The Way of the Wizard: Reflections of Merlin on Film

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Although the Middle Ages are often considered part of the distant past, medieval subjects nevertheless remain common themes in our contemporary culture, a fact that has led Umberto Eco to observe, "it seems that people like the Middle Ages."¹ Episodes and elements from medieval (particularly Arthurian) romance have served for centuries as the inspiration for creative artists working in a variety of media from stone to canvas and print to film, and stock character types featured in the romances, such as the questing knight, the damsel in distress, and the magic-wielding wizard, have long been a familiar part of our imaginative world. Unfortunately, the Medieval Studies of academics and the medievalism of the masses often remain separate, and proponents of each are largely unaware that they share similar interests.² However, the "reel" Middle Ages envisioned by filmmakers allow enthusiasts of the medieval period to bridge the gap between serious study and entertainment, because, as Martha W. Driver notes, "in a culture that values the visual over the printed page, film keeps medieval history and heroes alive, topical, and under discussion, sometimes heated discussion."³

As a contribution to furthering this work on the reception of the medieval in film, the present essay focuses on the treatment of wizards—here restricted to male magic-users—in American and British films and television productions. An investigation into modern wizards complements the other essays in this volume on medieval heroes in film, since wizards are most often found in the presence of heroes, such as King Arthur, Luke Skywalker, Frodo Baggins, John Sheridan and Harry Potter. The wizard is a multifaceted being engaged in a variety of narrative roles in the works in which he appears, but, for the purposes of the current

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study, I will limit my discussion to how representations of one of the best-known enchanters in Western culture, the character of Merlin from the Arthurian tradition whom Peter H. Goodrich has dubbed "the archetype of the Western wizard," appears to have influenced the conventions of depicting his brethren in popular culture.  

As E. M. Butler explains in her seminal study The Myth of the Magus (1948), the idea of the wizard has been a feature of human culture for millennia; nonetheless, the figure is at present undergoing something of a renaissance. Of course, Merlin remains the most prevalent and best-known member of his order, and it is no surprise to enthusiasts of the Arthurian legend that Merlin continues to be featured each year in a number of new works, including films, novels, and comics. In her Merlin: A Thousand Heroes with One Face (1994), Charlotte Spivack claims that "Merlin is the touchstone of any age, for each age has its own versions of the medieval sage," but she also observes that each age also has "its own derivatives" of Merlin. This formula holds especially true in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, in which Merlin has had to share the spotlight with modern wizards, such as J. R. R. Tolkien's "Ominic wanderer," Gandalf, introduced in The Hobbit (1937), and George Lucas's Obi-Wan Kenobi, who made his debut in Star Wars, Episode IV: A New Hope (1977).

Besides these veteran wizards, other additions to the fraternity have also received media attention in recent years. Most notably, the popularity of the wizard has increased exponentially, as readers around the globe have succumbed to the phenomenon surrounding the first five Harry Potter novels of writer J. K. Rowling and have become entranced by their interplay between the enchanted demesne of wizards and witches and the mundane realm of nonmagical Muggles. The world has also turned its attention to film wizards through the intense promotion of director Peter Jackson's film trilogy based on Tolkien's classic The Lord of the Rings (1954–1955) and Chris Columbus's film adaptations of Rowling's Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone (1997) and Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets (1998). In addition to these works, Rowling has promised two more volumes to conclude her Harry Potter series, and Warner Bros. appears committed to adapt all seven of her books to film, with the third and fourth installments set to appear in 2004 and 2005 respectively. Based on these few examples, it looks as though fans of wizards will have much to be entertained by before the conclusion of the first decade of the twenty-first century.

The enduring presence of wizards in mythology and popular culture and their continued prominence in popular texts such as Rowling's novels and Jackson's films attest to the fact that the figure of the wizard has long been a favorite character for creative artists. As the most prominent representative of this character type, Merlin and his legend have been appropriated in a seemingly endless number of works in the modern era; one such work appeared in 1995, when writer Deepak Chopra published The Return of Merlin: A Novel, in which he proposes that readers could "awaken the Merlin inside" themselves. No doubt many would consider Chopra's suggestion that aspects of the archmage of the Arthurian legend live within them to be absurd. Yet his theorizing of a Merlin within has some merit in analyzing popular texts, and we can profitably apply this idea to reading fictional and film characters that possess attributes of Merlin and his legend.

