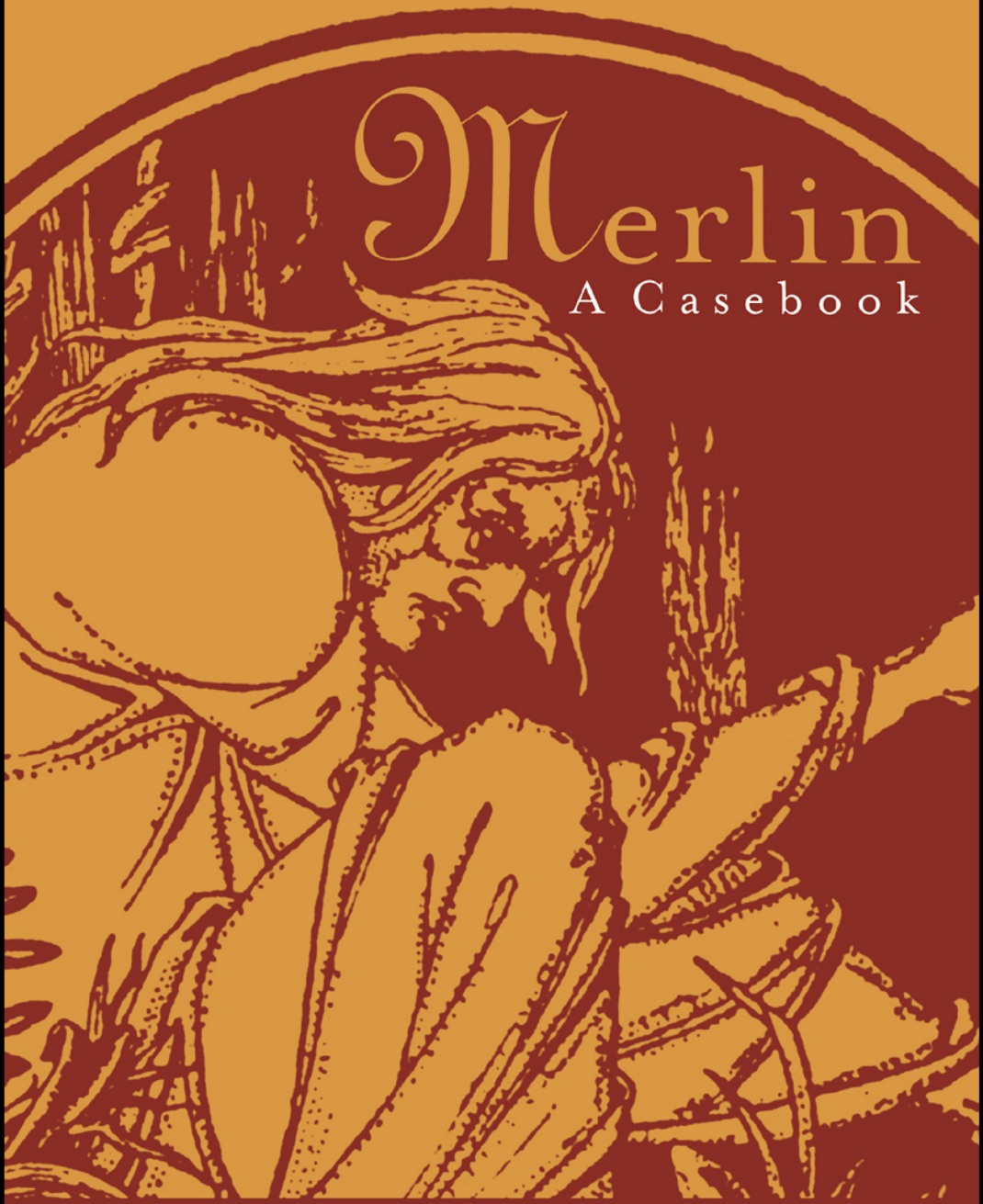
Merlin

A Casebook



EDITED BY
PETER H. GOODRICH &
RAYMOND H. THOMPSON

Merlin

Arthurian Characters and Themes

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Preface

This is Volume VII of *Arthurian Characters and Themes,* a series of casebooks from Routledge. The series includes volumes devoted to the best-known characters from Arthurian legend: Tristan and Isolde, Arthur, Lancelot and Guenevere, Merlin, Gawain, and Perceval. One is also devoted to Arthurian women in general. A single volume treats an Arthurian theme—the Grail—rather than characters.

Each volume offers an extended introductory survey and a bibliography and presents some twenty major essays on its subject. Several of the essays in each volume are newly commissioned for the series; the others are reprinted from their original sources. The previously published contributions date for the most part from the past two decades, although a few older, "classic" essays are included in several of the volumes—the criterion being the continuing importance of the study. All contributions are presented in English, and most volumes include essays that have been translated for the first time into English.

Heaviest emphasis remains on the development of the legend and its characters and themes during the Middle Ages, but each volume gives appropriate attention also to modern, even very recent, treatments. Similarly, the central focus is on literature, but without excluding important discussions of visual, musical, and cinematic arts. Thus, a number of the volumes are intently interdisciplinary in focus.

The proliferation of scholarly studies of Arthurian material continues at a daunting rate. When the *Bibliographical Bulletin of the International Arthurian Society* began publishing annual bibliographies, the first volume (1949) included 226 items (books, articles, and reviews), and some sections of that compilation represented national bibliographies over a full decade. The number of entries has increased regularly and dramatically, to the point that the most recent numbers of the *Bulletin* list well over one thousand items. Furthermore, the major contributions to Arthurian scholarship are often dispersed widely throughout North America, Europe, and elsewhere, and are in books and articles that are in some instances very difficult to locate.

As a result, it is extraordinarily difficult even for the professional medievalist to keep abreast of Arthurian scholarship, and it would be very nearly impossible for the nonscholar with serious Arthurian interests to identify and locate a score of the major scholarly contributions devoted to a particular character or theme. These difficulties surely dramatize the value of the *Arthurian Characters and Themes* series, but they also remain an insistent reminder that even the most informed selection of major essays

requires us to omit many dozens, perhaps hundreds, of studies that merit serious attention. The editors of the volumes have attempted to remedy this situation insofar as possible by providing introductions that discuss numerous other authors and texts and by compiling bibliographies that document a good many important studies that could find no room in these volumes. In addition, many of the contributions that are included here will themselves provide discussions of, or references to, other treatments that will be of interest to readers.

This volume, coedited by Peter H. Goodrich and Raymond H. Thompson, includes a detailed introduction examining the development and character of Merlin, who is perhaps the most popular of all Arthurian figures. Following the introduction and select bibliography, this volume offers seventeen essays. Twelve of them were previously published (some as portions of books), and two of those are presented here in English translation for the first time. The remaining five essays were newly commissioned for this volume, though three of the five are revisions and major expansions of previous studies.

Because permissions from copyright holders sometimes prohibited us from modifying the texts in any way, there are instances in which notes or documentary form will differ from essay to essay. In addition, style, usage, and even spelling (British vs. American) might vary as well. In a few instances, the editors have been permitted to modify the form in which the essay appears, and in those cases modifications have often gone well beyond the correction of minor and obvious errors. Offsetting the remaining inconsistencies is the advantage of having available, in a single volume, a substantial selection of the finest available studies, new as well as previously published, of the figure of Merlin.

