory towards a focus on language, almost to the exclusion of anything else, few scholars to date have considered the epistemological status of language within medieval texts or society (as opposed to applying modern assumptions or theories of language to medieval texts). Even fewer have explored the concepts of language presented in texts that are not explicitly about the mechanisms of writing, speaking, or communicating. Because writing can be both an image or concept within a text (and hence described in metaphors, images, analogies, and allusions) and is the thing itself we study (the textual artifact), we face a complex dynamic in a text as we slip from the 'inside' to the 'outside' — the image of writing within the text to the writing that is the text itself. Hence analysis becomes difficult, since the meaning of the text and the meaning in the text—or perhaps, better, the *means through which the text means* — in this case are inextricably intertwined. In this paper I propose to study the images of language and writing which appear in two medieval romances, Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* and the anonymous English prose *Merlin*.¹ Both *Le Morte Darthur* and the *Merlin* are interesting in this context because both implicitly undermine this opposition between 'inside' and 'outside' the text, between inter-textual and intra-textual; and both perform this conflation of *writing as meaning* and *writing as means* via the figure of Merlin.

IMAGES OF WRITING AND THE WRITTEN WORD

The image of writing presented in the well-known scene in which Arthur pulls the sword from the stone, found in both *Le Morte Darthur* and the

Merlin, provides a microcosm of the ways the two texts engage with the problems of writing and language. First, this scene suggests an image of writing as something magical. Words suddenly appear on a sword in a churchyard in golden lettering. No one wonders where the writing came from; no one thinks it might be some sort of trick or hoax. The epistemological status of this writing is unquestioned: it refers unproblematically to reality. The writing is not written, no one writes it; its manifestation is more akin to that of an image or a physical object, which appears in its entirety, than to a scribed, one-letter-after-another written word or sentence.

Second, the written word here contains some sort of inherent truth-value. No one questions the statement on the sword that whoever pulls out the sword is the 'rightwys kyng borne of all Englonde,' in Malory's version (7), or the king by the 'eleccion of Ihesu criste' in the prose *Merlin* (98). Even the barons and other kings, who later reject the statement, accept its truth-value at first and attempt to pull out the sword themselves, in the hope that they might be the chosen king. Merlin's later proof of Arthur's ancestry only supports, but does not supercede, the truth of the writing on the sword. Because the writing is apparently unauthored, it paradoxically contains ultimate authority. Since writing, by definition, cannot be 'unwritten,' there is only one possible writer for golden writing on a sword that appears out of the blue in a churchyard: God.

The third characteristic of writing exhibited in the story of the sword in the stone is its creative, motivating power. The writing gives meaning to the scene: without it, the sword, anvil and stone would only be a bizarre manifestation, one that would probably be somewhat worrisome for the archbishop who discovers it in his churchyard. The writing motivates later events: it bestows kingship on an unimportant squire, prompts the archbishop and most of the other people present to accept that kingship, starts a civil war, and, most importantly, begins the story. It is unlikely that Arthur or anyone else would have accepted his crowning without the writing on the sword, even had Merlin been slightly more prompt with his revelations about Arthur's parentage. The language act here has performative status:² the statement itself, that whoever pulls the sword out of the stone will be king, makes it so.

Images of writing in the prose *Merlin* and in *Le Morte Darthur* range from prosaic, everyday letters to the kind of magical gilded writing described in the scene above. In *Merlin*, fewer people can read than in *Le Morte Darthur*: Gawain, the archbishop of Canterbury, and Merlin's lover Nimiane are among

the few literate characters in the text, while King Arthur, the Emperor of Rome, and Merlin himself are all illiterate. In *Le Morte Darthur*, by contrast, most of the characters are literate: Guinevere and Isolde write each other letters, as do Lancelot and Tristram; Gawain writes a letter to Lancelot 'with myne owne honde'; Lavayne, Elaine of Astolat's brother, can also write. (However, Arthur calls a clerk to read Elaine's letter.) There are also several examples of perfectly non-magical writing in the *Morte*: letters, proclamations, tombstones that actually indicate who is buried beneath them rather than being inscribed with obscure, gilded prophecies.