In Tolkien's The Fellowship of the Ring (1954), we are warned, "Do not meddle in the affairs of wizards," yet one cannot resist for long the appeal of these magic-users who continue to fascinate modern audiences and consequently appear in a startling variety of texts. As both an admirer of these stories and a scholar as well, I am especially interested in how new works of medievalism make use of older stories and images such as the figure and legend of Merlin as creative artists—here specifically directors, screen writers, and conceptual artists—reshape this material into innovative forms. Although the texts discussed in this essay span almost a century, each mage participates in what might best be called the "way of the wizard." In "Merlin: The Figure of the Wizard," Goodrich submits that "Merlin has become tacit in our very conceptions of the wizard in any art or science," and I would suggest that these figures serve as reflections of Merlin in contemporary popular culture both in their use of the iconography traditionally associated with Merlin (specifically, the image of an aged and bearded figure) and in their shared roles as guides or mentors in their respective narratives.

"Elderly fellow, big gray beard, pointed hat": The Iconography of the Wizard

Goodrich has remarked that "there are (and must be) many Merlins—each drawing upon the wizard's tradition in different ways expressive of genre, periodization, and authorial imagination." Despite the variety in narrative representations of Merlin in modern Arthuriana, creative artists are more limited when it comes to Merlin's physical appearance. Some elements of his iconography, such as clothes resembling robes or clerical garb, are traditional and not evidence, as some have suggested, of Merlin's identity as a "crossgendered figure who wears a dress." However, although our modern conception of Merlin as an aged man with a long flowing beard has become the stereotype for both the
Arthurian mage and wizards in general, this image of the character is a relatively late addition to the Arthurian tradition.\textsuperscript{14}

Advanced age and a preference for facial hair do not appear to have become fixed features of Merlin's iconography until at least the second half of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{15} As attested by Goodrich, Adelaide Marie Weiss, and other researchers into the modern history of Merlin, poets and other creative artists of the period, including American Ralph Waldo Emerson, were drawn to Merlin and his perceived link to bardic tradition. Therefore it appears likely that the nineteenth-century envisioning of Merlin as a sagacious figure may have been inspired by late-eighteenth-and nineteenth-century ideas about and illustrations depicting the bards and druids of classical antiquity.

A few artists of the period, such as Aubrey Beardsley in his illustrations for an edition of Thomas Malory's \textit{Le Morte Darthur} entitled \textit{The Birth, Life and Acts of King Arthur} (1893–1894) and Edward Burne-Jones in his paintings \textit{Merlin and Nimue} (1861) and \textit{The Beguiling of Merlin} (1872–1877), ignored the newly developing trend and represented the mage as a clean-shaven adult. But the majority of depictions of Merlin, including Daniel Carter Beard's illustrations for Mark Twain's \textit{A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court} (1889) as well as Julia Margaret Cameron's photographs and Gustav Doré's woodcuts for separate editions of Alfred Tennyson's \textit{Idylls of the King}, presented an older, unshaven version of the character.\textsuperscript{16} By the early part of the twentieth century, the Merlin of the latter group of artists had become the new standard, as found, for example, in versions of the Arthurian legend illustrated by H. J. Ford, Howard Pyle, Louis Rhead, and N. C. Wyeth.\textsuperscript{17} Mature and hirsute Merlins also found their way into film, beginning with William V. Mong's portrayal of the aged enchanter in director Emmett J. Flynn's \textit{A Connecticut Yankee at King Arthur's Court} (1921), the first in a long line of film adaptations of Twain's novel.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, the convention of portraying Merlin as an aged figure appears to have incorporated other imagery associated with wizards in general, such as the pointed hat and magic wand, and many enthusiasts of the Arthurian legend—especially those who discovered the legend as children—were introduced to this revised version of Merlin in T. H. White's \textit{The Sword in the Stone} (1938). Updated for the twentieth century and incorporating elements from a variety of magical traditions, White's depiction of Merlyn as an "old gentleman ... dressed in a flowing gown with fur tippets which had the signs of the zodiac embroidered all over it, together with various cabalistic signs" and with "a long white beard and long white mustaches which hung down on either side of it" has become the new standard for representing Merlin.\textsuperscript{18} In 1963, animators at the Walt Disney studio offered
Mabruk, who is introduced as being “a magician’s magician,” is represented as “An old man in a dark, spangled gown and a pointed, spangled hat” and whose “beard and brows were white.” 22 C. S. Lewis includes two wizards in his *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (1952), one of his *Chronicles of Narnia*, and both Coriakin and Ramandu, two former stars, according to Lewis, appear with the long beards and aged appearance required of their current occupations as enchanters.

