MALORY'S TRAGIC MERLIN

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The untold tale of Merlin's birth haunts the opening of Malory's *Morte Darthur*; the ghostly presence of his demon-father infiltrates the work, provoking the insults of enemies and explaining his own sometimes erratic behavior. Although the usual approach to Malory, particularly since Vinaver, is to de-emphasize the marvelous, Merlin is, nevertheless, surrounded by an aura of the uncanny. Thus, while Vinaver argues that "incidents which appealed to the French authors because of their fairy element are reproduced with an emphasis on their human and realistic aspects and with a noticeable neglect of magic," Thomas Wright, in a beautifully evocative phrase, identifies Merlin as "the most intermediate of beings," adding that "neither devil, man, nor god, Merlin wears the masks of all three" (33). Synthesizing these divergent approaches, I would suggest that it is precisely the diminution of the marvelous in Malory's text that heightens the reader's impression of Merlin as intermediate and indefinable. The problem is not that he wears the masks of devil, man, and god, but that Malory, by erasing the story of Merlin’s birth, inscribes the riddle of his origin in the margins of his text. The problem is not so much Merlin’s "masks," but the impossibility of distinguishing mask from reality, of deducing his essence from his behavior.

Preceding the tale of Arthur's conception that opens Malory's work, Geoffrey of Monmouth, and the imitators and innovators who succeeded him, had told the tale of the fatherless boy, who, as Vortigern's Druids discover, had been engendered by an incubus on his virgin mother. Malory transposes this tale into rumor, a rumor known to King Lot,
for example, who calls him a "witch," and rallies his troops by mocking, "Be we wel avysed to be aferd of a dreme-reder?" (1:18). Later, Pellinor overhears one knight warning another, "Beware . . . of Merlion, for he knowith all thynges by the devylles craffte" (1:118). The most direct allusion of all occurs when Nynyve rejects him, because "she was aferde of hym for cause he was a devyls son" (1:126). Thus, although we are never told the tale of Merlin's birth, his contemporaries know it. In consequence, some hold him in awe, while others merely hold him in contempt.

But during Arthur's reign, at least until the coming of Lancelot, it is Merlin who protects the kingdom, intervening directly in the preparation, establishment, and preservation of the Round Table. He encourages Arthur to knight Grifflet, a young squire of Arthur's age, because he sees that "he woll be a passynge good man whan he ys of ayge" (1:46). He reveals the mystery of Sir Torre's birth, thus paving the way for the boy, ignobly raised if semi-nobly born, to become one of the first new knights of the Round Table. He also ensures the eventual arrival of Lancelot at Arthur's court, and reveals the child's future greatness to his proud mother (1:125-26). On several occasions, he preserves Arthur's life, rescuing him from three churls (1:49), and, by means of enchantment, from Pellinor (1:51). His intervention in the wars of the kings preserves Arthur's kingdom, when he arranges Balin's capture of King Royns, who had been a serious threat to Arthur's rule (1:72), and to Arthur himself. Knowing that in the battle against King Nero either King Lot or King Arthur must die, Merlin delays King Lot "with a tale of the prophecy" (1:75), until Nero has been slain, and Lot, fighting alone, can be killed by Pellinor. Thus, while "many kyngis and lordis hylde hym grete werre . . . Arthur overcom hem all . . . [because] . . . the moste party dayes of hys lyff he was ruled by the counceile of Merlyon" (1:98).
Extraordinarily problematic, the council of Merlin is perhaps nowhere more dubious than in the discussion of marriage that immediately follows Merlin's assurance of Merlin's instrumentality in the preservation of Arthur's kingdom. "My barownes," Arthur informs him, "woll let me have no reste but nedis I muste take a wyff, and I wolde none take but by thy counciele and advice" (1:98). Merlin asks Arthur if he has anyone in mind, and when Arthur mentions Guenevere, his council is merely to warn "the kyng covertly that Gwynyver was nat holsom for hym to take to wyff. For he warned hym that Launcelot scholde love hir, and sche hym agayne," but adding that "thereas mannese herte is sette he wolbe loth to returne" (1:98). Arthur pursues his marriage to Guinevere, and Merlin makes the arrangements as if no one, not even the prophet, had listened.