At the same time, *Le Morte Darthur* abounds with magical, unexplained writing on swords, stones, and monuments. Balin and a hermit find, presumably hanging in midair, 'letters of golde wretyn how that sir Gawayne shall revenge his fadirs dethe' (51). Later Balin stumbles on a cross 'theron were letters of gold wryten that said: 'it is not for no knyght alone to ryde toward this castel' (53). Bagdemagus encounters a similar cross foretelling his future (81); while Lancelot finds a tomb with an oblique prophecy in gilt about his son, Galahad (478). The grail questers regularly find gold-engraved crosses and tombs, swords with 'lettirs lyke bloode' (581) or 'blacke lettirs as ony cole' (582) and scabbards with 'lettirs of golde and sylver' (581). At no time do the characters wonder who wrote the letters, nor through what authority they were written. The epistemological value of the statements goes unquestioned. Moreover, the characters do not seem surprised that a relatively permanent medium—words carved into stone—would be used for a personalized, specific message, on the off chance that the person to whom it is directed might wander by.

Gregory Jember writes that such written signs are neither supernatural nor natural, but rather 'irrational eruptions of psychologically potentiated experience.'³ The signs and writing are a 'rational means of containment for the otherwise inexplicable, as a means of dealing with, in a word, the other.' In other words, the threatening, alien world of the magical forest is made familiar or understandable to the questing knight by being literally 'signposted' and safely contained in writing. By contrast, the writing, too, is simply part of the magical landscape, unquestioned by the knights just as helpful damsels and enchanted castles are accepted unquestioningly. In this formulation, the written word is not familiar and comfortable, but is itself mysterious and magical. In Jember's terms, writing is not a means of containing the other, but is the other.

When we are given a source for the magical writing, in *Le Morte Darthur*, it is usually Merlin. At the beginning of the grail quest, a sword embedded

in marble comes floating down the river, 'and the pomell thereof was of precious stonys wrought with lettirs of golde subtyle. Than the barownes redde the lettirs whych seyde in thys wyse: "Never shall man take me hense but only he by whos syde I ought to honge and he shall be the beste knyght of the worlde.'" This seems to be yet another of the magically appearing swords, with its concomitant magically appearing writing, but the reader knows that Merlin actually created it in book one (58). Readers also tend to assume that Merlin was involved in the manifestation of the original sword in the stone, although this is not grounded in the text: 'although none of the medieval texts says so explicitly, one cannot help but get the impression that [Merlin] somehow stage-managed the whole business, that he himself put the sword in the stone, as he later in fact does with Galahad's sword.'⁴ In the prose *Merlin*, Merlin is similarly presented as the source of magical writing. In the court of Rome, Merlin makes letters appear on the lintel of the door, identifying himself and delivering a threat to the Emperor on behalf of Arthur. Ironically, in the prose *Merlin*, Merlin himself cannot read. His writing, then, is not truly *written* at all, for Merlin cannot write. Merlin writes like God writes, in full, sudden *meaning* rather than mundanely, manually scribed words and letters.⁵ Because Merlin's writing is dictated, or magically inscribed, but never actually 'written,' it carries some of the same authority, the same 'truth,' as the divine writing and prophecies carved into stones and swords.

WRITING AND TRUTH

The association of the written word with truth runs throughout both *Le Morte Darthur* and the prose *Merlin*. The very genre of the two works — the fact that they are written in prose — is a statement about their 'truth.' The prose romance is stylistically similar to the historical chronicle, and hence elicits associations with the 'more direct claims to truth'⁶ made by those chronicles: 'the use of prose itself was a signal that the authors were dealing with "facts."⁷ The diction of these texts creates an epistemological claim for itself: it directly relates or reflects reality. Even if this claim is merely a stylistic device, it points to an underlying assumption about all language and writing: that language is capable of accurately representing the real world, that signifier is not impossibly distant or irreconcilably removed from signified.

Both romances, however, make more explicit efforts to claim the 'truth' of their tales, and in both cases, Merlin is the key figure. Merlin, we are told, goes to his mentor Blase and recounts the events he has witnessed, and Blase then writes them down—significantly, in Latin. Such a strategy was common in prose romances: the narrative's authenticity was guaranteed by an 'original

source,' a final signified, as it were, written by an eyewitness.⁸ Moreover, the language of the original source is important: the 'Latin book' implies a close relationship between signified and signifier, since Latin, although still 'fallen,' was the tongue that came closest to the pre-Babel ideal language. Anne Berthelot's description of the French prose *Merlin* holds true for both the English version and the *Le Morte Darthur* as well: '[Merlin] fournit à l'écrivain "réel" la garantie d'autorité dont celui-ci a besoin, et le relègue dans le rôle apparemment plus confortable d'éditeur' [Merlin provides for the 'real' writer the guarantee of authority that he needs, and relegates him to the apparently more comfortable role of 'editor'].⁹ This implies that if the text misrepresents or misinterprets reality, it is the fault of the translator or editor, not an inherent characteristic of language itself. While this truth-claim of reference to an eyewitness is a standard trope in both romances and chronicles, it is foregrounded in the prose *Merlin*: we are told no fewer than twenty-four times that Merlin has gone to visit Blase so the tale can be recorded.