Such a volume could not be produced without the generosity of museum officials and editors of presses and journals, who kindly gave permission for us to reproduce illustrations and articles. We are pleased to express our gratitude to all of them. Appropriate credits accompany the essays.

—*Norris J. Lacy*

Introduction

PETER H.GOODRICH

Merlin, the prophet and magus, is historically the second-best-known character from medieval literature, barely outstripped by his liege lord King Arthur. Beyond literature, he has entered our public consciousness to an even greater extent than Arthur, through the association of his name with all kinds of technological devices and commodities, many of them not in the least Arthurian. Most people know that Merlin is the epicenter of the supernatural in the Arthurian legend, his secularized male magic counterpoised by the female magic of Morgan le Fay and the Lady of the Lake and by the mystical religious miracle of the Holy Grail. Like theirs, his marvels are deeply rooted in pre-Christian traditions and molded by the Christian faith. The most famous stories about Merlin are tied to the matter of Arthurian Britain: his own miraculous birth foreshadows that of Arthur, which he arranges; his prophecies to King Vortigern announce the destinies of Arthur and the Britons; the building of Stonehenge creates a lasting monument to the ancient British; his training and advising of the young king—including the sword in the stone and the finding of Excalibur—establish the qualities of Arthur's rule; his own doomed love affair reflects the erotic susceptibilities that undermine and finally ruin the society of Camelot; and his uncertain end leaves him, like Arthur, poised outside of history for return or rebirth, *quondam et futurus*.

Merlin is nearly ubiquitous in Arthurian literature, appearing most often as a significant supporting character, sometimes as the chief character, and occasionally (especially in twentieth-century literature) as the narrator himself.[1] In fact, his early roles of prophet and chronicler of the Grail and Arthur's reign establish him (fictionally, at least) as the person directly responsible for the legend's transmission, and consequently—even at several removes—as its master narrator. As Merlin in the French Lancelot-Grail cycle explains this role to his scribe Blaise, "God has chosen me to work in His own service, for no one but I can do it and no one knows things as I know them.... There will be no noble man or worthy woman in the place where I am going some part of whose life I will not have you write down. You should also know that never have the lives of royal personages or the righteous been so gladly listened to as will be those of King Arthur and the people who in that time will live and rule."[2]

Consequently, Merlin's absence connotes either a narrative that is set in the middle or later years of Arthur's reign, after the mage's disappearance, or a strictly empirical approach to the legend. The empirical reason for omitting Merlin is that his legend

was originally separate from Arthur's; if their historical originals did exist, the two never could have met because they probably lived a century apart. To become the first to link Merlin with Arthur, the twelfthcentury cleric and chronicler Geoffrey of Monmouth had to conflate at least two separate characters: one the child of a reputedly virgin birth who supposedly lived in the mid-fifth century, and the other a Welsh soothsayer who lived in the latter part of the sixth century. And even Geoffrey's Merlin drops out of the narrative entirely before Arthur's birth; it was up to later writers to make him King Arthur's mentor. A lesser reason for omitting Merlin is that his abilities and actions in the literature are strongly supernatural. Thus a purely empirical approach to the legend must rationalize them to such an extent that Merlin would, in effect, become impossible to acknowledge or would be a vastly different character. However, such thorough rationalizations are rare, and they have only been attempted in the twentieth century.[3] Indeed, it is Merlin's magic that has defined him throughout the long history of Arthurian literature, and it is the magical power of words to shape as well as represent reality that underpins his function as the master narrator and architect of Camelot.

The personified faculty of our imaginative powers, the mage serves the Arthurian legend by elucidating order on the phenomenal and supernatural levels of being through his words and deeds. According to authorial and cultural interests, he assumes seven primary roles: Wild Man, Wonder Child, Prophet, Poet, Counselor, Wizard, and Lover. Most literature about the mage is selective, emphasizing and elaborating one or more of these features and de-emphasizing or even eliminating others. Moreover, Merlin was not always all of these things. Instead, his figure developed by gradually accreting varied capabilities to itself, each one suggesting further capabilities and roles. With the runaway popularity of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain,* this figure exploded throughout Europe into a "meta-Merlin" whose primary characteristics continue to be recalled, refined, and expanded today, continually encompassing new ideas and technologies as well as old ones.

The ability of this complex figure to endure for more than fourteen centuries results not only from his manifold roles and their imaginative appeal, but also from significant, often irresolvable tensions or polarities corresponding to each role. The mage's character and actions incorporate these tensions and mediate them to other characters and to us. Reduced to simple terms, the primary polarities within each role are between beast and human (Wild Man), natural and supernatural (Wonder Child), physical and metaphysical (Poet), secular and sacred (Prophet), active and passive (Counselor), magic and science (Wizard), and male and female (Lover). Interwoven with these primary tensions are additional polarities that apply to all of Merlin's roles, such as those between madness and sanity, pagan and Christian, demonic and heavenly, mortality and immortality, and impotency and potency. Ruling all of these tensions is the master polarity of illusion and reality, which interrogates the limits of the mage's power and insight. These dichotomies have long been central concerns of world culture (most of all Western culture, because of the dominant influence of the Christian religion upon the development of the Arthurian legend and its themes, and because the legend soon spread beyond Britain to continental Europe and eventually

other lands, incorporating international characters, locales, and motifs). Therefore, it should not be surprising that "the legend of King Arthur is our most pervasive and enduring secular myth."[4] Merlin and King Arthur have remained popular and influential figures, for they are drawn from the vital emotional and cognitive dissonances that define culture and perhaps even the human cortex.[5]

The foregoing summary, designed to establish the importance of Merlin in broad terms, deliberately omits the differences between individual Merlins in various national literatures and historical periods; nor does it explain how his figure attained its characteristics and appeal as it developed through time and diffused throughout western culture. Yet one of the most fascinating aspects of the literature on Merlin is its multiplicity and how it transforms the core details of his legend to create a panoply of mages who are remarkably varied yet all, somehow, recognizably the same. A more thorough historical discussion of this development and variety will help us to understand Merlin's metamorphoses and will prepare us for the insights offered by the essays in this volume.

Origins

Both oral and written texts adapt historical fact and character to preconceived patterns or themes. Because written literature was late in coming to Northern Europe, accurate historical records are hard to come by, and archaeology cannot always fill in the gaps. Consequently, the evidence for an actual Merlin is limited to late written texts, circumstantial at best, and likely to remain so. This has not prevented many people from believing that there was a specific historical Merlin upon whom the legend was founded, nor from speculating about the life of such an individual. But the roots of his legend predate any historical person, since they derive from (among others) the Indo-European type of the priest-king, the shaman or holy man, the convention of the wild man, the model of the biblical prophets, and the widespread conviction that natural and supernatural elements can intermingle in the physical world. With this confluence of models in the British cultural background, the research of A.O.H.Jarman and others explains how the story of Merlin developed from that of a warrior who went insane during the course of the battle of Arfderydd in 573 and fled to the neighboring Caledonian forest in Strathclyde. Named Lailoken by the twelfthcentury hagiographer Joceline of Furness and in two fragments of his legend preserved in another Latin manuscript (British Library Cotton Titus A. XIX), this wild man apparently developed the capability to perceive hidden causes and predict the future (including his own death).[6] The kernel of this legend is best summarized in a Welsh poem, the *Afallennau* (Apple Trees) preserved in the Black Book of Carmarthen from about 1200. In John K.Bollard's translation, the two most crucial stanzas read:

> Sweet apple tree that grows in a clearing,
> its virtue hides it from Rhydderch's lords,

a crowd around its base, a host around it.
It would be a treasure to them, brave ranks [of warriors].
Now Gwenddydd loves me not and she welcomes me not.
I am hateful to Gwasawg, Rhydderch's supporter.
I have destroyed her son and her daughter.
Death has taken everyone; why does it not greet me?
And after Gwenddolau, no lords revere me,
no amusement gladdens me, no lover visits me.
And in the battle of Arfderydd my torque was of gold,
though I may not be a treasure today to [a maiden with] a swan's form.
...
Sweet apple tree that grows on a river bank,
passing by it a steward will not succeed in getting its splendid fruit.
While I was calm in mind I used to be at its base
with a fair, playful maiden, a slender and queenly one.
Two score and ten years in constraints of outlawry
I have been wandering with wildness and wild ones.
After irreproachable goods and pleasing minstrels,
now there visit only want with wildness and wild ones.
Now I sleep not; I tremble for my leader,
my lord Gwenddolau, and my neighboring kinsmen.
After suffering sickness and sadness around Celyddon Wood,
may I become a blessed servant to the Lord of Hosts.[7]

His story was transplanted to Ireland where it became the model for the tale of the mad king Suibhne, and to southern Wales where it was either recontextualized or superimposed upon the career of another seer or bard, named Myrddin after the seacoast town of Carmarthen. This seer is even given a pedigree in the Welsh Triads that would be disregarded and radically changed when he gained international notoriety in the twelfth century:

Three Skilled Bards were in Arthur's Court:

Myrddin son of Morfryn,

And Taliesin.[8]

This late triad reflects both the early tradition and the subsequent one: As the second Myrddin he became known to an ambitious and literaryminded cleric named Geoffrey of Monmouth. For his Norman patrons, Geoffrey produced three works portraying this figure in different ways: the *Prophetiae Merlini* (Prophecies of Merlin, 1135), *Historia Regum Britanniae* (History of the Kings of Britain, ca. 1135–38), and *Vita*

Merlini (Life of Merlin, 1150).[9] The second of these, at the midpoint of which the *Prophecies* was inserted, became so popular throughout Europe that it established the primary features of the legend and started a vogue for Arthurian literature with Merlin as a permanent fixture.

Geoffrey of Monmouth

In the *History of the Kings of Britain,* the character is introduced as a boy from Carmarthen "who was also called Ambrosius" (169). He is sought out at the advice of King Vortigern's wizards to become a blood sacrifice for stabilizing the foundations of a fortified tower. His father is unknown, described by Merlin's mother as a nocturnal phantom and identified by Vortigern's desperate magicians as an incubus demon. The precocious Merlin confounds their bloodthirsty intentions by revealing the true reason for the tower's instability—a hidden pool concealing a stone under which two dragons are penned. When they are released, the boy states the famous utterances contained in the *Prophecies of Merlin* (ca. 1135), the midpoint of Geoffrey's romantic chronicle, which foretell Vortigern's death, the coming of Arthur and defeat of the Saxons, the eventual downfall of the Britons and an apocalyptic end to history. Nearly fifteen years later, the *Life of Merlin* (ca. 1150) recounts the adventures of a mad king and prophet of South Wales whom Geoffrey blandly asserts has known both Vortigern and Arthur. This is, he claims, the same Merlin Ambrosius. Geoffrey's dates begin Vortigern's rule at about 425 and end Arthur's at about 470 (corrected from Geoffrey's figure of 542).[10] However, the battle of Arfderydd, at which Merlin was driven insane, occurred in 573. Therefore, in order to be Ambrosius, serve Arthur, take part at Arfderydd and live in the Caledonian forest for fifty years, this Merlin would need three long lifetimes—from youth to old age in the time of Vortigern and Arthur, then perhaps in reverse so as to be young again before Arfderydd, and forward once more to old age during his mad wandering. The absurdity of this career was immediately apparent to Geoffrey's readers, who concluded that there must have been two Merlins—a distinction that further established Merlin's dualistic nature and that prepared the way for future transformations.

Part of the discrepancy may be accounted for by Geoffrey's mistaken date of 542 for Arthur's death—a chronology corrected by dating from the birth rather than death of Jesus. As many scholars have observed, it is also probable that Geoffrey learned more about Merlin from his Welsh sources between writing the *Prophecies* and the *Life of Merlin*. At first, Geoffrey must have heard enough about a prophetic bard named Myrddin to associate him with Nennius's wonder child from South Wales, but probably not enough to place him in the north or at Arfderydd. As a resident of Oxford who had ready access to many ecclesiastics and libraries from London to Wales, and who was perhaps himself sought out by clerics who knew not only of his *History* and *Prophecies* but also of the Welsh Myrddin poetry, Geoffrey was able to learn more about the earlier tradition during the 1140s. His election in 1151 to the small Welsh bishopric of St. Asaph—although he never traveled there—also suggests

eventual access to northern as well as southern sources of the Myrddin legend. Certainly the unification of Welsh kingdoms Dyfed, Gwent, and Gwynedd under the rule of Gruffydd ap Llewellyn ap Seisyll in 1060 had helped to create the conditions under which Myrddin's transplantation from Strathclyde to Carmarthen could have been accomplished, and the protonationalism of Welsh war-leader Owain Gwynedd confirmed such legendary figures as the property of all the Welsh even as Geoffrey appropriated Myrddin for the political purposes of the Norman dynasty.

Despite Geoffrey's awkward attempt at conflation, Giraldus Cambrensis (ca. 1146–1223) soon solidified the perception of two Merlins: the child and prophet Ambrosius or Emrys of the *History* and *Prophecies,* and the Merlin Celidonius or Silvester who dominates the *Life,* and whom Giraldus associates with Arthur.[11] Curiously, Geoffrey had dropped all mention of Merlin in the *History* after the mage aided Arthur's conception, with one exception: the assertion late in the *History* (colophon xii. 17) that "God did not wish the Britons to rule in Britain any more, until the moment should come which Merlin had prophesied to Arthur." This inconsistency so bothered the scribe of one manuscript (Jesus College, Oxford MS LXI) that he felt it necessary to correct the passage from Arthur to Vortigern (*History,* 282–83). Presumably Geoffrey had omitted Merlin from Arthur's career because no tradition known to him had brought them together, yet he clearly had all but united them through Arthur's nativity, and other writers took the point. Perhaps Geoffrey, too, for-got that his *History's* Merlin had not prophesied to Arthur—like other medieval writers, he undoubtedly regarded complete consistency as a sort of "hobgoblin." Geoffrey's confusion about Merlin's actual identity—if it was confusion—is also instructive because it reveals a multiplicity of sources and subtexts that come to constitute the mage himself. Consequently his Merlin becomes both plural and paradigmatic, with transformation as his master trope. The figure's primary roles are all established in Geoffrey's works, and his transformations end only when God closes up his mouth and his book at the end of the *Life*.