Besides these mages, other wizards, such as Tolkien’s Gandalf the Grey and Saruman the White, are more familiar to today’s readers. Gandalf appeared first in *The Hobbit*, where (refiguring Dumbledore and his boots) he is presented as “a little old man with a tall pointed blue hat, a long grey cloak, a silver scarf over which his long white beard hung down below his waist, and immense black boots”; a character in Jackson’s *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Rings* (2001) offers a shorthand version of this recitation and sums up Gandalf as “Elderly fellow, big gray beard, pointed hat.” 23 Tolkien devotes more attention to Gandalf and Saruman, the chief of his order of wizards, in *Lord of the Rings*, where he describes them as coming into Middle-earth “in the shape of Men, though they were never young and aged only slowly.” 24 All seven of these wizards have made an easy transition from print to film, and Dumbledore, Shazam, Mabruk, Coriakin, Ramandu, Gandalf, and Saruman have all turned up in generally accurate representations of their original physical appearance on either the silver screen or the smaller screens of our home entertainment systems (and sometimes on both).

Like their literary brothers, wizards native to film have also displayed a preference for the unshaven look. For many, Lucas’s Kenobi is the most recognizable of these mages, but the Jedi Knight has other company in the world of motion pictures. Notable bearded wizards appearing in films with medieval settings include Tim the Enchanter from the cult classic *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975) and Ulrich (played by screen veteran Ralph Richardson) from *Dragonslayer* (1981). 25

Additional mages who fit this model feature in fantasy films, where we find Yen Sid (Disney spelled backwards) in “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice” segment of *Fantasia* (1950); the dwarfish Avatar and his evil brother, the mutant Blackwolf, in *Wizards* (1977); the unfortunately named High Aldwin, played by little person Billy Barty, in *Willow* (1988); the eponymous mage in *The Pagemaster* (1994), and newcomer Mimir from the made-for-TV movie *Mr. St. Nick* (2002). *The Secret of NIMH* (1982), an animated film based on Robert C. O’Brien’s children’s novel *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* (1971), provides further evidence of the wizard’s stamina in modern media through the reenvisioning of two ordinary-looking animals from the novel, an owl and Nicodemus, the leader of the rats of NIMH. Transformed by the magic of the film’s conceptual
Appropriating the Role of Merlin: The Wizard as Guide and Mentor

As I noted in my “Merlin Goes to the Movies: The Changing Role of Merlin in Cinema Arthuriana,” two of Merlin’s most important roles in the Arthurian tradition are that of teacher and kingmaker. I would now suggest that these functions of the character should be subsumed into his larger role as guide and mentor, occupations that other wizards appear to have inherited from Merlin. From medieval to modern texts, Merlin’s primary purpose in most versions of the Arthurian legend is to assure the betterment of the country (whichever it may be) and to assist the king (or his surrogate) and the members of his court in achieving their destinies. The mage first performs these tasks in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s Historia Regum Britanniae (c. 1136–1138), where he aids a succession of British kings, including the uncle and father of a future King Arthur, and Merlin’s final act in the narrative is to make possible the conception of Arthur, who will lead the British people into a golden age.

