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Merlin Goes to the Movies: The Changing Role of Merlin in Cinema Arthurianna
The legend of Merlin is like a medieval tapestry. Each creative artist who seeks to work with the character of Merlin pulls several strands from the rich tapestry that composes his legend. Each then places those strands upon the wonderful loom of imagination and sets about to reweave the story of Merlin from a unique perspective. From this reweaving and reinterpretation of the character come the seemingly infinite variations on the figure of Merlin in the modern era. Although the legend of Merlin has existed for more than a thousand years, the current perception of the character is based predominantly on his portrayal in the Walt Disney film *The Sword in the Stone* (1963) and in its source, the eponymous novel by Terence Hanbury White, originally published in 1938. Both versions of *The Sword in the Stone* have had a definite impact on subsequent versions of Merlin in literature, art, poetry, drama, film, and television. However, just as new each work of Arthuriana is unique, so, too, is each author's, artist's, or director's depiction of Merlin. In this article, I will focus on three of the most important roles of Merlin in the corpus of cinema Arthuriana: teacher, king-maker, and lover. Each of these roles is rooted in the medieval tradition of Merlin and reflects some of the earliest versions of his legend in connection with the narratives of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table.

**Merlin as Teacher**

The role of Merlin as teacher appears to originate in the figure of the "Merlin of the Romances," who first appears in the Old French and Middle English Arthurian romances of the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries. However, earlier portrayals of Merlin, such as the figures of the wild man Merlin Calidonius (based on the Welsh prophet Myrddin Wyllt mab Morfryn) and the prophet Merlin Ambrosius, display aspects of the pedagogue in their legends. For example, Merlin Ambrosius from Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (1136) possesses the wisdom of the ages, perhaps in homage to the Awen-inspired® prophet Merlin Calidonius. Geoffrey's Merlin displays his learning both by using machines to reconstruct the Irish Giant's Dance as the British Stonehenge and in his knowledge of herb lore, which is essential to the conception of King Arthur. Both Merlin Calidonius and Merlin Ambrosius instruct others through their prophetic powers and clairvoyant abilities. The Merlin of Geoffrey's *Vita Merlini* (1150) merges the legends of these two Merlins, and in this later work, Merlin and Taliesin (Telcgisenus in Geoffrey's Latin) have several long discussions from Merlin's observatory in the Caledonian woods on the medieval concepts of the heavens and present several learned catalogs of fish, birds, islands, springs, and lakes.

In the Arthurian romances (especially in the Old French *Estoire de Merlin*, *Suite du Merlin*, and the Didot Perceval and in the Middle English Prose-Merlin and *Of Arthour and of Merlin*), Merlin acts as a teacher to Arthur and the knights of the Round Table. He takes on a variety of guises and either offers advice or leads the knight upon the proper path toward his destiny. *Le Morte Darthur* of Sir Thomas Malory (1485) continued the traditions of the Merlin of the Romances, and for the most part, it was Malory's version of the Arthurian legend that the Victorians revived in the nineteenth century. Following Malory's narrative, T. H. White composed *The Sword in the Stone*, the tetralogy entitled *The Once and Future King* (1958), and *The Book of Merlyn* (published posthumously in 1977). It is in White's work that Merlyn as teacher comes to the attention of the modern world, including the world of cinema.

In 1963, Walt Disney released a film adaptation of *The Sword in the Stone* and further spread the image of Merlin as teacher. Two recent films also involve Merlin in the role of teacher. In *A Kid in King Arthur's Court* (1995), Merlin helps young Calvin Fuller gain confidence in himself, and, through Calvin, Merlin helps Arthur regain his own confidence. Merlin returns in *Kids of the Round Table* (1995) to teach Alex Cole about the true nature of Excalibur's power.