Within the framework of the narratives, the written word is the ultimate guarantee of truth. In the prose *Merlin* Blase writes down 'the oure and the nyght in writynge' that Merlin's mother was visited by the fiend, and the precocious child Merlin who results from this visitation later says, when his mother is accused of harlotry, 'Ye haue the houre and the tyme wryten that I was ynne conceyved and therby may you knowe yef my mother sey troath' (18). Presumably, the writing down of the date and time provides some sort of physical evidence; nevertheless, this evidence does not seem to prove that the woman is telling the truth about being raped by a fiend rather than her having a human lover. The truth-value of writing, therefore, goes beyond the mere logic of coincidence of date and event. Similarly, if something were not written down, it did not happen. The narrator of the prose *Merlin* assures us that Merlin is chaste, for 'we fynde not in no writinge that euer he required eny vilonye of [Nimiane] ne of noon other' (418; cf. 134). The narrator of *Le Morte Darthur* refuses to state with finality that Arthur is dead, for 'thus of Arthur I fynde no more wrytten in bokis that bene auctorysed, nothir more of the verray sertainté of his dethe harde I never rede... more of the deth of kyng Arthur coude I never fynde' (717). In these romances, writing and event are intertwined, to the point that the writing takes precedence over the event. The event is only known and legitimatised—only achieves truth—through the writing.

However, this equation of writing with truth, once established in the romances, is then called into question. The fact that the narrator of the prose *Merlin* even raises the possibility of Merlin's lechery, for example,

challenges the truth of the authoritative version. Time after time writing is used as proof of sexual honesty: if a sexual episode be written down, then the person is telling the truth about it. At one point, however, Merlin tells Uther to write down every time he has sex with his new wife, Igraine. This written record is then used to blackmail Igraine into giving up Arthur when she gives birth, for the record proves that the child could not be Uther's. In reality, however, the child is Uther's; that sexual experience was simply omitted from Uther's record. Two written records exist: Merlin's record, which proves to the barons that the child is Uther's, and Uther's record, which proves to Igraine that the child is not his. The authors of these romances, while they are aware of the truth-value attached to the written word, are also aware of the difficulties that come with writing. The truth-value attendant on writing in the middle ages is explored and questioned within these texts.

The claim to authority that the texts painstakingly establish for themselves is also problematised. Merlin ends his days imprisoned by his beloved—in a cave, in Malory, in a castle of air in the prose *Merlin*—and we are told he never spoke to another person. Yet in both tales the story goes on—in *Le Morte Darthur*, it goes on for seven more books. How, if Merlin never talks to another person again, do we know the ending of the story? Arguably, this question could be resolved by contending that since Merlin could foresee the future, he told Blaise the ending of the story before it actually happened; the text, however, does not make this claim. The texts thus undertake a complex exploration of the relationship of writing to actual events or reality, on one level presenting an image of language that unproblematically represents reality (especially in terms of the tale's own relationship to 'external' reality or historical events), while simultaneously acknowledging the possible duplicity and unreliability of writing and language, and its openness to manipulation. In each case, Merlin is central to these problems.