In later works, Merlin has a more direct role in the life of Arthur, and writers such as Robert de Boron and his continuators, who composed the various components of the great cycle romances of the High Middle Ages, extended Merlin’s narrative life span beyond the genesis of Arthur. As in Geoffrey’s text, the Merlin of the Arthurian romances serves as advisor to the kings who precede Arthur, but he now also functions within the reign of Arthur himself. It is during this previously untouched period of Merlin’s life that the mage displays a newfound ability to multitask, as he subdivides his accustomed roles as guide and mentor into those of teacher, strategist, advisor, and counselor for a variety of kings and their knights, who in turn become, as Goodrich
suggests, "sorcerer's apprentices"—though they are learning not the wizard's craft but the secret forces governing proper conduct on their own." 27

Beyond the medieval period, Merlin continues to serve as guide or mentor in new Arthurian texts. Similar to works from the Middle Ages, the majority of pre-twentieth-century texts featuring Merlin are oracular in nature, and it is as prophet that Merlin continues to shepherd the destinies of heroes and nations. A smaller number of these manifestations of Arthuriana, such as Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queen* (1579–1596), John Dryden's *King Arthur, The British Worthy* (1691), and Thomas Love Peacock's *The Round Table; or, King Arthur's Feast* (1817), revisit Merlin's role as wizard and advisor to kings, but the greatest number of narratives employing Merlin in these professions appeared in the twentieth century, where, inspired by White's novel and its film adaptation, the representation of Merlin as an educative force in the Arthurian world reigns supreme.

In relation to the way of the wizard, the legend of Merlin appears to offer three models for modern wizards willing to adopt the vocation of guide or mentor. The first two groups of sorcerers limit their presence in the life of their charges, as Merlin does in director Steve Barron's miniseries *Merlin* (1998), where the mage has too much on his mind to worry about the affairs of Arthur. Like Barron's representation of Merlin, many modern wizards maintain less active roles in their respective narratives, although this representation of the wizard is antithetical to the richer tradition of Merlin as a proactive educator, as found in White's *The Sword in the Stone*, his later *The Once and Future King* (1958), and film adaptations of his work, such as *The Sword in the Stone*. Ignoring the paradigm established by White, these wizards either appear only to provide indispensable aid or disappear almost entirely from the narrative to allow their students to develop on their own with relatively little guidance from the master mage.

Like some versions of Merlin, this first set of wizards serves as *deus ex machina* figures, who surface only when required to provide the needed advice or necessary bit of magic to set things right. Gandalf acts this way in *The Hobbit*, as when he arrives at the most opportune moment to save Bilbo Baggins and the Dwarves from their adversaries (these are some of the most memorable scenes from the Rankin-Bass telefilm), and on occasions in *Lord of the Rings*, but Dumbledore is a better example of this type of wizard. Rowling's mage is largely absent in the life of Harry Potter and turns up mostly to offer the boy guidance, as in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, or to provide a clue essential for completing the latest adventure, as in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (1999). In *Dragonslayer*, the wizard Ulrich performs similar service for his apprentice Galen Bradwardyn when he returns from the dead to put an end to the fire-breathing dragon Vermithrax Perjorative. Another version of this type of mage appears in *Santa Claus Is Coming to Town*, where a reformed Winter Warlock provides magical assistance to a young Kris Kringle.

In a complementary mode, a number of wizards are adept at using a disembodied voice to provide support when things look bleak, as when, in the climax to *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, young Potter hears the voice of Dumbledore encouraging him during his struggle with Voldemort. Although Merlin has a penchant for speaking from beyond the grave in some medieval texts, the majority of modern wizards display this power while still alive, and the model appears to be Gandalf, who, as Verlyn Flieger has noted, often "out-Merlin's Merlin," rather than the Arthurian mage. 28 In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Frodo Baggins hears Gandalf shouting, "Take it off! Take it off! Fool, take it off! Take off the Ring," as he struggles between his Hobbit common sense and the will of the Dark Lord Sauron that threatens to overpower him. 29