**The Sword in the Stone (1963)**

*The Sword in the Stone* was Walt Disney's sixteenth full-length animated feature. It remains a delightful and humorous adaptation of T. H. White's novel, with songs by the Sherman Brothers, Richard M. Sherman and Robert B. Sherman. Throughout the film, Merlin uses his magic in order to teach the Wart (Arthur) several important lessons that he will need to master before attaining his destiny as the king of England. Early in the film, Merlin (voiced by Karl Swenson) conjures a vision in a puff of smoke and watches as the Wart (voiced by Ricky Sorenson), about the age of twelve, arrives at Merlin's house. Thereupon, the old man informs the boy of his intention to tutor him. Arthur needs "a real education," as opposed to the boy's limited training in becoming a squire. As Merlin puts it, "Now develop your brain. Knowledge. Wisdom. There's the real power. Higher learning." Wart then says he has no time for more lessons, because of his duties as a page, but Merlin plans to change all that because "even in these bungling, backwards, medieval times, you have got to know where you're going .... You must plan for the future, boy. You've got to find a direction."
Arthur, Merlin, and Archimedes (voiced by Junius Matthews), Merlin’s “highly educated owl,” arrive at the Castle of the Forest Sauvage. There Merlin, or Marvin as Ector (voiced by Sebastian Cabot) calls him, explains his intentions to “educate the Wart.” Merlin promises that his magic is used only for “educational purposes.” Although Ector is somewhat annoyed at Merlin’s meddling in castle affairs, Merlin manages to persuade Sir Ector to allow him to remain. Merlin realizes that Arthur has potential as a squire, but the boy is destined for even greater things. The magician knows that his pupil must rise above the trappings of medieval civilization. Of course, Merlin has an edge over Ector and Kay (voiced by Norman Alden); he plans to “cheat” and use his magic to win Arthur over to the side of learning.

Soon, Merlin and Arthur transform into two fishes in the moat, so Arthur might learn about “brains over brawn” to the tune of “That’s What Makes the World Go ‘Round.” Still later, they become squirrels, and the Wart learns that love is “a powerful thing,” perhaps “the greatest force on earth,” when he encounters a young female squirrel (voiced by Ginny Tyler). While a squirrel, Merlin also lectures the Wart about gravity and “to always look before you leap.” However, Merlin’s machinations cause Arthur to earn more demerits and lose his chance to serve as Kay’s squire. The wizard reappears to comfort the boy and comments that things can only get better. The Wart finally agrees to accept Merlin’s offer of an education, and the next day, Merlin, an experienced time traveler, begins his class by attempting to enlighten the Wart on the innovations that have been developed since the Middle Ages. Merlin shows the boy a model plane, and the Wart starts to gaze out the tower window daydreaming about being a bird. Suddenly, Merlin grants Arthur’s wish, transforming the boy into a sparrow. Archimedes and Arthur fly off together so the boy might learn how to be a bird, but a hawk attacks them. Archimedes quickly loses sight of the boy, lost and confused, the Wart falls prey to the wiles of Mad Madame Mim (voiced by Martha Wentworth), Merlin’s nemesis. Mim sings her theme song while she shows off her powers of transmogrification, and soon Merlin engages Mim in a “wizard’s duel” to save the Wart. The two sorcerers then take various forms in the attempt to kill the other. In the end, Mim takes the form of a purple fire-breathing dragon, and Merlin seemingly vanishes into the form of a rare disease. Merlin wins the combat, and Arthur has learned Merlin’s final lesson, that “knowledge and wisdom is the real power.”

Things finally begin to look promising for Arthur in terms of his education. However, Kay’s new squire gets the mumps, and so Ector reinstates Arthur. The boy immediately runs to Merlin’s tower to show off his squire’s uniform. Merlin grows angry at the boy and yells, “I thought you were going to amount to something.” Infuriated, the wizard shouts out, “Blow me to Bermuda!” and he rockets off into the twentieth century. Left alone, Arthur and Archimedes go to the tournament in London with Kay. In the search for a sword for Kay, Arthur and Archimedes come upon the fabled Sword in the Stone. Innocent of the sword’s value, Arthur pulls it from the stone, and after some delay, the boy is declared king. When next we see Arthur, the boy sits in his throne room wearing an oversized crown on his head. Arthur wishes Merlin were there to advise him, and suddenly Merlin reappears, dressed in Bermuda shorts. He discards his modern garb for his old wizard’s robes and hat, and Arthur and Archimedes explain that the Wart is now king. Merlin is not surprised, and once more assuming the role of teacher, he tells the boy about “King Arthur and his knights of the Round Table” and that “You’ll become a great legend. They’ll be writing books about you for centuries to come. Why, they might even make a motion picture about you.” And so they did.