Like the two Merlins—the sage and the madman—Geoffrey bridges two styles of writing: the factual and the fantastic. His use of multiple genres, from oracle, to chronicle, to protoromance, illustrates the effects of increasing literacy. Writing enables things like lists, genealogies, exegesis, and encyclopedias to detach themselves from verbal narrative formulas, yet Geoffrey himself was certainly dependent on those formulas as well as on the products of earlier writers. The incorporation of prophecy and the nascent evolution of narrative from chronicle to romance that is apparent in the *History,* followed by the mixed genres of the *Life,* are themselves personified by the ever-shifting composite character of Geoffrey's Merlins. For example, this figure demonstrates the frequent hagiographic movement from isolated wonder child to trusted royal counselor, and from unholy wild man to monastic leader. Through Geoffrey's works, Merlin also becomes a model for later chivalric romance by developing into a figure that reconciles criticism of the hermit-ideal as private and personal quest with the Christian demand of love and service to others and to society.[12] As Robert W.Hanning observes, Merlin "embodies…the self-awareness of his creator's historical imagination"[13] as it moves from historical to

romantic vision. He not only observes and prophesies, but he also performs marvelous deeds. Thus he becomes a fundamentally self-fulfilling as well as dualistic figure, who acts as both creator and agent, "whose insight into predetermined history gives him some control over the historical process. But he is also to be equated with the androgynous, passive-active form of history itself."[14] In other words, he personifies Geoffrey's multigeneric narrative forms as they converge on the complementary goals of instruction and pleasure, and he also comprehends British history both in action and as it is vicariously experienced through narrative.

The manifold character of Merlin consequently embraces the popular alternative views of Geoffrey himself. One is of Geoffrey as he professes to be—a tale-repeater or historian, the (conditionally) responsible user of (reputedly) factual sources. The other is of Geoffrey as tale-maker or romancer who makes it all up. While the scholarly balance of opinion from William of Newburgh onward has leaned in favor of the second view, the first has always had adherents. Giraldus Cambrensis is one near contemporary who combines both approaches: His travels in Wales confirmed for him Merlin's existence as a folkloric character with two originals, whom he designates Ambrosius and Celidonius or Silvester. The first was sired by an incubus and prophesied to Vortigern; the second was a frenzied prophet from Scotland who, Giraldus mistakenly claims, "lived in the time of Arthur" (192–93). Though he refers to the seer's "well-known fiction and prophecy" in the same breath (167), Giraldus later argues that Merlin could have been capable of true prophecy (248–49), and then he tells us that "we read of the faith of Merlin, and we read of his prophesying; but we do not read that he was saintly or that he performed miracles" (250).

Giraldus also critiques Geoffrey's veracity with the amusing story of Meilyr, who could see "unclean spirits" clustering profusely upon that writer's *History* (116–18). Because of such conflicting views about Geoffrey's trustworthiness, it seems more accurate to interpret the dichotomies in the figure of Merlin as testimony to the nonlinear dynamic of Geoffrey's narrative art. From this perspective, his tale-repeating, tale-making narrative adopts a series of unpredictable and eclectic compromises between chronicling and romancing the subject. This art of compromise, of recasting "found" story elements and rhetorical conventions, appears at every stage of Geoffrey's work and is made most evident in the inconsistent yet compelling character of his Merlins.

Chronicles and the Prophecies after Geoffrey of Monmouth

Because Geoffrey's work immediately established the Arthurian legend throughout Europe, subsequent chroniclers depended upon it as a primary source—whether they respected his veracity or not.[15] Medieval historians were most struck by Merlin's unnatural birth and oracular powers, and they displayed widely varying credulity regarding them. Prominent among the translations are the Anglo-Norman *Le Roman de Brut of* Wace (1155) and the alliterative English *Brut* of Layamon (ca. 1200) which is based upon Wace.[16] The Anglo-Norman poet was sceptical of the most marvelous

elements from Geoffrey and started a trend among chroniclers for omitting all or most of Merlin's prophecies.[17] He plays an important part in transmitting Merlin's legend nonetheless, for the *Brut* was presented to Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine and thus came to the notice of King Henry II, who perceived the potential of the Arthurian legend as a repoliticized Norman myth. Wace also becomes a source, like Geoffrey, of later chroniclers and of French romance writers who vastly expanded Merlin's role and functions, for, as Christopher Dean has pointed out in *A Study of Merlin,* the effect of Wace's omissions paradoxically strengthened the perception of Merlin as a magician.[18] Layamon contributes by translating the legend into early Middle English, thereby presenting Arthur and Merlin as models, not only for the Norman aristocracy, but also for their putative foes—thereby transforming it into a national legend for all England. Like his Arthur, Merlin is associated with the faery otherworld, but the precise nature of Merlin's magical powers remains vague: his removal of Stonehenge and disguise of Uther have the appearance of magic, but there is no assertion that magic has been used.

Later chroniclers, however, were writing after French romances made Merlin's magic more abundant and explicit, though not necessarily more credible. As Caroline D.Eckhardt describes their view of Merlin's character in "The Figure of Merlin" it surpasses that of a traditional folkloric hero. They make of him a "time-binder"—not only embedded in history but able to transcend it through his prophetical power—who can thus construe causality from the past into the future. This capability permits him to become an "explicator," "facilitator" and "mystifier of events."[19] Robert of Gloucester's rhymed *Chronicle* late in the thirteenth century mentions his suspicion that Merlin's cleverness may be due to "som enchanterie" (l.3109), but his reticence on this subject is paralleled by his refusal to recount the prophecies in Geoffrey that cannot be clearly understood by common folk. Robert Mannyng's rhymed *Story of England* (1338) takes the same approach toward the mage's prophecies while expanding upon his origin and deeds, and it refers more decisively, as does John Hardyng's *Chronicle* (1457–64), to his "coniurisouns" that move Stonehenge (Mannyng, l. 8903) or change Uther's appearance to that of Duke Gorlois (Hardyng, Ch. 72).[20] Pierre de Langtoft's French verse *Chronicle* (1307) and Thomas Castleford's English *Chronicle* (ca. 1327) attribute even greater abilities to Merlin.[21] De Langtoft, a canon in Yorkshire, already reflects the French romance view of him as a seer and enchanter whose powers derive in part from the Devil.[22] Castleford dwells upon him at greater length than any other chronicler, even including his complete prophecies and emphasizing the mage's power to fulfil the British kings' desire and to engineer that which he foresees.[23]

The main difficulty that chroniclers experience with Merlin is credibility; it was easier to conceive of Arthur as an actual king of Britain than of Merlin as an actual magician, and easier to credit Merlin's fatherlessness and straightforward soothsayings than to logically explain his magic arts and mantic prophecies. This problem of belief led some chroniclers to comment on what to include or omit. For instance, Robert of Gloucester is typical in omitting the prophecies that are "derc to simplemen" (l. 2820); Robert Mannyng admits he cannot "open the knottes that Merlyn knyt" (l.

8224); and John Hardyng (Ch. 69) "cannot wryte…affirmably" of Merlin's birth, nor his encounter with and prophecies to Vortigern, even though he accepts the mage's other prophecies and ability to move Stonehenge and change appearances.[24] Their concerns sometimes prompt innovation: Like most chronicles, the English *Prose Brut* (late fourteenth century) omits the lengthy prophecy to Vortigern, but then it goes on to add a new one to King Arthur. This includes the Six Last Kings prophecy whose animal imagery imitates Geoffrey's style, but it more clearly refers to actual English monarchs from Henry III to Henry IV.[25] Most interesting in this regard is the influential Latin universal history or *Polychronicon* of Ranulph Higden (mid fourteenth century) and especially its English translation with commentary by John Trevisa (1387), which view Merlin with suspicion despite his reputed gifts.[26] They both regard Merlin chiefly as a prophet whose prophecies and deeds are dubious. Trevisa accepts the convention of the two Merlins and that Silvestris's prophecies to Arthur were relatively comprehensible. However, he rejects the idea that Merlin Ambrosius was begotten by a goblin or incubus, incredulously asking, "What wight wolde wene/ that a fend myght now gete a childe?" and deciding that Merlin's mortality refuted the tale (*Polychronicon* I, 419). Similarly, he questions the story of Vortigern and the tower, the "prophecie that is so derk," and the magical transportation of Stonehenge to Salisbury plain.