But the reader, who has paid attention, has learned a number of things: that love is a power to be reckoned with; that a man's desire has a great deal more to do with the course of history than with forethought and vision; that Arthur will marry Guinevere; and that Lancelot will come to court and fall in love with her. The reader may deduce that if Arthur had not married Guinevere, Camelot would not necessarily have been saved, but Merlin would have been proved false. The prophet is accurate only when he is ignored, only when his predictions do not change anyone's behavior and, thus, alter the future he has announced. Thus, all true prophecies must be ignored. Cassandra's tragedy is not unique, but the ground of prophecy. In this way, Merlin shares Cassandra's tragedy, but his is darker and deeper. Unlike Cassandra, who merely announces events, Merlin is actively engaged in creating the kingdom whose downfall he perceives. Thus, anachronistically perhaps, Merlin is the hero of an existential tragedy. Like Camus's Sisyphus, he devotes himself to the completion of a project in the full knowledge of his eventual defeat.
In addition to establishing a tragic dimension to the character of Merlin, this essential ineffectiveness of his prophecy (ineffective in that it changes nothing) serves two functions in “The Tale of King Arthur.” On the simplest level, the prophecies provide a thematic overture to the “hoole book of kyng Arthur and of his noble knyghtes of the Rounde Table” (3:1260). When Merlin, for example, establishes the perowne, a memorial stone (literally, a mounting block), on the spot where the lady Colombe slays herself for love and sorrow and announces that “in this same place the grettist batyle betwyxte two [knyghtes] that ever was or ever shall be, and the trewyst lovers; and yette none of hem shall slee other” (1:72), he prepares for the combat of Lancelot and Tristram before either has come to court. He can prophecy the “stroke most dolerous that ever man stroke, excepte the stroke ofoure Lorde Jesu Cryste” (1:72), preparing for the Grail Quest. He hints, too, of Arthur’s end, telling him “that there sholde be a grete batayle besydes Salysbiry, and Mordred hys owne sonne sholde be agaynste hym” (1:79). Even more poignantly, he prophesies not only Arthur’s end, but his own, telling Arthur that “ye have lyene by youre syster and on hir ye have gotyn a childe that shall destroy you and al the knyghtes of youre realme,” mournfully adding, “but I ought ever to be hevy . . . for I shall dye a shamefull dethe, to be putte in the erthe quycke; and ye shall dey a worshipfull dethe” (1:44).

These “ineffective” prophecies, then, allow Merlin’s words to function as a prelude to the Morte, announcing themes and characters, sometimes as simply and briefly as a Wagnerian leitmotif, as in the few brief notes about the perowne that only hint at the fully orchestrated symphony of the Lancelot-Tristram theme. Thus, he can provide a thematic introduction to the long and complicated series of events that follow upon the conception and coronation of Arthur. But a far more important function of Merlin’s prophecies is not simply to
announce themes but to position them. Reversing the famous motto of Mary, Queen of Scots, “In my end is my beginning,” Malory’s Merlin inserts the end in the beginning. His prophecies shadow the initiation of the Arthurian project with the tragedy of its end. Thus, the reader’s “sense of an ending” is doubled by Merlin’s insertion of a brooding fatality into the text itself.