**A Kid in King Arthur’s Court (1995)**

_A Kid in King Arthur’s Court_, produced by Walt Disney Pictures in association with Trimark Pictures and Tapestry Films, premiered in theaters on Friday, August 11, 1995. Loosely based on Mark Twain’s _A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court_, this film is set in a King Arthur’s court held under the oppression of Arthur’s trusted aide, Lord Belasco (Art Malik). Merlin (Ron Moody making his second appearance as Merlin, his first in Disney’s _Unidentified Flying Oddball_ in 1979)
The film opens with an image of Merlin in the Well of Destiny. The wizard casts a powerful spell across the ages, seeking a brave knight to wield Excalibur for Arthur and save Camelot from Lord Belasco’s treachery. The film then cuts to the twentieth century, when young Calvin Fuller, in a baseball uniform bearing the legend Knights 27, strikes out at bat because he has no confidence in himself. Merlin’s magic pulls Calvin through a portal in space-time, and he literally falls into the age of King Arthur. The boy quickly learns that all is not well in Camelot. The people think that Arthur no longer cares about them, because Belasco’s men, in the name of the king, extract exorbitant taxes from them. Almost immediately, Calvin and Belasco face each other, setting in motion a conflict that later plays itself out in a joust between a disguised Calvin and Lord Belasco. Under the tutelage of Master Kane (Daniel Craig) and Katey, Calvin learns how to be a knight and gains the confidence he lacked.

Initially, Calvin speaks to Merlin in the Well of Destiny, and he tells the wizard that his spell picked the wrong person. Merlin, however, is infallible, and his magic has chosen wisely. If Calvin can help Arthur find his way back, then Merlin will help Calvin return home. Calvin falls in love with Katey, and when Belasco’s men kidnap her, he and Arthur leave Camelot disguised as peasants to save her. Merlin urges Calvin to take Excalibur with him and lead the way for Arthur. Outside, in the real world, Arthur’s eyes open for the first time in years, as he sees the chaos that now rules his land. Arthur and Calvin talk, and the king confesses to the boy that he has no faith in himself. Calvin then tells the king that he once thought he needed a sword in the stone, but now, as his self-confidence has grown, he realizes he never needed that particular miracle. As they rescue Katey from Belasco’s men, Calvin gives Excalibur back to Arthur. His faith in himself restored at last, Arthur is revitalized with the return of the sword to his hand. Together, they save Katey, and Arthur dubs Calvin a knight of the Round Table. Arthur says that it does not take a sword in the stone to make one a hero.

Once Lord Belasco is defeated and peace restored to Camelot, Katey and Arthur bid Calvin farewell. Merlin sends Calvin home, and the boy returns the moment before his turn to bat. Calvin, now full of confidence and wielding a Louisville Slugger “Excalibur,” strikes a home run. The player in front of Calvin removes her cap, and Calvin sees that it is Katey. In the stands sits Arthur, with Calvin’s Swiss Army knife, a parting gift to the king. The home-run ball continues through the air to land in the Well of Destiny. Merlin catches the ball, and the film concludes with the wizard saying, “Taught the kid everything he knows.”

**Kids of the Round Table (1995)**

*Kids of the Round Table*, directed by Robert Tinnell and based upon his short story, premiered at the 1995 Cannes Film Festival and first aired on the Disney Channel on January 12, 1996, as part of “Triple Feature Friday.” *Kids of the Round Table* follows an Arthurian plot line in a contemporary setting. Eleven-year-old Alex Cole (Johnny Morina) claims the sword in the stone and becomes an Arthur figure, and Merlin (Malcolm McDowell) appears to set Alex upon the right path. Inside a basement set beneath an old tree, Merlin tries to teach Alex how to use the power of Excalibur and tells the boy that the sword must remain hidden, because its power comes from faith.

The next day, Luke (Jamieson Boulanger) enrolls in Alex’s school, and like, Lancelot defeating Arthur in a joust, Luke defeats Alex in one-on-one basketball. Jenny Fergusson (Maggie Castle) plays the Guinevere role and is the object of the two boys’ affections. Though Merlin had warned Alex that to misuse Excalibur is to lose it, Alex fights Luke and calls upon the power of Excalibur to win. He loses both the sword and Jenny. Merlin also leaves the boy. The plot moves quickly as Alex foils the attempts of three bank robbers. Alex apologizes to Jenny and Luke, and they forgive him. Outside of Merlin’s tree, the sorcerer reappears to Alex. Alex asks if he will regain Excalibur, but Merlin tells him that he never truly lost it. Merlin continues:

Fact or fantasy, the power [of Excalibur] is only what you make it ... Excalibur is not a thing, something you can hold in your hand. Excalibur is the good in you. The power to do good, to stand up for what's right, to slay...
dragons, to capture bank robbers. You always carry Excalibur in your heart.