Geoffrey's *Prophecies* also enjoyed a widespread vogue. Merlin's oracular forecasts soon became a device altogether separate from Geoffrey: they were individually inserted in chronicles, romances, and other texts wherever a text's author deemed them apposite—just as Geoffrey himself had done with the original *Prophecies* and in the *Life of Merlin*—and his soothsayings were generally made in practical, easily comprehensible form when they relate to the deeds of Arthur and his knights, and in mantic, incomprehensible form when they refer to historical and political developments outside the scope of Arthur's reign.

The device of serial prophecies remained popular, too. In addition to the works just described, which either incorporate or allude to them, many other Latin and vernacular prose translations were produced during the Middle Ages. Latin versions of the *Prophecies* rapidly followed Geoffrey, including Orderic Vitalis's prose *Historia Ecclesiastica* (Ecclesiastical History, 1134), John of Cornwall's verse fragment *Prophetiae Merlini* (1155), and Godfrey of Viterbo's *Pantheon* (1186), which included a messianic prophecy that Arthur would return from a land beneath the sea.[27] The Icelandic poet Gunnlaug Leifsson added several new stanzas to his Old Norse translation, the *Merlínusspá* (1250).[28] The independent strain (both in terms of innovation and of manuscripts separate from chronicle) of Merlin's prophecies is retained on the Continent as well as in England. For example, the *Prophécies de Merlin* (1272),[29] reputedly translated from Latin by Richard d'Irlande, departed almost entirely from Geoffrey's text in creating prophecies related to contemporary politics, yet it followed Geoffrey's and the French romance cycles' pattern of employing the prophet as a source of scribally recorded wisdom. And it establishes another new tradition by making this wisdom available even from the seer's tomb—an idea that subsequent works would amplify by various figures' pilgrimages to it for advice. A

hybrid of chronicle and romance forms, the *Prophecies* became a model for Paolo Pieri's *La Storia de Merlino* (The History of Merlin, ca. 1305)[30] and other fourteenth- and fifteenth-century works in Italian, Catalan, and Spanish. Whether independent or linked to chronicle and romance, the prophetic tradition remained the most vital aspect of the mage's legend well into the Renaissance.

Medieval Romance: France

What we might call the "Merlin problem" for chroniclers, who were concerned with "saying sooth" in the factual sense, was no problem at all for writers of romance. They were interested not only in warlike exploits like those celebrated by the *chansons,* but also in the marvelous and (in recognition of their female audiences and patrons) in women and courtly or domestic social issues. Merlin does not appear in surviving romances before the end of the twelfth century: He receives a single passing mention, for example, from the genre's defining practitioner, Chrétien de Troyes, in *Erec*. Yet his legend was apparently known not only from Geoffrey and Wace, but also through at least one lost Breton lai, *Merlin le sauvage*.[31] French romance soon promoted him not only as a major figure in the years preceding Arthur's birth, but as the primary influence on Arthur's early reign. Robert de Boron, most likely a Burgundian cleric writing in verse for a noble patron, Gautier of Montbéliard, devised a new scheme for the legend.[32] Building upon Chrétien's unfinished Grail romance and Geoffrey's tale of the wonder child Ambrosius, Robert reshaped the tale of Merlin's engendering by an incubus into a major event of salvation history: a plot of the infernal devils to counter Christ's redemption of souls through harrowing Hell by creating their own Antichrist. His tale of Merlin, preceded by the story of Joseph of Arimathea and his descendants who bring the relics of Christ's crucifixion to Logres (in Britain), is modeled upon the book of Job. The devils progressively destroy the fortune and reputation of a good and wealthy man until he and his wife die and his two eldest daughters become harlots. The youngest and most virtuous daughter resists corruption until one night she falls asleep without commending herself to God's protection. A demon cohabits with her in her sleep, engendering Merlin. However, she seeks the protection of her confessor Blaise, who helps to redeem the child from the devil's control by baptizing him at birth. While Merlin inherits the dark and hairy body of his father, his precocious intelligence and clairvoyance are thus claimed for God's service and turn evil into another tool of divine providence. The Grail theme of evangelizing the West thus enrolls Merlin as its prophet and facilitator, who supports the hidden line of Grail guardians that began with Joseph of Arimathea. As Stephen Maddux points out, both Joseph and Merlin "function as points of contact between God and the world, indeed as the chief means by which he acts upon history";[33] Joseph is the link to the past and the inner kingdom of mystical communion with God, and Merlin is the link to the future, public kingdom of Arthurian chivalry.[34] Robert's conception of the mage makes Merlin a Christian spokesman of the divine will and narrator of the Grail history that will culminate under Arthur's reign, with Arthur's Round Table third in a sequence of holy Tables

begun at the Last Supper. This enlarged role for the mage is exemplified by many new adventures and marvels. Prominent among them is another of Robert's innovations, the tale of the sword in the stone, which Merlin prepared and the archbishop of Logres (or London) sanctioned as the means of revealing Uther Pendragon's destined successor. With this tale, the work attributed to Robert himself ends and that of his continuators begins.

While only Robert's *Joseph d'Arimathie* and an opening fragment of his *Merlin* remain, he is now credited with at least planning, if not completing, a three-part Grail romance that was subsequently copied, rewritten, expanded, and revised in alternative forms during the first half of the thirteenth century, becoming the definitive romance history of King Arthur and his knights for nearly three centuries. Whereas the chroniclers' version of Merlin's legend had concentrated on secular politics and lifestyles, romance writers added a religious dimension. Moreover, they contrasted Merlin's and Arthur's beginnings in lust with the new courtly convention of *fin' amor* or the virtuous romantic attachment between a noble and his lady, exploring with great detail (and often subtlety) all the dimensions of earthly and spiritual love. Merlin is especially problematic in these explorations, for he fulfils the folkloric motif of the creature that can only be captured by a woman. Not only is he a product of unholy masculine lust who sometimes aids and abets it with the kings Uther, Arthur, and Ban, but he also meets his demise by succumbing to lust, or love, himself.[35] In this way, he remains his father's son and an ambivalent figure who mediates not only many narrative events, but many dimensions of spiritual and sexual affiliation, becoming culpable in Arthur's fall as well as instrumental in Arthur's rise.