Both Merlin and the reader, then, read Arthurian history backwards, attempting to recover the ideal origins of chivalry after the fall. His vision and our nostalgia fuse foresight and hindsight to situate Arthur’s project in a fragile moment of recuperated history. Unlike the nightmare from which Stephen Dedalus tries to escape, Arthur and Merlin try to reinvent history as a dream, maintaining the Anglo-Saxon sense of dream as “rejoicing, joy, delight; melody and song.” The associated noun drymann, “sorcerer, magician” (derived from the cognate dryme) places Merlin at the center of this fragile project. With a kind of pre-existential sense of inevitable failure, the drymann Merlin, both todgeweiht (“doomed,” like Wagner’s heroes) and engagé (“pledged,” like Sartre’s), centers the Arthurian enterprise in hope and history. Merlin, having created Camelot, fully understands its inevitable end. But committed to enterprises he knows will fail, he achieves a tragic awareness of individual, dynastic, and imperial history, an awareness that allows him to share the joy of the tragic hero defined by Yeats in “Lapis Lazuli,” when he observed that “Hamlet and Lear are gay.”

This concept of tragic gaiety provides a context in which to place the more playful aspects of Malory’s Merlin. His shape-shifting, a talent traditionally possessed by magicians and demons, which Malory derives from his sources, seems nearly aberrant in his revised context. But the shape-shifting contributes to the sense of Merlin’s “indeterminacy,” making
it difficult to define not only his substance, but his accidents as well. Arthur is not only not sure of what Merlin is, he cannot even know for certain what he appears to be. As a result, he cannot always know when he has met him, or where he can be found, for his location is as arbitrary as his appearance. He has no clear identity and no fixed address.

But Merlin’s uncanniness may be playful, even if with a kind of ominous gaiety, and some transparent showmanship designed to mystify the mob. For example, when Ulfius (and the reader) first encounters him, he is “in a beggars aray” and asks Ulfius whom he is seeking, only so that he can immediately reply, “I knowe whome thou sekest, for thou sekest Merlyn, therefore seke no ferther, for I am he” (1:8). His disguises allow him to prepare his own epiphanies and to exercise control over his sudden and arbitrary revelations to create an air of mystery that lends special authority to his announcements and councils. This gift of “omnilocality,” his apparent ability to be everywhere and nowhere simultaneously, also allows him to achieve a detachment, a freedom, unavailable to anyone else in Arthur’s world. He is a drifter as well as a dreamer.

Merlin’s subsequent appearances take on similar aspects of showmanship, of a conscious concern for effect. He appears dramatically on a black horse on the battlefield of the eleven kings to warn Arthur that “hit ys tyme to sey, ‘Who!’” (1:36). Soon after, he appears in his most elaborate disguise, “all befurred in blacke shepis skynnes, and a grete payre of bootis, and a boowe and arowis, in a russet gowne, and [bringing] wylde gyese in hys honde” (1:38). While he does reveal that “here in the same place there the grete battayle was, ys grete tresoure hydde in the erthe” (1:38), nothing more is heard of this treasure, and the primary effect of the scene is the playful revelation of Merlin’s identity: “Than Ulphuns
and Brastias knew hym well inowghe and smyled. . . . So they had grete disporte at hym’’ (1:38). Merlin’s shape-shifting, then, is not limited to moments of significant revelation. Malory frequently presents the prophet in surprising disguises simply for dramatic effect. And perhaps to remind us of the demonic origins of Merlin’s ability to devise these dramatic entrances.

Both more playful and more serious is Merlin’s sequential appearance before Arthur, first “lyke a chylde of fourtene yere of ayge” and then again “in the lykenesse of an olde man of four score yere of aygge” (1:43-44). Apart from his relatively insignificant appearance before King Royns, this is Merlin’s final disguise. In this last metamorphosis, Merlin enunciates the dire consequences of his first, the compounded transformations essential to accomplish Arthur’s conception. The child and the old man, defining the boundaries of human life, reveal to Arthur the mysteries of his birth and death. It is the Merlin-child who tells Arthur, “I know what thou arte, and who was thy fadir, and of whom thou were begotyn: for kyng Uther was thy fadir and begate thee on Igrayne” (1:43), and it is the aged Merlin, who warns him of the sin that particular ignorance had made possible. “Ye have done a thynge late that God ys displesed with you, for ye have lyene by youre syster and on hir ye have gotyn a childe that shall destroy you and all the knyghtes of youre realme” (1:44). Merlin, sequentially puer and senex, tells Arthur who and what he is, and Arthur’s discovery of his identity ensnares him in a genealogical chain of guilt bequeathed and inherited, the guilt of the father and the sin of the son, for the sin of Mordred’s conception is made possible by the secret treachery of Arthur’s own, the consequence of Uther’s lust and Merlin’s most notable, least playful, disguise.