A more familiar example of the disembodied voice occurs in *A New
and similar circumstances repeat in the lives of many wizards. Gandalf is imprisoned for a while by Saruman and later killed in battle with the Balrog at Khazad-dûm, as recounted in Tolkien's Fellowship of the Ring and shown in the films directed by Bakshi and Jackson; Kenobi, Ulrich, and Nicodemus in Secret of NIMH are struck down by foes less powerful than they are. Other wizards arrive at their predetermined ends soon after instructing their pupils, as is the case with Shazam, while the wizened Yoda simply dies of old age in Star Wars, Episode VI: Return of the Jedi (1983).

More often, the wizard makes a conscious choice to be absent and approaches the supervision of his charge as a type of challenge setting various tasks before him. Both the High Aldwin in Willow and the Pagemaster follow this pattern. Although appearing wise and all-powerful, the magic of the High Aldwin is not quite what it appears to be (rather like that of the Wizard of Oz), and he uses the chance appearance of a Daikini child in the Nelwyn village to send his would-be apprentice Will Brown to the land of Oz, who, the Aldwin had earlier assessed, lacked faith in himself, on a life-altering adventure. Likewise, in a story similar to the animated special Puff the Magic Dragon (1978), the Pagemaster uses young Tyler's unexpected visit to the local library to transform the paranoid and phobic child into a courageous and imaginative one. A variant of this type of story occurs in the “Sorcerer’s Apprentice” from Fantasia, where the wizard Yen Sid tests the mettle of Mickey Mouse.

In contrast to these examples, a third group of wizards shares similarities to the Merlin of medieval romance and certain modern versions of the character (such as in the telefilm Arthur the King [1982]), choosing to be more active participants in the world in which those under their supervision exist. However, this expansion of the wizard's activities often has dire consequences, as in Monty Python and the Holy Grail, where the help provided by Tim the Enchanter leads to the death of many Knights of the Round Table (though unfortunately not "brave" Sir Robin) at the Cave of Caerbannog because Arthur fails to heed his warning that "death awaits you all with nasty big pointy teeth." Introduced as “An illuminating history bearing on the everlasting struggle for world supremacy fought between the powers of Technology and Magic,” Wizards offers another variant of this motif at the climax of the film. At this point, the hero Avatar, who had earlier spouted such slogans as "They have weapons and technology. We just have love" and "No more wars, you fool. Scorch can be beautiful too," appears to betray his ideals when, to prevent a second atomic holocaust, he pulls a gun on his wicked brother Blackwolf, a twisted parody of humanity who has resurrected the Nazi war machine in his desire to conquer the world, and shoots him.

Yen Sid and Mickey Mouse at the end of “The Sorcerer's Apprentice,” from Fantasia (1940).
Beagle's *The Last Unicorn* (both in its print and film versions) is another story in which the wizard's actions cause death, but here the tragedy is short-lived. In the final climatic battle with the supernatural entity known as the Red Bull, Prince Lir asks the unbearded mage Schmendrick, "What use is wizardry if it cannot save a unicorn?" The mage replies, "That's what heroes are for," and, resigned to his fate, Lir realizes, "Yes, of course. That is exactly what heroes are for. Wizards make no difference, so they say that nothing does, but heroes are meant to die for unicorns." Lir then leaps into the path of the Red Bull and is trampled; his sacrifice motivates the last unicorn of the title into action, and she later restores her champion to life. Lastly, although unintentionally, the advice of Oswald, the Merlin analogue in *First Knight*, also proves disastrous when he urges young Guinevere to wed the much older King Arthur (played by Sean Connery). Of course, at the time, none of the three was aware of the existence of Lancelot or the effect the young man would have on Guinevere.31

In still other narratives featuring the presence of dynamic wizards, the allies of the wizards become pawns in the larger schemes of the mages and their opponents, as is also the case with Merlin in, for example, novelist Susan Cooper's *The Dark Is Rising* series (1965–1977). There is a hint of this theme in *Babylon 5*, where the seemingly good Vorlons attempt to manipulate Sheridan and his "army of light" into continuing their age-old struggle with a Lovecraftian race of aliens known as the Shadows. A similar situation seems to be developing in the *Star Wars* prequel films, where the Dark Lords of the Sith are engaged in a covert war against the Jedi Knights and Senator (later Emperor) Palpatine manipulates young Anakin Skywalker into betraying his Jedi code of ethics. Of course, viewers know that young Anakin is fated to become Darth Vader, who, as Kenobi notes in *A New Hope*, "helped the Empire hunt down and destroy the Jedi Knights."