Merlin's roles and capabilities are greatly elaborated in the great romance cycle begun by Robert de Boron. As a redeemed Antichrist, he foresees and arranges not only Arthur's birth but also Arthur's upbringing, accession, and conquest of both internal and external enemies in order to unify Britain. As he also narrates the history of the Grail and the events leading up to and including Arthur's reign to his baptiser and scribe Blaise, he becomes in a sense the controlling voice of the narrative. Through the kings and others (like Gawain) whom he guides, Merlin orchestrates political, military, and social history, engineering events in such a way that even long after his demise the memorials he has constructed and the predictions he has made continue to be borne out. His gifts are manifold. He can shift shape to that of a male of any age—fair or ugly, noble or common—and he appears as a wild man, herder of animals, or animal itself (usually a stag). He is able to disappear and reappear, not in a stagey flash and puff of smoke, but simply without anyone noticing how he has come or gone, and to travel far distances without any apparent lapse of time. It is as if he can step outside the conditional reality of the narrative world and reenter it anywhere he desires. He serves also as a diplomat, counselor, strategist, and general, using the psychology of love and honor to motivate others, relaying crucial messages, orchestrating campaigns, and bearing down on enemies in battle on a black stallion though he never bears conventional weapons. Instead, when he carries anything it is Arthur's dragon banner, which he can cause to breathe flames. He is a master at logistics and at transporting troops undetected to their appointed places. He also

controls climate, summoning darkness, mist, storms, fire, and smoke to aid Arthur and his allies and to dismay opponents at critical moments. He prophesies future events, explains the significance of past or present ones, and constructs permanent markers and inscriptions to commemorate them. He can detect the presence of buried treasure (a handy thing for the king's coffers) and can create illusions to entertain his love (though she, at least in the French Vulgate and Post-Vulgate romances, is apparently the only one whom he so entertains). He can cast sleep upon an entire castle, and he knows many spells besides. In fact, these spells prove to be his downfall, for he teaches them to Viviane (in the Vulgate, or Niniane in the Post-Vulgate) and she uses them to imprison him. He is, in short, a medieval polymath as well as polymorph.

The pivotal difference between Merlin's treatment in Robert de Boron's work (that grew into the Vulgate or Lancelot-Grail prose cycle) and the fragmentary Post-Vulgate cycle of romances that tells essentially the same story is their attitude toward the role of religion in chivalry.[36] This changed attitude reveals itself especially in Merlin's character. He reaches his high point in the Vulgate: largely portrayed as a benevolent mastermind, he succumbs in the end to peaceful circumscription by the woman who loves him. Conversely, he is regarded as irredeemably tainted by his infernal paternity and hypertrophied into a leering ancient—feared, hated, and ultimately entombed by the object of his attentions in the Post-Vulgate *Suite* or Huth Merlin. Thus his character in thirteenth-century French romance suffers a decline equal to that of his one-time *amie* and pupil Morgan, whose reputation is also progressively blackened by her necromantic and erotic proclivities. This change in attitude has less to do with the narrative necessity to get Merlin off the stage so that the great society of Arthur's Camelot and its knights can unfold undiminished by his machinations, than it does with a misogynistically tinged shift toward Christian asceticism, lessening clerical tolerance of the non-Christian supernatural, and increasing emphasis on the vanity of chivalric lifestyles not strictly governed by spiritual and doctrinal norms. In both the Vulgate and the post-Vulgate cycles, however, the public world of Merlin and Arthur is ultimately viewed with irony as flawed—not because of any flaw in God's will or the inner-directed salvation pattern of the Grail quest, but because of human and social imperfections implicit in the personal histories of Merlin and Arthur themselves.

These French cycles provided the basis for subsequent medieval treatments, and their difference in Merlins is picked up by other romance writers according to source and inclination. As Anne Berthelot points out in this volume, for example, the French *Prophécies de Merlin* mediates between benevolence and depravity by having the mage both exact a sexual price from women for his tutelage and admit lust as his greatest failing. As the figure of Merlin diffuses into the literature of the later Middle Ages and Renaissance, he remains not only a gifted "shower of the way," but is increasingly referred to as a conjurer tainted by his own demonic nature. As a prophet, he is therefore associated more overtly with other non-Christian prophets like the Sibyl than with John the Baptist or the Old Testament prophets and Christian ascetics with whom he also shares many characteristics. He becomes increasingly linked to the

earth, to caverns, grottoes, and fountains where he was reputed to reside and work his spells, command demons, lie imprisoned or entombed by his mistress, or guard over the sleeping Arthur.

Other works incorporating Merlin that may be considered part of these cycles are the prose fragments about Vertigier's (Vortigern's) usurpation and Merlin's early life by Bauduin Butor—collectively known as *Les Fils du Roi Constant* or *Pandragus et Libanor* (1294)—and *Le Livre d'Artus* (Book of Arthur, early thirteenth century), a continuation of Robert de Boron's *Merlin,* in which the mage closely monitors the adventures of Gawain and suffers a Post-Vulgate end.[37] Another early prose work derived from de Boron is the anonymous *Didot-Perceval* (ca. 1220–30), based upon his conjectured third romance about Perceval's Grail quest.[38] In this work, Merlin actively guides Perceval. Once the quest is successfully completed, the mage joins Blaise in retirement near the Grail Castle, building a hermitage that he calls his *esplumoir* (a word referring to the cage of a molting hawk), and emerging only to report Arthur's death and departure for Avalon to Perceval. Thus, a tertiary tradition of Merlin's survival, as in Geoffrey's *Vita Merlini,* was created alongside that of his disappearance immediately after Arthur's conception (as in Geoffrey's *Historia*) or early in Arthur's reign (as in the Vulgate and Post-Vulgate). And although it was not itself a significant influence upon later literature, it did signal a continuing tendency to improvise upon Merlin's characteristics in newly fashioned narratives that were often only tangential to the Arthurian legend. For example, the *Prophécies de Merlin* hybridized the prophecies by developing a narrative context of Merlin's conversations with his scribes—even from his tomb. The final episode of Heldris de Cornuälle's *Roman de Silence* (ca. 1270) follows the convention of Merlin's sardonic laughter in Welsh tradition, Geoffrey's *Life,* and the Vulgate by introducing him as a wild seer who identifies his captor as a woman.[39] Another romance, *Claris et Laris* (ca. 1268),[40] brings him in as a guide who helps to free the captive Laris. In each of his primary roles—particularly as seer and commentator, guide, magician, and lustful lover—Merlin's intervention thus becomes a popular device for advancing a narrative or explicating an adventure's meaning.

As Geoffrey of Monmouth had established the figures of Merlin and Arthur for chronicle, so the further elaborations of Robert de Boron and his continuators established the pattern of their life histories for subsequent romances composed in other languages. Through the copying, circulation, translation, and adaptation of French manuscripts, the mage's central role in establishing King Arthur's reign and documenting its relation to secular and salvation history remained characteristic to the end of the period in both English and continental literatures.

Medieval Romance: Beyond France

Although rough-hewn by French standards, the early Middle English romance *Of Arthour and of Merlin* (1270)[41] signals in its very title the dualism that had by this time constructed the king and his mage as in fact a *doppelgänger* for the full cultural potential of the hero. Arthur and Merlin adapt the complementary functions or

"estates" of warrior and priest to a medieval Christian context without ever quite losing their pre-Christian associations (such as Arthur's magical sword Excalibur and Merlin's oracular, shamanistic, or druidical capabilities). By implying the third estate of producers through the king's apparently humble upbringing and acclamation by the people, and by the mage's marvelous ability to assume humble forms and master crafts, they also incorporate the full heritage of Indo-European culture into their courtly administrative model.[42] The emphasis of this English verse romance, however, is upon the practical (if often supernatural) events by which Arthur's kingdom is established. It and most subsequent English versions of the legend are less interested in ideology than in action. Only through Merlin's insight and intervention is Arthur's birth brought about and his reign successfully begun; only through the youthful Arthur's martial prowess and skill at attracting and inspiring allies is it instituted. Yet both figures are required for greatness, for each encompasses a complementary aspect of the human potential for heroic action.