While Malory omits the story of Merlin’s own conception, a compound of demonism, violence, and violation, he begins
with Merlin’s role in the conception of Arthur, erasing the desire of demons to highlight Uther’s demonic passion for Igrayne, who “was a passyng good woman and wold not assente” (1:7). For Uther, the immediate consequence of this thwarted desire is disease, an illness that might almost be diagnosed as possession. To rescue the king, “seke for angre and for love” (1:8), as he himself admits, Ulfius attempts to procure a remedy, and “by adventure he mette Merlyn” (1:8), who promises rescue but demands a reward. “And yf kynge Uther wille wel rewarde me and be sworne unto me to fulfille my desyre, . . . I shall cause hym to have all his desyre” (1:8). Ulfius accepts: “. . . thow shalt have thy desyre,” and Merlin seals the bargain: “he shall have his entente and desyre” (1:8). In this exchange, Merlin accomplishes his desire. His radical indeterminacy reappears here when Merlin, trapped in the ambiguous space where his mother’s virtue intersects with his father’s evil, is simultaneously the agent of glory and defeat.

To accomplish this glorious and dangerous conception, Merlin performs his most critical transformation, disguising the king as Gorlois, Ulfius as Brastias, and himself as Jordanus. With altered identities, this unholy trinity enters the castle of Tintagil in the absence of its lord, so that “after the deth of the duke kyng Uther lay with Igrayne, mor than thre houres after his deth, and begat on her that nygh[!]t Arthur” (1:9). The trickery, the compounded deceptions, disguised violations, all the machinery required to accomplish the conception of Arthur make Merlin’s conception, a simple demonic rape, seem a model of decorum.

The neurotic violence of Uther’s passion, a compound of lust and betrayal, and mediated by his jealousy of Gorlois as much as by his desire for Igrayne, make Arthur’s conception the initiating crime of Uther’s dynasty. Thus, because of Malory’s opening in medias res, Uther’s lineage is not simply
the righteous counterforce to the corruptions of Vortigern and his Saxon allies, but is in itself the source of the evil, the fateful sin, that haunts his son and grandson. Guilt is no longer deflected onto the Other, but imprinted in the Arthurian genealogy. This sin initiates the chain of desire that results in Arthur’s lust for his sister, and that sin is a consequence of Merlin’s desire to monopolize knowledge and control disclosure. Thus, Merlin makes possible the intercourse with Morgause. When, soon after that event, Arthur rescues Merlin and boasts, “here haddist thou be slayne for all thy craffitis, had nat I bene,” Merlin replies that he could have saved himself from the churls, but that Arthur has acquired a far more powerful enemy: “thou arte more nere thy deth than I am, for thou goste to thy dethe warde and God be nat thy frende” (1:49). Once again, Merlin perceives the beginning as merely a prologue to the end, a birth as the initiation of an inevitable “deth warde” journey. The nexus of desire and death may reflect an ascetic Christian theology, but it also evokes the universality of the Yeatsian horror of the “dying generations.”