As attested by his "Merlin: The Figure of the Wizard," Goodrich notes that "Comics ... [are] a medium in which the figure of the wizard is very much alive under other names."32 Although not discussed by Goodrich, the comics also feature more authentic wizards, such as Shazam, who appears in both comics and film. Although Merlin-like in appearance like the worldly Tim the Enchanter, Avatar; and Oswald, Shazam serves as a variant of this class of sorcerer, since, unlike the others, he fails to maintain an active role in the life of his champion. Shazam emerges first on the comics page in *Whiz Comics* No. 2 (February 1940) to transform the young orphan Billy Batson into his successor, the superpowered adult known as Captain Marvel, charged "to defend the poor and helpless, right wrongs and crush evil everywhere."33 By uttering the name Shazam, the unwitting newsboy and later radio reporter begins a pursuit of evildoers that still continues today, over sixty years later. Both Shazam and a more mature Batson feature in the *Adventures of Captain Marvel* serial (1941), where the wizard empowers the reporter to "see that the curse of the Scorpion is not visited upon innocent people" for "so long as the golden Scorpion [a weapon of mass destruction] may fall into the hands of selfish men, it is the duty of Captain Marvel to protect the innocent from its use." Unlike the four-color Captain Marvel appearing in the comics, the career of this version of the hero ends at the conclusion of the serial when he destroys the scorpion idol and the disembodied voice of Shazam transforms him back into Batson a final time.

Perhaps illustrating his mastery of the way of the wizard, Tolkien provides the most developed examples of the active wizard in his *Lord of the Rings*, with Saruman's plotting against the designs of the White Council and Gandalf's various activities in Middle-earth. As explained in "Appendix B: The Tale of Years (Chronology of the Westlands)," Gandalf and Saruman "came out of the Far West and were messengers sent to contest the power of Sauron, and to unite all those who had the will to resist him; but they were forbidden to match his power with power, or to seek to dominate Elves or Men by force and fear."34 In his letters and other works published posthumously, Tolkien elucidates that the Valar, the angelic guardians of the created world, sent wizards, who, Tolkien states, are supernatural entities, as emissaries into Middle-earth.35 In his desire for power and, later, to acquire the one Ring for himself, Saruman fails in his appointed duty, but Gandalf, largely through his efforts to inspire the free people of Middle-earth against Sauron, fulfills his assignment, as he explains to Aragorn near the conclusion of *The Return of the King* (1955): "The Third Age of the world is ended, and the new age is begun; and it is your task to order its beginning and to preserve what may be preserved.... The Third Age was my age. I was the Enemy of Sauron; and my work is finished. I shall go soon. The burden must lie now upon you and your kindred."36

In order to achieve his goal, Gandalf allies with members of all the races of Middle-earth, from Eagles, Elves, and Ents to Dwarves, Men, and Hobbits, but as with many of his fraternity, his aid often comes with a price, as when Gandalf himself perishes (albeit temporarily) in the Mines of Moria in *Fellowship of the Ring*. More permanent harm is done, for example, to Théoden, King of Rohan, who meets his death in one of the wars against Sauron's forces, and to the Hobbits Bilbo and Frodo Baggins, who become emotionally scarred after serving as Ringbearsers for Gandalf and must pass into the West for healing at the conclusion of *Return of the King*. Clearly, the admonition at the beginning of *The Lord of the Rings* to "not meddle in the affairs of wizards" is one that should have been heeded.
Conclusion

Many scholars have noted the interrelationships between Merlin and his fellow wizards, but Goodrich offers one of the most interesting sound bites. In a turn of phrase inspired by Joseph Campbell, he proposes that Merlin is “the wizard with a thousand faces” because the character and legend of Merlin are “in public domain. He has long since entered that nonverbal space of consciousness which is the spawning ground of new fictional creations in archetypal modes.” The preceding discussion has provided illustration for the veracity of Goodrich’s statement and has shown that the medieval legend of Merlin and its modern adaptations still have an enormous influence on how creative artists choose to represent the idea of the wizard in popular texts.