In *Of Arthour and of Merlin,* the Grail concept is de-emphasized in favor of political action and battle: this straightforward, secular orientation toward Merlin and his protégé is perhaps due not simply to its English provenance but also to its anonymous author's sources in chronicle as well as in the Vulgate *Merlin,* and to the predominantly male, rather than mixed, audience that may be conjectured for it. The poet establishes a precedent for Thomas Malory's use of sources by rearranging material from the Vulgate, such as the circumstances of Merlin's birth, or omitting it, as in many details of his relationship with Viviane and his appearance to Arthur as a rude and ugly churl aware of buried treasure. Thus he drastically reduces the scope of the mage's actions as compared to his French source, along with the length and interlaced complexity of the narrative. Yet this does not significantly decrease Merlin's importance, for Arthur's own actions are similarly circumscribed—most notably his begetting of Mordred. The narrative's modest but continuing appeal is indicated by seven manuscripts dating through the sixteenth century.

Such reduction and, apparently, popularity was not the case with two later translations of the Vulgate *Merlin* written in about 1450—Henry Lovelich's verse *Merlin* and the anonymous Middle English prose *Merlin*.[43] Each survives in only one representative copy and derives from a different Vulgate manuscript, but both attempt to tell the full story of Merlin, including digressions such as Merlin's trip to Rome to replace the emperor's lascivious and unfaithful wife with the clever, cross-dressed female counselor Grisandole, and the sexual material characteristically excised by the *Of Arthour and of Merlin* poet.[44] Merlin's influence in both these late translations is indicated by Lovelich's periodic observation that "Rhyt as Merlyne devisede in alle thing,/Riht so aftyr hym evene wrowht the kyng" (ll. 4391–92, for example). Besides their mediums (poetry and prose), they differ primarily in their contextual setting—Lovelich's *Merlin* is, like the Vulgate and Post-Vulgate cycles, a continuation of the Grail story (he also translated de Boron's *Josephe d'Arimathie*), whereas the Prose Merlin exists in isolation from other parts of the Vulgate cycle; to this is added his more frequent invocation of the deity, giving his verse a religious tone. Lovelich's translation also breaks off sooner than the Prose *Merlin,* although neither completes

the narrative of its source. Together, they suggest that the late medieval popularity of the French Arthurian romances prompted their production in a form that a non-French-speaking, middle-class audience could understand. They also show that thirteenth-century French romance predominated in presenting Merlin to English audiences until late in the medieval period, for he seldom figures in other Middle English romances.

The culmination of Middle English romance in Thomas Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* (1470)[45] indicates that Merlin, though a key character, has become subordinated to Arthur and his knights, much as John the Baptist is subordinated to Jesus in biblical narrative. Merlin, however, still possesses in Malory supernatural powers that go beyond John's in the gospels—and his supernatural character, poised ambiguously between good and evil, may well have motivated Malory's treatment of him. Whether one reads the Caxton text that has served as the English language template of the legend for centuries, or the Winchester text discovered in 1934 and published in 1947 by Eugène Vinaver, Malory's ambivalent treatment of the mage "turned a long book about Merlin into a short book about King Arthur."[46] He does this by beginning with Arthur's conception, rather than Merlin's or the origin of the Grail. The work as a whole (it is termed "The Whole Book" in the Winchester manuscript) focuses on Arthur and his knights, including the independent tradition of Tristan and Isolde as a counterpoint to the involvement between Lancelot and Gwenever, and it is based on a variety of French and English sources available to Malory—especially the Vulgate cycle and the Post-Vulgate *Suite du Merlin*. Malory's portrait of Merlin reduces his actions to those that arrange Arthur's conception and fostering, establish him as king, and educate the king and his court to the significance of their actions—both good and bad. The mage's powers are also curtailed, especially his role in Arthur's battle campaigns, and his end comes early in Arthur's reign. Malory adopts the harsh Post-Vulgate view of Merlin's relationship with Viviane (here a lady of the Lake called Nyneve or Nimuë), and represents it only in Merlin's forecast to Arthur of his fate "to be putte in the erthe quycke," and in the brief account of his lecherous "dotage" upon, and entombment by, the harried maiden. Unlike Lovelich or the Prose *Merlins* author, who were translating a single text, Malory was reworking an entire body of texts into a more-or-less coherent whole, in which Merlin performs as the marvelous catalyst who gets Arthur's society going—but who must then vanish in order for it to work out its own brilliant, yet ultimately tragic, destiny. The mage's flawed greatness forecasts the imperfection of Camelot itself—an imperfection developed in *Le Morte D'Arthur* through the complex social, political, and moral entanglements of the characters, rather than through supernatural *merveille* or received religious doctrine as in its French forebears.

On the Continent, the Prophecies tradition, together with the French Vulgate and Post-Vulgate romances, also provided most of the source material for romance writers from the thirteenth century on. Merlin's reputation throughout Europe in the late Middle Ages was such that he is named in some manuscripts of the widely copied *Seven Sages of Rome* (fourteenth century).[47] In a tale called "Sapientes," a close analogue to Geoffrey's tale of Vortigern's tower in the Historia, he is the fatherless child who

is brought before a Roman emperor, ill advised by his seven wise men.[48] In several English versions of another tale about the magically empowered Virgil, the name "Merlin" replaces that of the Roman poet.[49] In Germany, Albrecht von Scharfenberg's *Der Theure Mörlin* (The Esteemed Merlin) retold the Vulgate *Merlin* story in late-thirteenth-century verse, but it survives only through Ulrich Fuetrer's "Mörlin" in his *Buch der Abenteuer* (1473).[50] There, the account from the mage's conception through to Arthur's coronation serve as part of the larger Grail narrative. Merlin did not become a significant character in early German romance, however, and the greatest German writers—Hartmann von Aue, Wolfram von Eschenbach, and Gottfried von Strassburg—did not make use of him. This neglect may have had less to do with Merlin than with these authors' focus on the careers of individual Arthurian knights (especially Tristan and Parzival [German for Perceval]) in which Merlin traditionally plays little part, rather than on Arthur himself or his rise to power. Where the mage does appear in German romance, treatment of him tends to be limited and iconoclastic.[51]

Merlin fares better in other medieval languages. Jacob von Maerlant translated the section of the Vulgate *Merlin* concerning Merlin's origin and early years into Middle Dutch verse as *Merlijns Boek* (or *Boek van Merline,* 1261), adding a scene in which Satan is on trial; his work was continued by Lodewijk van Velthem's *Merlijn-Continuatie* (or *Boec van Coninc Artur,* 1326), based upon the Post-Vulgate *Suite du Merlin.* Both works currently exist only in fragments and a Middle Low German redaction.[52] Finally, the medieval tradition survives in the *Merlijn Volksboek* (or *Historie van Merlijn,* 1540), a fragmentary prose chapbook concerning Merlin's birth and Vortigern based upon *Of Arthour and of Merlin*.[53] These Dutch works typify the general European trend to translate and popularize existing sources, with occasional innovative twists, after the great early thirteenth-century efflorescence of the Arthurian legend.