THE EVENT OF WRITING

In these romances, Merlin plans and instigates everything from battles to festivals to illicit sexual liaisons. One could argue that without Merlin Arthur would not have been conceived and, if he had been conceived, might not have survived until adulthood; Arthur's identity might not have been revealed, and hence he might not have been crowned; ultimately, Camelot might never have been created.¹⁰ However, without Merlin's removal of the baby Arthur, there would have been no need to reveal Arthur's identity; and without Merlin's delay in informing the barons of Arthur's heritage, there would have been no civil war (as Ulphuns says to Merlin in the prose *Merlin*, 'Ye ar

than more to blame than the queene' (30)). Seemingly random events, such as Uther's desire for Igraine, are revealed to be part of a broader, never-quite-explicit plan of Merlin's.¹¹ Merlin arranges the marriage between Guinevere and Arthur, despite knowing Lancelot and Guinevere will be lovers, and, in the prose *Merlin*, himself creates the Round Table. Moreover, if Merlin caused Arthur's 'irregular birth' then he is also in a sense responsible for Arthur's incestuous relationship with his sister and the birth of Mordred,¹² since Merlin could have prevented the incest by revealing Arthur's true identity. This responsibility is magnified by the fact that Merlin knows and prophecies (after it is too late) that Mordred will bring about the destruction of Arthur's kingdom. In a way, then, Merlin not only establishes the Round Table and Arthurian society, but creates the conditions for its destruction and downfall.¹³

In these works, Merlin is not only positioned as an incredibly powerful, wise, far-seeing manipulator, but as an agent of God.¹⁴ In *Le Morte Darthur*, Merlin says, 'God and I will make Uther to speak' (7); in the prose *Merlin*, Merlin tells Uther, 'so god a-complleshe thyn hertys desire . . . so yeve me som thyng that I may conne the thanke fore' (75), forcing the reader to wonder exactly how much influence Merlin has over God, and why Merlin himself should be thanked for God's actions. In both romances Merlin, although born of the devil and a human woman, acts as spokesman for God, a sort of 'Old Testament prophet' or a 'go-between for the human and the divine.'¹⁵ In *Le Morte Darthur*, he chastises Arthur for not ending a war, saying 'God is wroth with the for thou woll neuer have done' (24); later, he tells Arthur 'God ys displeas'd' because of the incest (29). He warns the king not to pursue a fight, for 'thou goste to thy deth warde and God be nat thy frende' (33). In the prose *Merlin*, the magician tells the rebel barons, 'god will shewe soche wreche, that ye shall be full rebuked and foule shamed' (113).

Not only does Merlin seem to have a direct link to God, but he can foretell the future, and makes numerous prophecies throughout both books. Even though Merlin himself exits the story, his prophecies continue to influence events. Blase writes down many of his prophecies, as do the clerks of Arthur's court. The reader of the prose *Merlin* is told that anything Merlin says '[the clerkes] wolde lete it be wreten. And so began the boke of prophesies of Merlin, that spake of the kynges that sholde be in Engelande, and of alle other thinges that he spake of, and he knew that alle his wordes sholde be wreten' (53). Merlin's role as prophet of God, already linked to his role as strategic planner (in that his plans seem to carry out God's plans explicitly), slips into his role as writer as well. His spoken prophecies, although Merlin himself does not write them, become written text.¹⁶

Thus Merlin not only acts in the story, or foretells the story; he writes the story as well. Although in the prose *Merlin* he is illiterate, Merlin is the source of many of the written words in both *Le Morte Darthur* and the prose *Merlin*. He writes the story of Balin in gold letters on Balin's tomb—the story that the reader just read in the preceding section. In the prose *Merlin*, he tells Blase the story of Jesus and Joseph of Arimathea, which precedes this tale in the French Vulgate cycle.¹⁷ Merlin acts as 'news broadsheet' for king Arthur, telling him about events in other parts of the country, which again the reader has just read in the preceding chapters. In *Le Morte Darthur*, the narrator writes that 'Merlyon warned the kyng couertly that Gwenyver was nat holsom for hym to take to wyff. For he warned hym that Launcelot scholde love hir, and she hym agayne, and so he turned his tale to the adventures of the Sankegreal' (59). The warning about Lancelot and Guinevere, the adventures of the grail quest, become a 'tale' which Merlin is telling.

'DEVISING' AND 'FOUNDING': THE WRITTEN WRITER

It is in this process of writing that Merlin's various roles—planner, prophet and writer—conflate; and this, I believe, is the most interesting and problematic aspect of writing and the written word in *Le Morte Darthur* and the prose *Merlin*. Through Merlin, the act of writing and the writing of the action merge, to the point where it is difficult to tell whether Merlin is writing the story as he watches it happen or whether he makes it happen by writing it. Action, speech and writing become indistinguishable.