The lesson learned, Merlin then vanishes, and Alex walks away from the tree. The scene now changes to another time and place, where a young girl pulls Excalibur from the stone.

Merlin as King-Maker and Kingdom-Maker

The role of Merlin as both king-maker and kingdom-maker appears to have originated in the Historia Regum Britanniae of Geoffrey of Monmouth. Geoffrey introduces the character of Merlin and also makes the first reference to Merlin's part in engineering Arthur's conception. Geoffrey's Merlin Ambrosius administers herbs or drugs to King Uther Pendragon, which grant him the appearance of Gorlois, the duke of Cornwall. With Merlin's art at work about him, Uther safely enters the bedchamber of the Duchess Ygerna and lies with her. Nine months later, an heir to the throne of Britain is born, and the legend of King Arthur begins.

Medieval writers after Geoffrey, such as Wace, Lawman, Robert de Boron, the composers of the Vulgate and post-Vulgate cycles, and Sir Thomas Malory, extended Merlin's association with the boy king as they added the new innovation of the sword-in-the-stone test to verify Arthur's rightful claim to the throne. In these later texts, Merlin makes a series of prophecies that deal exclusively with the reign of King Arthur and guide the young king toward his destiny. Moreover, in the Arthurian romances of the thirteenth century, Merlin takes an active role in aiding Arthur's rise to power, and the wizard both fights alongside Arthur's troops and uses his magic to create a fire-breathing dragon-banner to frighten Arthur's foes. The Merlin of the Romances then continues to advise and aid Arthur until the sorcerer meets his predestined end and passes from this world.

Based closely on the themes of traditional Arthurian romances, the film Excalibur, directed by John Boorman, (1981) portrays Merlin in his role as king-maker and magic-user. Merlin functions as the driving force behind Arthur's reign and uses his magic in an attempt to prevent Arthur's downfall, but because the Arthurian narrative is inherently a tragedy, Merlin is destined to fail. Only the memory of Camelot will remain to inspire others. In Guinevere, directed by Jud Taylor, (1993), Merlin's role as king-maker expands to that of kingdom-maker to encompass his part in the lives of both Arthur and Guinevere, and in the end Merlin passes along his dream of Camelot to them.

Excalibur (1981)

Closest of all Arthurian films to portraying the curious character of the Merlin of the Romances, Excalibur begins in the reign of King Uther Pendragon (Gabriel Byrne). Merlin (Nicol Williamson) hopes that Uther will bring peace to the land, but he soon realizes that Uther has another destiny. Merlin allows Uther to use Excalibur, but Uther's lust for Igrayne (Katrine Boorman) brings about the king's downfall. Uther begs Merlin for but a moment with Igrayne, and the wizard agrees to assist the king, though he mutters, "Years to build and moments to ruin." Merlin will use his magic, but he tells the king, "What issues from your lust, shall be mine." Merlin then uses the power of the Dragon to give Uther the semblance of Cornwall (Corm Redgrave). Uther, in the form of Cornwall, rides up from the shore and into the castle. He lies with Igrayne, and they conceive a child. Merlin proclaims, "The future has taken root in the present. It is done." Nine months later, Merlin comes to claim the child. Uther is unwilling to give up the infant, and he follows Merlin from the castle. A group of armored men ambush Uther and wound him. The king fights with Excalibur, and he calls for Merlin. Uther plants the sword into a stone and shouts, "None shall wield..."
Merlin remains with Arthur for many years as adviser. By Merlin's words, establishes the fellowship of the Round Table. Merlin, referring to Arthur, says, "What he needs is a king," as he dies. Merlin then prophesies "He who draws the sword from the stone. He shall be king." He gazes at the infant Arthur, and tells him, "Arthur, you're the one."

Many years later, while in search of a sword for his foster brother, Kay, to use at the Easter tournament, Arthur pulls forth the sword from the stone. After some delay, the boy is proclaimed king. Suddenly, Merlin appears to announce to Arthur and the assembled nobles that the boy is indeed the rightful heir to the throne, and the son of Uther and Igrayne. Leondegrance (Patrick Stewart, Captain Jean-Luc Picard of Star Trek: The Next Generation fame) of Cameliard supports Arthur's claim to the throne, but most of the older knights, such as Uryens (Keith Buckley), will not accept a boy as king. Merlin wanders away from the group of knights, and Arthur, sword still in hand, follows the sorcerer through the woods. It is there that the king-making begins. Arthur asks what it means to be king. Foreshadowing the later answer to the Grail question, Merlin says, "You will be the land, and the land will be you. If you fail, the land will perish. As you thrive, the land will blossom." Arthur asks why, and Merlin again replies, "Because you are king."