Merlin’s participation in the deceits of destiny implicate him intimately in both the success and the defeat of the Arthurian project. Just as he himself is the product of his father’s evil and his mother’s good, he is the source of both the creation and the collapse of the kingdom. His ambiguous complicity is nowhere clearer than in the consequences of his role in Arthur’s conception and the satisfaction of his subsequent desire, to take for himself the unbaptized child begotten on the night of lust, disguise, and death, a sorcerer’s tale of a warrior and a wooer, and a woman, who, all unknowingly, is twice a wife and once a widow in a single night. As a consequence of Merlin’s appropriation of knowledge and the baby, he makes possible and necessary Arthur’s extraction of
the sword from the stone to demonstrate signally and publicly that he is “rightwys kynge borne of all En[g]lond” (1:12), but, at the same time, he makes possible the incest that destroys that kingdom. Thus, if Uther’s criminal lust for Igrayne is the seminal event in the founding of the Arthurian kingdom, it is Merlin who both anticipates and incarnates the beginning and the end, as if, one of Yeats’s gyres made flesh, he contains and presides over the cycling ages, foreseeing both Arthur’s triumph and the nightmare of the “rocking cradle,” from which Modred “slouches towards [Camelot] to be born.”

The prophet Merlin is also, however, the counsellor Merlin, who attempts to delay the ending he so clearly foresees. In this aspect, Merlin becomes the sole voice of moderation in a world ruled by, in the Duke of Cornwall’s words, “warre and worship” (1:187). When war is necessary and provoked, Merlin is an excellent tactician, who arranges the alliance with Ban and Bors, and actually establishes the battle formations that lead to Arthur’s victory. But his preference is for peace and moderation, in what may be a forlorn hope to put off the end of Camelot for as long as possible. He manifests himself “on a grete blacke horse” (1:86) on the battlefield of the eleven kings to teach Arthur restraint: “Thou hast never done. Hast thou nat done inow? Of three score thousand thes day hast thou leffte on lyve but fyftene thousand! Therefore hit ys tyme to sey ‘Who!’ for God ys wroth with the for thou woll never have done” (1:86). Merlin’s council of moderation is a new one for a world that thrives on conquest, but it is a lesson unique to Malory’s Arthur, and a lesson that is later forgotten when Merlin is no longer around to reinforce it. It is knowing when to say “Who!” and to learn that “inowghe is as good as a feste” that allows Malory’s Arthur to succeed in the Roman wars. No longer the victim of Fortune, as in Geoffrey of Monmouth, or the over-reaching of the Alliterative Morte,
Malory’s Arthur achieves a just victory over the Roman invader. This lesson of moderation and restraint is one of the happier, if short-lived, legacies of the equivocal prophet, Merlin.

The competing careers of Merlin as prophet and peacemaker intersect in his analyses of the opposing virtues of the sword and the scabbard. He advises Arthur to be restrained in his use of Excalibur, “the swerde that ye had by myracle” (1:19). He casts an enchantment on Pellinor so that he will not be slain by Arthur, preventing bloodshed and creating a friend for the king. In this rescue, there is again the Merlin-mixture of good and evil. Because he has saved Pellinor, the king and his sons will become famous knights of the Round Table. On the other hand, the sons of Pellinor will become embroiled in the most vicious and destructive family vendetta in the history of the Round Table. Arthur’s rashness is renewed, when, eager to test the quality of the new sword he receives from the Lady of the Lake, he wants to try his hand at Pellinor one more time; again Merlin instructs him in chivalry (“the knyght ys wery of fyghtynge and chasynge, that ye shall have no wor-ship to have ado with hym” [1:53]), and poses the significant question, “Whether lyke ye the better the swerde othir the scawberde?” (1:54). To Arthur’s unsurprising preference for the sword, Merlin responds with praise for the scabbard. While the magician does becloud his message with a magical discourse, the essential point is clear: war will destroy Arthur and his kingdom; peace will preserve it.