For example, in *Le Morte Darthur*, Merlin writes on the pommel of Balin's sword that only the best knight in the world will be able to hold the sword, and that will be Lancelot or Galahad; and that Lancelot shall kill Gawain, the man he loves best. Half of this prophecy is conditional: either Lancelot or Galahad will be the best knight in the world. Half of it, however, is literally set in stone: Lancelot shall kill Gawain. No matter what the characters do throughout the rest of the book, this will happen. Merlin both 'tells of' an event in the future that will happen, and almost seems to make the event sure to happen through the act of writing it down.

In the prose *Merlin*, Merlin foretells the Sege Perelous of the Round Table: only one person will be able to sit in that seat and anyone else will die horribly. Yet Merlin himself has made the table: he tells Uther, 'I shall go before, and make the table, and whan thou arte come, I shall setten them that owen ther-at to sitten' (60). Since Merlin makes the table, presumably he makes the enchantment that fries the hapless knight who tries to sit in the

Sege Perelous. In a sense, then, Merlin causes his own prophecy to come about: his words describing what will happen ensure that it will happen.

In *Le Morte Darthur*, this ambiguity is captured in the word 'found.' We are told, 'Merlion founde in every sege lettirs of golde that tolde the knyghtes namys that had sitten there, but two segis were voyde' (60). The *Middle English Dictionary* has several definitions for the word 'found'. The word is the past tense for both the verbs 'finden' and 'founden,' and hence could mean either 'to come upon,' 'to discover or come unexpectedly across,' or 'to base,' 'to establish,' 'to make or create; to devise or invent.' The obvious meaning of the phrase 'Merlin founde in every sege lettirs of gold' is that Merlin discovered these letters; a possible meaning, however, is that Merlin established or created these letters.¹⁸ The verb tenses in the story reinforce the suggestion that Merlin is writing the story of the Round Table and the knights who sit in it: 'Merlin founde in every seat the names of the knights that had sitten there'—in this phrase, 'had sitten' is further in the past than 'founde.' Interestingly, 'founde' has another meaning in Middle English: 'to compose or produce by way of artistic endeavour,' 'to devise, fabricate or concoct.'

A similar ambiguity between writing and creating, between writing about the events and actually making them happen, is captured in the word 'devise.' According to the *MED*, 'devise' can mean 'to decide or determine,' 'to design or plan, to contrive' or 'to form, fashion, shape; to compose (a letter, a poem, etc.),' 'to tell, say, relate; describe; interpret; prophecy.' In the English prose *Merlin*, some form of the word 'devise' appears approximately forty-two times. Most of these (about twenty-two) fall under the 'to plan' definition of the word; about twelve fall under the category of 'to tell' or 'to write' (for example, the narrator says of Gawain, 'the tale ne of hym deviseth no more' [181]). But the syntax occasionally makes the meaning ambiguous: 'Thus devised Merlin this boke,' (23) we are told. Did Merlin *plan* the book, *tell* the book, or *compose* the book? Likewise, the numerous times various kings say to Merlin, 'let it be as ye have devised' mean, on the surface, 'let it be as you have planned.' At another level, however (especially in the context of Merlin's continual prophecies) it could mean, 'let it be as you have told' or even 'let it be as you have written.' The oddest use of the word 'devise' comes near the end of the work, when Nimiane is planning to trap Merlin in her castle of air. We are told, 'Then [Merlin] began to devise the crafte vnto her, and she wrote all that he seide and whan he hadde alle devised, the damesell hadde grete ioye in herte...thei wente thourgh the foreste hande in hande, devisinge and disportinge' (681). The first two usages—'Merlin began

to devise the craft' and 'when he hadde alle devised'—fairly clearly mean 'teach' or 'tell.' The last usage, however, is ambiguous: are they wandering through the forest teaching and disporting? planning and disporting? writing and disporting? In many of these instances, the multiple meanings of the word 'devise,' and the occasionally ambiguous ways in which it is used, conflate the actions of 'writing' and of 'planning,' and raise the possibility that as Merlin writes or imagines events, so they happen.¹⁹ Of the forty-two uses of the word 'devise' in the text, over half are linked to Merlin.

The concordance to *Le Morte Darthur* gives thirty-nine usages of some form of 'devise' or 'devised.'²⁰ Of these, most mean 'to plan' ('Merlion devised passynge well' (18)) but several mean 'to understand,' 'to conceive of' or 'to tell,' 'to write' ('letters well devysed'). There are several instances of phrases similar to 'so like as Merlyn devysed it was done' and 'so it was done as Merlin had devised;' in these two cases, at least, the phrase comes immediately after a speech of Merlin's, telling the other characters what to do. Again, then, this phrase could mean, 'as Merlin planned, so it was done,' or 'as Merlin told them, it was done,' or, without stretching the definition too much, 'as Merlin wrote, it was done.'