The next morning, Arthur and Merlin appear at the makeshift camp erected by those who support Arthur's claim. Merlin urges Arthur to join them. Arthur inspires his followers, and together they ride out to Cameliard to defend Leondegrance. During the battle, Merlin aids Arthur's forces by telling them when and where to strike. He also initiates the confrontation between Arthur, still without any armor, and Uryens. Arthur defeats the knight, but Uryens refuses to swear fealty to a boy king, much less one who is not a knight. Arthur hands Excalibur to Uryens and asks him to knight him. Uryens knights Arthur, and Merlin looks on, amazed at this unforeseen stroke of genius on Arthur's part.

Some time after the victory celebration, the adult Arthur (Nigel Terry) confronts Lancelot (Nicholas Clay), a knight unbested in fair combat. Aided by Excalibur, Arthur defeats Lancelot, and the knight swears fealty to King Arthur. Now with the addition of Lancelot to his forces, Arthur defeats the invaders, and peace is restored to the land. Merlin counsels the knights to remember this night, and Arthur, inspired by Merlin's words, establishes the fellowship of the Round Table. Merlin has successfully guided Arthur safely to the throne, and, the king-making complete, Merlin remains with Arthur for many years as adviser to the king and architect of Camelot.

### Guinevere (1993)

The film Guinevere is an adaptation of the Guinevere novels of Persia Woolley, and it first aired on cable's Lifetime network on Sunday, May 15, 1994. Narrated by Guinevere (Sheryl Lee), the film recounts the establishment of a golden age in Britain under the rule of King Arthur and Queen Guinevere. Guinevere holds title to her father's lands, the kingdom of Camelot, which spans all of Britain. Camelot was the boundary that the Roman legions never crossed, and it was never conquered. Moreover, as Merlin (Donald Pleasence) perceives, it is also the kingdom that the young King Arthur (television's "Young Indiana Jones," Sean Patrick Flannery) needs to hold Britain together, and Merlin knows that Arthur could benefit from a strong queen like Guinevere.

The movie begins with Guinevere giving a brief retrospective of her life. Guinevere was five when her mother (Laura Girling) died, and her father soon sent the young girl north to the Sanctuary of the Old Religion, where she would be safe from the chaos and constant warfare in Britain. Morgan le Fay (Brid Brennan), High Priestess of Britain, directs the sanctuary and trains her charges to be future kings and queens. A young boy named Lancelot (Noah Wyle, currently starring as Dr. John Carter on NBC's E. R.), whom Morgan rescued from drowning, also lives at the sanctuary, and he and Guinevere have fallen in love. Merlin, an unassuming old man, arrives to announce the crowning of a new high king, a fifteen-year-old who is heir to King Uther. The new king, anointed and crowned Arthur Pendragon in a Christian church, has need of a queen, and Merlin has selected Guinevere because she is learned and intelligent. However, Morgan, who is Arthur's half-sister, refuses to aid Merlin. Strongly anti-Christian, she despises the old man and Arthur, whom she sees as the outcome of Uther's rape of her mother and the murder of her father. Using Guinevere and Lancelot as her unwilling pawns, Morgan vows to stop Merlin's plans.

Leodogan (Constantine Gregory) sends for his daughter to return home, but the Camelot Guinevere returns to is war-torn and nearly defeated by the forces of Malgrim (James Faulkner), king of Gorre. Six brave warriors arrive, and with their aid, the forces of Camelot manage to defeat those of Gorre, though not without grievous costs. Many men perish in the fighting, including Guinevere's father, Leodogan. Guinevere offers all she has in return for the help of these six unknown men: Merlin, Arthur, and four of the young king's companions. Ever the king-and-kingdom-maker, Merlin, referring to Arthur, says, "What he needs is a..."
wife." Guinevere accepts, for she owes Arthur more than her life, and replies that nobility of heart is more important than the nobility of birth. It is then that Merlin introduces Guinevere, queen of Camelot, to Arthur Pendragon, High King of Britain.