In light of Merlin’s attempts to train and restrain Arthur, it is ironic that the last outburst of Arthur’s extraordinary potential for ruthless violence, the slaughter of the May Day babies, is blamed on Merlin. The son of a virtuous mother is too easily blamed for the crimes that seem inspired by his demon-father. When, for the last time, Merlin reminds Arthur
of the virtue of the scabbard, he goes on to anticipate the theft and counterfeiting of the sword and scabbard by Morgan le Fay, who gives the originals to her lover Accolon. The abbreviated narrative of this theft, which leaves Arthur vulnerable, is followed by Merlin’s most specific prophecy of the end of the realm: “But after thys Merlion tolde unto kynge Arthure of the prophecy that there sholde be a grete batayle besydes Salysbiry, and Mordred hys owne sonne sholde be agaynste hym” (1:79).

But Merlin is not only the agent of history, he is also the agent of historiography. As he moves Arthur to enact events, he moves the mysterious scribe, Blaise, to record them. After the victory of Arthur, Ban, and Bors, Merlin

toke hys leve . . . for to go se hys mayster Bloyse that dwelled in Northhumbrlonde. . . . And so 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 worst. 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.

(1:37-38)

Inspiring the deeds and dictating the words, knowing the end, but, nevertheless, committed to beginning the narrative, Merlin is the authentic author of Arthurian history.

He also authorizes his own tragedy, for it is not only the end of the kingdom he foresees, but his own imminent death. The very event that signals the foundation of the Round Table, the oath that concludes the festivities at the marriage of Arthur and Guinevere and the quest of the white hart, initiates
the end of Merlin, for Pellinor's successful quest results in the arrival of "one of the damesels of the Lady of the Laake, that hyght Nenyve," with whom "Merlyon felle in dotage" (1:125). With astounding economy, Malory portrays the outlines of a sad and doomed affair between a young woman with a hidden agenda ("ever she made Merlion good chere tylle sche had lerned of hym all maner of thynges that sche desyred" [1:125]) and an old, wise man, who knows the fate of the world, but cannot govern his own desire.

In the midst of this poignant pedagogical affair, Merlin is capable of advising Arthur of the wiles of his sorceress sister ("he tolde hym how the swerde and the scawberde sholde be stolyn by a woman frome hym that he moste trusted" [1:125]), but incapable of taking steps to avoid his own tragedy. When he tells Arthur "that he scholde nat endure longe, but for all his craftes he scholde be putte into the erthe quyke," Arthur suggests "syn ye knowe of youre evil adventure, purvey for it, and putt hit away by youre craftes" (1:125). To this sensible advice, Merlin responds, "Nay, . . . hit woll nat be" (1:125). The tragedy of his own fate mirrors his helplessness in the context of the larger tragedy that overwhelms the kingdom he creates. Both Cassandra and her audience, Merlin's most intimate prophecy is one that he himself does not, cannot heed.

While the traditional moral of the story of Merlin and Nenyve is the power of desire, Malory's emphasis is sadder and more profound. He does not diminish the force of love, and he retains the simple moral of the uselessness of intellect and the wisdom of age as a defense against lust and the wiles of a beautiful young woman; but Merlin's fate in this text may be more profoundly read as the deserved undoing of a man whose career from its inception, at least from Malory's in medias res opening, is embroiled in the desires of others.
Having abetted Uther’s sick desire and accomplished Igrayne’s betrayal, Merlin’s destruction by his own lust for a beautiful, deceptive woman represents an elegant justice. His claustration may be read as Igrayne’s vengeance, a symmetrical equation of the deceiver deceived, as Merlin, the instrument of another’s lust, is in the end betrayed by his own.