Other phrases in *Le Morte Darthur* and the prose *Merlin* also tease the reader with the possibility that, for Merlin, planning and writing an event is the same action. Chapter 23 of the prose *Merlin* opens with the phrase, 'Thus were the foure princes discourfited, as ye haue herde be the witte of Merlin' (412). The syntax here makes it unclear whether the princes were discomfited by the wit of Merlin, or whether we have heard by the wit of Merlin. The answer the text provides, of course, is that it is both: within the story, Merlin discomfits the princes; outside of the story, we the readers have this text because of Merlin's dissemination of it through Blase.

In a similar case, in *Le Morte Darthur*, we are told that 'Bloyse wrote the batayle worde by worde as Merlion tolde hym, how hit began and by whom, and in lyke wyse how hit was ended and who had the worse. And all the batayles that were done in Arthurs dayes, Merlion dud hys mayster Bloyse wryte them. Also he dud wryte all the batayles that every worthy knyght ded of Arthurs courte' (25). The obvious meaning is that Merlin tells Blase about the battles, and Blase then writes them down. The actual syntax, however, leaves open another possibility. Malory here displays a propensity to drop prepositions. Bloyse does not write 'about the battle' or 'of the battle,' he writes the battle, word by word as Merlin tells him. He does not write 'about' all the battles of Arthur's knights, or write 'down' or 'of' or 'on' the battles: he simply 'dud wryte all the batayles.' Merlin/Blase is writing the battles we

are reading, as one might write a story or write a letter; and as in the examples I mentioned before, the writing seems to take precedence over the event. We are teased with the possibility that the characters in the story are themselves writing the story in which they appear.²¹

In *Le Morte Darthur* and the prose *Merlin*, writing and the problems of the written word center on Merlin. His actions become indistinguishable from his writing; his writing sets events in motion. Moreover, his writing is, in many ways, the source of his authority and power. Merlin's writing seems godly because it appears suddenly, and seems unsourced, unwritten. His power over the world is linked to his power over writing; and this power is of necessity mysterious and magical, for Merlin, at least in the prose *Merlin*, cannot read.

This, in the end, is the source of his downfall. Merlin's beloved, Nimiane, is a clerk, 'lerner in clergie' (634). She can read and write, and we are told numerous times in the *Merlin* that she writes down whatever Merlin teaches her: 'she wrote the wordes in perchemyn soche as he hir devised' (312). Even though she only learns the magic he teaches her, for some reason the student is more powerful, in the end, than the teacher. That power is linked to writing: '[Merlin] hir taught and lerner so moche that after he was holden a fooll and yet is, and she hem well vndirstode and put hem in writinge, as she that was well expert in the vij artes' (680). Merlin's power comes from the 'unwritten' written word; her power comes from mundane, clerical, everyday writing. The magical writing which has been so powerful throughout the text has become encased and imprisoned by mundanely scribed, pen-and-parchment, trained human writing.

OXFORD

Kathy Cawsey has taught in England, Ireland, Canada and Hungary, and is working on a dissertation examining Geoffrey Chaucer as a theorist of language and literature. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the University of Oxford.

NOTES

- 1 Thomas Malory, *Works*, ed. Eugene Vinaver, 2nd edn. (London: Oxford University Press, 1971); H. B. Wheatley, ed. *Merlin: A Prose Romance* (London: Early English Text Society, 1899). References to these editions are noted by page number. *Le Morte Darthur* needs no introduction; the *Merlin* is a fairly close translation of the French prose *Merlin*, or Vulgate *Merlin*, written by Robert de Boron and an anonymous author who continued de Boron's tale. The fact that both *Le Morte Darthur* and the *Merlin* are adaptations based on French texts is itself interesting.

As such, their authors would have been forced to acknowledge the problematic nature of referentiality and semantics, which one can sometimes avoid or dismiss if one works solely within one's mother tongue.