Prior to the wedding, Merlin speaks with Guinevere and tells her that he chose her to be Arthur's queen because of her mind. He raised Arthur and made the boy a king, and so he knows both Arthur's flaws and his magnificence. Merlin also knows what is to come, and he recognizes that Arthur intends to pass on the task of making the kingdom to her so that she may do the job she was destined for. Arthur then arrives and proclaims that they shall wed in the ceremonies of both religions dominant on the Isle of Britain. The night before the ceremonies are to be performed by the Christian clergy, Arthur and Guinevere are wed in the pagan custom, but in the morning, Merlin has also prepared a Christian wedding and coronation.

A year after the wedding, Morgan le Fey appears and administers a potion to the pregnant Guinevere to induce labor. Meanwhile, Morgan enchants Arthur, and she "stains" his crown with incest. The queen discovers them in bed, and she runs into the woods. There, Guinevere encounters a midwife (Irena-Marija Leonaviciute), who helps with the birthing of a baby girl, Arthur's daughter. The queen then leaves the child in the midwife's care. Following a lengthy recovery and a commercial break, Guinevere learns that she will never bear children again. Despite the fact that a few months have passed since the incident, the queen will not easily forgive Arthur for his adultery. They soon reconcile, however, for the good of the kingdom and the true love they feel toward each other. Arthur then declares, "This island will be my children," and Guinevere agrees with her husband. At this point, Merlin continues to remain hidden within his lair, and he leaves the kingdom to Guinevere's capable hands. The queen becomes caretaker to Merlin's dream of a unified Britain, which Arthur had inherited. She decides to remain off the battlefield to do the work Merlin chose her to do. Guinevere insists:

"It is up to us to create a different way. A different way of solving differences. A different way of wielding power. We have to be better, not just in battle, but to make others want to be like us. To win, not just our protection, but our esteem."

Arthur continues his military campaigns, while the queen remains at court working on her new philosophy of kingship. In one example of her efforts towards the goal, Guinevere devises the concept of the Round Table, where all may sit as equals.

However, the relative stability established by Arthur's warcraft and Guinevere's diplomacy is shattered six months later, when Arthur is made a prisoner of war and held for ransom by Malgrim and Morgan le Fey, and while Guinevere makes her preparations against them, an unwell-looking Merlin appears on the scene. He says that although Arthur is a charismatic leader, he is still only an ordinary man. Nevertheless, Merlin has done an excellent job raising the king, and Arthur has managed to inspire the world to true nobility. Now Merlin tells Guinevere she is to be tested. He knows that Guinevere's daughter is alive and well, and, with thoughts of the kingdom's well-being ever on his mind, Merlin has hidden the child on the Isle of Anglesey. As he says to the young queen, "I told you, I was practiced at spiritting away small, wet Pendragons." Merlin then offers her the same advice he gave to Igraine at Arthur's birth in saying, "This child belongs to Britain. Claim her, and she will be destroyed." Despite this, he promises that Guinevere's daughter will return one day to save the kingdom. He then reassures her with the words, "I have never left you and never will.... One day we will meet again." Soon after this encounter with the queen, Merlin passes from this world.

Her wisdom and dreams have carried the people of Britain with her, and Guinevere, accompanied by an army of peasants, progresses toward Malgrim's camp, where he has allied with four other kings. With Lancelot helping her and the people behind her, Guinevere defeats Malgrim and saves Arthur. Peace then reigns in Britain. Lancelot leaves to preserve the kingdom from their love and sends the queen a white rose in parting. Regarding Merlin, Guinevere tells her husband during the victory celebrations, "He is gone, Arthur." Arthur replies, "We are alone then; it's just we two together." Guinevere turns toward him and answers, "It will be enough." From that day forth, the kingdom is left in the capable hands of its young king and queen, and under their care Camelot becomes "a beacon to all people in all lands for all time."