It is not just his own lust, however, but the silenced narrative of Merlin’s birth as that, in part, accounts for his sad defeat. Like Arthur, Merlin cannot escape the pedigree that (mis-)shapes him. His demonic parentage is the reason Nynyve gives for rejecting him, but it is also clear that the woman simply doesn’t like him, although she both fears him and desires to acquire his secret knowledge. Malory presents the death of Merlin simply, but the effect shifts from an *exemplum* of the power of lust to a poignant acknowledgment of the frailty of the human condition and the desperate desire for love. The poignant tragedy of Malory’s Merlin is that he is willing to dare, to risk love knowing full well that the consequence is to be trapped in his tomb by the woman he loves and to whom he has given all he owns and all he is. While he is surely guilty of ignoring the woman’s feelings, there is something grandly tragic in his willingness to give his life for his last and first beloved. In his final act of existential risk, he ventures all he has, and all he is, in his amorous enterprise, and he does this in full awareness that he will inevitably fail.

With his claustration, the ambiguity of Merlin, the son of the virgin and the demon, is dissolved, for, after him, magic, feminized and divided, is simpler; good magic is appropriated by the damsels Nynyve, evil magic by Arthur’s sister, Morgan le Fay. While Nynyve attempts to take Merlin’s place, her beneficence is never as complex as Merlin’s tragic vision, and she is useful mainly as a nymph *ex machina* to tidy up loose ends, as in the midsummer’s night confusion of the Pelleas.
adventure, or to rescue Arthur from rival sorceresses in the Forest Perilous. Morgan is evil, but also predictable. Thus, with the disappearance of Merlin, magic becomes less disturbing because it is no longer either tragic or profound. Merlin is at last displaced by Brusen’s revisionist sorcery that redefines the deceptions of Arthur’s birth to accomplish Galahad’s nativity. Redeeming Merlin’s treatment of women and introducing a pattern of chivalry that supersedes Arthur’s, Brusen is the agent of a history that transcends Merlin. But, while she may surpass him as an agent, she falls far beneath him as a character. She performs her function and disappears, and, unlike Merlin, she seems unaware of the role she plays in a universal history. Merlin knows that what he builds will fall, that what he most loves will most painfully destroy him, and yet he goes on, committed and engaged, knowing, like Yeats’s Hamlet and Lear that “All things fall and are built again / And those that build them again are gay.”

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NOTES

1All citations of Malory are taken from the Vinaver edition.

2Needless to say, I cannot agree with the conclusions of Wendy Tibbetts Greene that Merlin is “only human” [italics mine] (62). In addition, I do not agree that Merlin is finally “the bumbling magician (62).” This comic view of Merlin may be one of the unfortunate consequences of too early an exposure to the novels of T. H. White.

3It is my view of Merlin as a reader that makes it impossible for me to accept Kimball’s more mythic view of Merlin as a “demi-urge, an ironically created force that somehow
goes awry” (29). While Kimball’s introduction of the repetition compulsion into the study of Merlin reinforces my view of the cyclical nature of Arthurian history; Freud, if applied at all, should be applied to the text, not the character. There is, of course, repetition and doubling in Merlin’s dictating his own story to Blaise, when the discussion of the narrative narrates his narration. See my discussion of Merlin and Blaise below.

4See Hall s.v. dream.

5The tragedy of this aspect of Merlin is also noted by Muriel Whitaker, who sees Merlin as a “tragic figure whose great achievement in establishing Arthur’s kingdom is undermined by a humiliating and destructive passion for a woman” (57). I would add that failure is not necessarily tragic, but that there is a “tragic gaiety” in Merlin’s knowing embrace of his claustration.

6A suggestive element to my concept of Merlin’s “tragic gaiety” is to be found in Piero Boitani’s discussion of “tragic sublimity” in medieval contexts dealing with the archetype of the Old Man and his connection with Freud’s notion of the uncanny (das Unheimliche). I have said less about Boitani’s tragic sublime than I ought to have, in part, because I am not convinced that Merlin is in fact old. Boitani’s concluding remarks, however, deserved to be considered: “The Old Man incarnates the unbearable contrast we feel between on the one hand our notion of death as the opposite of life and on the other their equivalence. He represents the borderland, the limen or threshold where division is oneness, and his uncanniness is therefore supremely, ‘sublimely’ tragic” (19).

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