- 2 For the classic work on performative speech acts, see J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).
- 3 Gregory Jember, 'Chaucer and Malory: Signs of the Times,' in *Arthurian and Other Stories*, ed. Takashi Suzuki and Tsuyoshi Mukai (Cambridge: Brewer, 1993) p. 137 [131–142].
- 4 C. Scott Littleton and Linda Malcor, 'Some Notes on Merlin,' *ARTHURIANA* 5:3 (1995): 88–89 [81–90].
- 5 In the words of Jacques Derrida: 'God the king does not know how to write, but that ignorance or incapacity only testifies to his sovereign independence. He has no need to write. He speaks, he says, he dictates, and his word suffices.' Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 76.
- 6 Helen Cooper, 'Counter-Romance: Civil Strife and Father-Killing in the Prose Romances,' in *The Long Fifteenth Century*, ed. Helen Cooper and Sally Mapstone (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 142 [140–157].
- 7 Larry Benson, *Malory's Morte Darthur* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 8.
- 8 Benson, *Malory*, pp. 8–9; see also Richard Fehrenbacher, 'The Domestication of Merlin in Malory's *Morte Darthur*,' *Quondam et Futurus* 3.4 (1993): 12 [1–16]. Fehrenbacher's arguments, although he himself does not appear to think so, are as valid for *Merlin* as for Malory.
- 9 Anne Berthelot, 'L'enchanteur et le livre ou Le Savoir de Merlin' *Perspectives Médiévales* 9 (Juin 1983): 38 [38–39].
- 10 See W.T. Greene, 'Malory's Merlin: An Ambiguous Magician?' *Arthurian Interpretations*, 1.2 (1997): 56, 59 [53–63]; and Terence McCarthy, *Reading the Morte Darthur* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1989), p. 6.
- 11 Felicity Riddy, *Sir Thomas Malory* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1988), p. 39.
- 12 Charles Moorman, *The Book of Kyng Arthur*, (New York: Routledge, 1965) p. 58. See also Bonnie Wheeler, 'Romance and Parataxis and Malory,' *Arthurian Literature* 12 (1992): 116 [109–132].
- 13 Donald Hoffman, 'Malory's Tragic Merlin,' *Quondam et Futurus* 1.2 (1991) 22–23.
- 14 Thomas Wright, 'The Tale of King Arthur: Beginnings and Foreshadowings,' in *Malory's Originality*, ed. R. M. Lumiansky, (Cambridge, MA: University of Harvard Press, 1964), p. 23 [9–66].
- 15 Beverly Kennedy, *Knighthood in the Morte Darthur*, (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1985), p. 26.
- 16 Alternately, one could read Merlin as not being *close* to God, but as a *parody* or *likeness* of God, with Blase as his evangelist: Merlin's plans become divine Word, and hence reality. After all, we only have Merlin's word for it that he is acting on God's behalf. (Thanks to Kiséry András for this interpretation.)

- 17 Wheatley, *Merlin*, p. cxxix.
- 18 Kennedy, *Knighthood*, p. 36.
- 19 My own ambiguity in the word 'as' here is, of course, deliberate: I wish to imply both 'in the way in which Merlin writes events, so they happen' and 'at the same time as' or 'while Merlin writes events, so they happen.'
- 20 Tomomi Kato, ed., *A Concordance to the Works of Sir Thomas Malory* (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1974).
- 21 Amusingly, the EETS edition of the prose *Merlin* also provides another example of the way the grammar of the text can suggest that Merlin is both creating/writing the story and acting in it. The editor omits a close-quotation punctuation mark when Merlin is speaking of the story he will relate: Merlin says to Blase, 'I shall be sente after to seche oute of the weste, and they that shull come to seche me, haue graunted their lorde that they shull me sle, but whan their come and here me speke they shull haue no will me to sle. And I shall go with hem; and thow shalt go in that partyes, where they be that haue the holy vessell. And euer here-after shall thy boke gladly be herde, and he that will knowe the lyf of kynges whiche were in the grete Bretayne be-fore that cristendom come, be-holde the story of Bretons. That is a boke that maister Martyn traunslated oute of latyn, but heire rested this matere. And turneth to the storye of Loth, a crysten kyng in Bretayne....' and the tale goes on. The quotation, as far as the reader (and apparently the editor) can tell, never ends: the rest of the book is told by Merlin. Except, of course, that it is not, and Merlin goes back to being a third-person character in the story...except, of course, that Merlin actually *is*, so we are told, writing the story. We cannot tell which should be given precedence, the writing of the story or the action in the story.