Merlin as Lover

In the Welsh Myrddin poems, Myrddin (Merlin) makes a somewhat vague reference to a lover who no longer visits him, and in his Vita Merlini, Geoffrey of Monmouth gives Merlin a wife. Despite these early lovers, Merlin has his first documented love affair in the
Arthurian romances of the Middle Ages. First, he becomes infatuated with Morgan le Fay, until she rejects him once he teaches her his magic. Later, Merlin falls in love with a young girl variously named Viviane, Vivien, Nimiane, Nimiane, Niniane, or Nimue. The girl, described as one of the Ladies of the Lake, leads the older Merlin on for some time. He offers to teach her a spell that will imprison a man forever, and the girl casts the spell upon Merlin while they pass through the forest of Brocéliande in Brittany. The great wizard then passes from this world, but his voice remains and continues to prophesy. This account remained popular, and the Victorians, among other modern authors and artists, readily accepted this end for Merlin. Edward Burne-Jones created a series of paintings on the beguilement of Merlin by Nimue, and Alfred, Lord Tennyson, made it the central theme of the idyll "Merlin and Vivien." Recently, director Clive Donner used it as the basis for his film *Arthur the King* (1985), in which Merlin and Niniane remain imprisoned together for a thousand years because she would not confide in him. All is not lost, though; Merlin and his love reconcile by the film's conclusion, as they call upon the power of love to shatter their prison.

**Arthur the King (1985)**

In 1982, director Clive Donner filmed a three-hour version of *Arthur the King.* The powers then in charge at CBS Television significantly cut the film, which finally aired on Friday, April 26, 1985, in a two-hour block. The premise of *Arthur the King* has Merlin (Edward Woodward) and Niniane (Lucy Gutteridge) trapped in an ice cave beneath Stonehenge for a thousand years. Merlin has left open a hole through which he watches the stars, and in falls a young woman from New York named Katherine (Dyan Cannon), whom Merlin dubs "Katherine of York." Katherine leads the pair into discussing their life in Camelot before their imprisonment. Merlin narrates, while Niniane and Katherine provide commentary on various episodes from the past during the reign of King Arthur (Malcolm McDowell, who later played Merlin in *Kids of the Round Table* in 1995). All of these episodes, especially the retelling of the marriage of Gawain (Patrick Ryecart) to the boar-faced Lady Ragnell (Ann Thornton), focus on the theme of love and its transformative power. It is in one of these such episodes that King Pellinore (Denis Lill) brings Niniane to court, and Merlin and Niniane fall in love at first sight. Later, Merlin agrees to teach her his magic.

Early in the film, Merlin foils the schemes of Morgan Le Fey (played by a red-haired Candice Bergen, television's Murphy Brown) to kidnap the queen. Morgan remains angered with the wizard for his intervention, and so she strikes at Merlin's sole weak spot: his love for Niniane. The evil enchantress kidnaps and tortures Niniane's father (Mise Martinovic). Morgan tells Niniane that only by betraying Merlin will her father be safe. She must neutralize Merlin with one of his own spells. Although Niniane truly loves Merlin, she does not ask him for help. (Back in the cave, Merlin comments that he was "the greatest wizard the world has ever known:" surely he could have done something had he but known. Merlin then uses his powers to show Katherine how the actual betrayal came about.) Trusting Niniane, Merlin agrees to show her his second most powerful spell. Merlin shows Niniane how to bind two people together forever. The wizard puts himself at his love's mercy, and she betrays him. Niniane chooses to act against Merlin and casts the spell, but the spell also ensnares her in its mystic web. They must now spend eternity locked within a cave of ice.

Back in the cave, Merlin and Niniane kiss and reconcile after centuries wasted in anger and retribution. Merlin wants to try and break the spell that
entraps them within the ice cave, so that they can go back and save Camelot. True to his role as lover, Merlin says that the magic of love breaks all spells and cancels out all other magic because love itself is the greatest magic. In a cyclone of sorcerous energy, Merlin, Niniane, and Katherine take to the air. Katherine falls, but Merlin and Niniane succeed in casting their spell. They invoke love as a power greater than time and death, and they invoke their love for each other in order to shatter the spell that binds them. The spell is broken, and Merlin and Niniane return to Camelot not long after they left. Katherine awakens outside, leaning against one of the standing stones, and the film ends.

Conclusion

These twentieth-century films continue the established traditions of the Arthurian legend, though with each generation adapting and changing the story of Merlin to reflect its own sensibility. Originally, in the earliest Arthurian literature, Merlin functions as a prophet of Britain and often in the role of king-maker. Much later, in the Arthurian romances of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Merlin gains a history, as various authors flesh out his legend. The Merlin of the Romances also took upon the role of teacher to aid Arthur and the knights of the Round Table in establishing, and later maintaining, the golden age of Camelot. The enchanter, himself enchanted, also gained a lover in these works and an apparent death. These themes have been constantly reworked in the tapestry that composes the legend of Merlin: someone pulls one thread, and another person pulls a different one. In the end, the world is greater for the new product produced, and films such as The Sword in the Stone, A Kid in King Arthur's Court, Kids of the Round Table, Excalibur, Guinevere, and Arthur the King remain brilliant examples of the persistence of the legend of Merlin into the twentieth century.