As noted, the majority of wizards and wizard-like figures (like the film versions of the Great Owl and Nicodemus) are influenced by the legend of Merlin at the most basic level of shared iconography and, like the now-standard depiction of Merlin as an aged man, they too display flowing white beards and often wear the long robes and pointed hats associated with Merlin’s characteristic attire. More importantly, some wizards and their analogues in popular texts, such as Kosh from Babylon 5 and Oswald in First Knight, attest to the further vitality of the legend of Merlin and its influence on the representation of his brother wizards in their similar purposes in their respective narratives. Like Merlin in Arthurian works produced from the Middle Ages to the present day, these wizards serve their protégés in the pivotal role of guide and mentor, either aiding or inspiring their charges as they fulfill their predestined tasks. Displaying an incredible vigor for a character-type thousands of years old, wizards are protean figures morphing under the guidance of creative artists into new forms to fulfill this vital narrative role. As both magic-users and magical beings, they bring some of this mutability to any text they appear in, thus transforming the story into something memorable.

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Notes


3. Martha Driver, “Writing about Medieval Movies: Authenticity and History,” Film & History 29:1–2 (1999): 5. Lee Tobin McClain anticipates her sentiments both in “Contemporary Medievalism as a Teaching Tool” and in “Introducing Medieval Romance via Popular Films,” where she comments that film “can provide an enjoyable and useful entryway into studies of medieval romance. Enjoyable because we live in a media-driven age, because today’s students are more visually than textually oriented, and because film grips most students more quickly than a difficult medieval text. Useful because the familiar element of film links students’ own world to the less familiar medieval world” (Tobin McClain, “Introducing Medieval Romance via Popular Films: Bringing the Other Closer,” Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Teaching 5:2 (Fall 1997): 59). I have adopted the idea of the “reel” Middle Ages from Kevin J. Harty’s comprehensive The Reel Middle Ages: America, Western and Eastern European, Medieval Eastern and Asian Films about Medieval Europe (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1999).


5. Useful surveys of the representation of Merlin from the Middle Ages to the modern era include the studies by Christopher Dean, Peter H. Goodrich, and Charlotte Spivack noted below.


10. While the alliterative phrasing for the “way of the wizard” is borrowed from the title of Chopra’s The Way of the Wizard (New York: Harmony Books,
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Hibbard Loomis, Arthurian Legends in Medieval Art (New York: New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1938); Debra N. Mancoff, The Arthurian Revival in Victorian Art (New York: Garland, 1990) and The Return of King Arthur: The Legend through Victorian Eyes (New York: Abrams, 1995); Stuart Piggott, The Druids (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1996); Christine Poulsen, The Quest for the Grail: Arthurian Legend in British Art 1840-1920 (New York: Manchester University Press, 1999); Roger Simpson, Camelot Regained: The Arthurian Revival and Tennyson, 1800-1849 (Cambridge, U.K.: D.S. Brewer, 1990); and Muriel Whitaker, The Legends of King Arthur in Art (Cambridge, U.K.: D.S. Brewer, 1990). Given the evidence provided by these works, it appears safe to state that the character of Merlin is never old in the Middle Ages. Instead, the medieval Merlin was at first something of a child prodigy (as in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s Historia Regum Britanniae and illustrated in British Library, MS Cotton Claudius B.VII Art. 15, fol. 224, and in British Library, MS Cotton Julius A.V. fol. 53v) and later a wise youth or young adult who never seems to grow much older than the kings and the knights whom he counsels (as in British Library, MS Royal 20.A.II, fol. 3v, and British Library, MS Add. 10292, discussed by Hoffman). However, as a shape-shifter, Merlin does at times assume the appearance of an older man, such as in the Eneid Merlina, the Roman de Silence, and Malory’s Le Morte Darthur, but he always reverts to his true form upon completion of whatever task required that particular shape. Only Geoffrey of Monmouth’s Vita Merlini, where an older Merlin features, proves an exception to the rule, but the text is based on Welsh traditions of the “original” Merlin and has little relevance to the mainstream tradition of the character. However, the romance tradition may offer a possible origin for Merlin’s beard, since the Merlin of medieval romance was said to be excessively hairy, a trait derived from his demonic sire.

15. It is possible that the trend of depicting Merlin as an older man may have begun earlier in the century (see Roger Simpson “Arthurian Legend in Fine and Applied Art of the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,” Arthurian Literature 11 (1992): 83, and Roger Simpson, Camelot Regained: The Arthurian Revival and Tennyson, 1800-1849 (Cambridge, U.K.: D.S. Brewer, 1990), pp. 145, 170, plates 2b, 6b, and 15), but additional work is still needed on this period to assess whether or not this was the dominant image of Merlin in the first half of the nineteenth century.

16. Discussions of these artists occur in the works of Hoffman, Hughes, Mancoff, Poulsen, and Whitaker.


18. T. H. White, The Sword in the Stone (New York: Dell Publishing, 1963), pp. 31-32. White’s spelling of the wizard’s name is unique. Although I have yet to confirm his statement, Goodrich claims that “The popular image of the mage in heavy robes and conical hat emblazoned with astrological symbols” derives from the accouterments of both medieval and early modern astrologers and


20. Although the text is outside the scope of this essay, both Frongia (pp. 67–75) and Spivack (pp. 88–91) address additional analogues to Merlin in Ursula K. Le Guin’s A Wizard of Earthsea (Berkeley, CA: Parnassus Press, 1968).


23. The text of the original edition is reconstructed by Douglas Anderson in Annotated Hobbit, Revised and Expanded Edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin 2002, pp. 32 and 36 n. 13). After the appearance of The Lord of the Rings, Tolkien revised the description of Gandalf and reintroduced the wizard as “an old man with a staff” (Annotated Hobbit, p. 32), but the remainder of the passage was unchanged. Many studies have suggested that Gandalf owes his appearance to the Norse god Odin. See Marjorie Burns, “Gandalf and Odin,” Tolkien’s Legendarium: Essays on the History of Middle-earth, ed. Verlyn Flieger and Carl F. Hostetter (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2000) for details and Miriam Youngerman Miller for some words of caution about this linkage. Anderson makes some important comments in Annotated Hobbit on the inspiration for Gandalf (pp. 36–39 n. 17); Tolkien’s own drawings of Gandalf are reproduced in Wayne G. Hammond and Christina Scull, J.R.R. Tolkien: Artist and Illustrator (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), figs. 91, 100. Also of interest is that there exists at least one precedent for a Gandalf-like Merlin independent of these works, and the Arthursian magic appears in a wide-brimmed hat and cloak in M.L. Kirk’s illustrations for Inez N. McFée’s The Story of Idylls of the King Adapted from Tennyson, illus. M.L. Kirk (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Co., 1912).


25. In addition to these characters, Barbara Miller suggests a third analogue to Merlin in the character of Oswald (played by the late John Gielgud) in First Knight (1995), who, although nonmagical, is both aged and bearded (pp. 157–161).


30. Beagle, pp. 222–23. The exchange is the same in the film.

31. My comments on Oswald are indebted to Barbara Miller’s discussion of his role in the film (pp. 157–161).


34. Tolkien, The Return of the King, p. 455.


Works Cited


**Filmography**

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*The Way of the Wizard: Reflections of Merlin* (Torregrossa)
The Medieval Hero on Screen

Representations from Beowulf to Buffy

Edited by Martha W. Driver and Sid Ray

with a foreword by Jonathan Rosenbaum