In all of his activities, Merlin makes use of his fabulous powers of sorcery. In the role of teacher, Merlin prepares his pupils for their greater destiny, while he aids them in attaining either knowledge, as in The Sword in the Stone, or confidence in themselves, as is the case in A Kid in King Arthur's Court and Kids of the Round Table. As a king-maker and kingdom-maker, Merlin functions as the initiator of a new age. A being on the threshold, like Gandalf in Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings, Merlin establishes the groundwork for peace in both Excalibur and Guinevere, but then he must pass from this world and leave its affairs to Arthur, Guinevere, and the citizens of Camelot. However, in his role as lover, Merlin succumbs to his own spells and his blind trust in Niniane, and, as depicted in Arthur the King, he suffers eternal imprisonment as a result. Together, the three roles of Merlin shape our perception of this protean character.

Notes

The preceding sections on A Kid in King Arthur's Court, Kids of the Round Table, and Arthur the King have been excerpted, and substantially revised, from the conclusion to my honors project (spring 1996) at Rhode Island College under the direction of Dr. Mary Alice Grellner. I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Meradith McMunn at Rhode Island College for helping me prepare this manuscript for publication. I would also like to thank Dr. Martha Driver for her editorial comments and her interest in my research. My thanks also to Dr. R. Carol Barnes of Rhode Island College for giving me her copy of American Educator with the Merlin article by Barbara Lerner. I also wish to thank Dr. Mary Alice Grellner for her comments on the “final” version of the paper. Last, but certainly not least, I would also like to thank Dr. Kevin J. Harty for his invaluable research on Arthurian film and television. Without his prior research, much of this present study would have been impossible to complete. I also owe Dr. Harty a debt of gratitude for his help in locating the various stills for this project and for sharing his knowledge of Arthurian film and television in a series of e-mails sent in July through September 1997 and for updating me on works produced since then.


Recently, Barbara Lerner proposed that the American Federation of Teachers follow the teaching methods of Merlyn in White’s *The Once and Future King*. (Barbara Lerner, “*Merlyn’s Magic... And Ours*,” *American Educator* 20.2 (1996): 4 - 8.

As Merlin sings:

That’s what makes the world go round. You see, my boy, it’s nature’s way; upon the weak, the strong ones prey. In human life it’s also true, that the strong will try to conquer you. That is what you must expect, unless you use your intellect. Brains and brawn, weak and strong, that’s what makes the world go [round] . . .


The Welsh Myrddin poems (*Yr Afallennau, Yr Oinanau, Ymddiddan Myrddin a Thaliesin, Cyfeisi Myrddin a Gwendyddol a Chwarae, Gwasgargedd Yr Fyrrdin yn y Bedd, and Poirian Faban*) have been translated by John K. Bolland, “*Myrddin in Early Welsh Tradition*” in *The Romance of Merlin*, 13 - 54.


The connections between Merlin and Gandalf have appeared in numerous works dealing with the legend of Merlin, and it appears safe to conclude that the figure of Merlin was a source, if not the inspiration, for Tolkien’s wizard. Tolkien’s *Middle Earth* saga originally appeared as a series of books: *The Hobbit, or There and Back Again*, rev. ed. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1982) and the three books of the Lord of the Rings series: *The Fellowship of the Ring* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1965); *The Two Towers* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1965); *The Return of the King* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1965). Later, these works were adapted to the medium of film: *The Hobbit* (1977), directed by Arthur Rankin, Jr., and *The Lord of the Rings* (1978), directed by Ralph Bakshi, Republic Pictures, 1993; *The Return of the King* (1979), directed by Arthur Rankin, Jr., and *The Lord of the Rings* (1996), directed by Ralph Bakshi, Republic Pictures, 1993; *The Return of the King* (1979), directed by Arthur Rankin, Jr., and *The Lord of the Rings* (1996), directed by Ralph Bakshi, Republic Pictures, 1993.

Films


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Strick, Philip. “John Boorman’s Merlin.” Sight and Sound: International Film Quarterly. 49.3 (1980): 168 - 171. Mostly focuses on the filming of Excalibur (then called Knights), but pages 170 - 171 deal with Merlin, the legend of Merlin, and Williamson’s take on the character.

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