The trend is even more apparent in romances from the Italian and Iberian peninsulas. In both places, the prophecies were frequently combined with romance in a hybrid narrative form that emphasized Merlin's supernatural qualities—qualities that occasionally allow him even to overcome his own death in body or in spirit, something only Arthur is reputed to do in medieval French and English romances. Merlin is more often referred to in passing than as a central character. However, *Il Novellino* or the *Cento Novelle Antiche* (One Hundred Ancient Tales, 1300)[54] includes three tales of Merlin in which he chastises a woman who profits from her husband's usury to purchase an expensive coat and prophesies twice. Pieri's *Storia di Merlino* (mentioned previously) differs from the work of de Boron by including an original *enfance* for the mage along with his prophecies, an innovative approach to be adopted in the seventeenth century by Thomas Heywood's *Life of Merlin*. Yet such extreme departures from the cyclical tradition in Arthurian romances involving Merlin were eschewed by both the Italian *Vita di Merlino con le Sue Prophetie* (The Life of Merlin with His Prophecies—also known as the *Historia di Merlino*—1379), which was loosely adapted from the Vulgate *Merlin,* and the Spanish *El Baladro del Sabio Merlín* (The [Death]-Shriek of Merlin the Sage, 1498), which was based upon an earlier Hispanic translation of the Post Vulgate.[55]

As with Malory, these continental romances indicate the increasing extent to which later writers adapted material from a variety of sources to their reconstruction of a primary source, while adding unique episodes. For example, the author of the *Baladro* employs not only his Post-Vulgate source with commentary of his own, but also contemporary sentimental romances, the *Prophecies* tradition, and perhaps the hypothetical *Conte del Brait* in which the doomed Merlin prophecies to Bagdemagus from his tomb before setting off marvels with his final cry.[56] In this way, the slippery figure of Merlin was well suited not only to the interlacing narrative technique of the major romance cycles as both narrator and shape-shifting model, but also to continued adaptation to changing times and tastes, displaying a diverse iconoclasm that would soon enable him to assimilate new technologies and outlooks. For Spanish romance writers, who tended to adopt the darker Post-Vulgate view of his demonic nature, Merlin appears to have been an equivocal creature whose actions could as easily compromise as assist one. Emphasis on his equivocal nature was to continue into Renaissance and early modern literature, with its competing magical, religious, and scientific paradigms for reality.

Sixteenth, Seventeenth, and Eighteenth Centuries

The Arthurian literature of the Renaissance treats this duality in several characteristic ways. There, Merlin is a secondary character who advances the plot, comments on the hidden significance of events, or serves as an exemplar. His relationship with the aristocracy remains a linchpin of his characterization. According to Richard Bernheimer, this relationship grows out of a late-medieval shift in the conventional use of the wild man—from a symbol of unredeemed humanity to a wholesome corrective for the increasingly sterile chivalric lifestyle. This shift was accompanied by a growing interest of the aristocracy in folk culture and the pastoral mode.[57] Signs of this shift may be seen in the mage's frequent disguises as a wild man or commoner to admonish kings and knights, and such interpolated stories as the Grisandole episode in the Vulgate and its translations. This role consequently merges into that of counselor, so that Merlin becomes a figure who keeps the aristocracy in touch with human nature and the natural world, defining aristocratic cultural values by counterpointing them. His purpose may ultimately be to support these values, as in Renaissance epics and masques, but it is potentially subversive as well. As Jeff Rider notes, a tendency already exists in medieval chronicles such as the *Brut* to situate the mage on the "fictional margin" as "implicitly in competition with the kings and…to some degree a threat to them" by signifying "the free play of language and historical imagination within historical writing, a force potentially independent of the line of kings."[58] In the Middle Ages, this force was largely bound by religious doctrine, and Merlin was made a representative of God and messenger of the Grail—though a significantly compromised one. In the early modern period, however, this religious hegemony began to crumble and consequently brought forth both "reformational" and "counter-reformational" characterizations of the mage, which increasingly liberated him from received religious doctrines to serve secular purposes, and eventually from Arthurian

legend itself to find a place in superstition and popular culture. There the figure subsides below the high-culture horizon for a time, to be revived by renewed Romantic interest in the legend.

One way in which this process operates is through Merlin's wizardly role and his connection with demons. This feature was also emphasized in the Renaissance through the introduction of printing, which brought about an immediate efflorescence of speculative material that had previously existed in expensive and hard-to-obtain manuscripts, for a readership reaching far beyond the aristocracy and clergy. Merlin and his demonic origins were popularized along with the rest of the Arthurian legend. His notoriety was also fueled by a fascination with demonology and witchcraft, lasting well into the seventeenth century and influencing debates over the rise of empirical science. The Greek term "magos" or magus had become associated specifically with those able to consult or command "daimones" or the spiritual intermediaries between the natural and divine realms of being.[59] One such had been the incubus who sired Merlin, pejoratively rationalized in Christian terms as a devil from Hell. Thus Merlin's power over demons arises from two sources: his own nature and his superior knowledge, which was by now understood to be acquired through constant study and book learning (like that of the cleric or clerk) rather than simply inborn. In the Renaissance, his intercourse with devils—prefigured most directly by his ability to summon spirits and create illusions for his lady love—became a commonplace of his magical technology and a staple of the wizard's more sensational appearances. Merlin became a type of the Renaissance magus, whose protoscientific ontology assumed the interpenetration of natural and supernatural phenomena. Moreover, a tradition of the fairy world concurrently developed that euphemized the conflict between continued folk belief in the supernatural and Christian dogma. A clear expression of this view is Michael Drayton's massive encomiastic poem about Britain, *Poly-Olbion* (1612), which relates Merlin's marvelous birth, magical deeds and everlasting prophecies, and captivity in "the *Fairie* Land."[60]

Following medieval sceptics such as William of Newburgh and John Trevisa, early modern rationalists attacked Geoffrey of Monmouth—even, in Polydore Vergil's *Anglicae Historiae* (History of England, 1534),[61] dismissing the historicity of his Arthurian characters out of hand. William Stewart in *The Buik of the Chroniclis of Scotland* (1531–35), Robert Fabyan in *The New Chronicles of England and France* (1516), and John Rastell in *The Pastime of People, or, The Chronicles of Divers Realms; and most especially of the Realm of England (1529)*[62] accepted Arthur and Merlin but rejected the supernatural element of Merlin's reputation—particularly as applied to such episodes as Arthur's conception and Stonehenge's transportation to Salisbury Plain. John Leland's judgment in his *Assertio Inclytissimi Arturii Regis Britanniae* (1544, trans. Richard Robinson, 1582) represents this empirical view: "*Merlinus* was in very deede a man euen miraculously learned in knowledge of thinges naturall, and especially in the science Mathematicall: For the which he was most acceptable and that deseruingly vnto the *Princes* of his time."[63] Commenting on Drayton's account of Merlin's birth, John Selden questions the very idea that supernatural beings can have children unless through artificial insemination: "I shall not beleeve that other then true bodies on

bodies can generate, except by swiftness of motion in conveying of stolne seed some unclean spirit might arrogate the improper name of generation"—and conjectures that his actual father was a Roman consul (*Poly-Olbion,* 107–8). He scorns Merlin's power to prophesy, as well: "I should abuse you, if I endevered to perseuade your beleefe to conceit of a true fore-knowledge in him" (211). But such views never erased the mage's usefulness as an icon of the marvelous. As Christopher Dean explains, "Drayton looks back…to a vanishing world of legend…; Selden looks forward…to a new world of enlightenment…. Drayton's world can easily embrace a figure such as Merlin; Selden's world still does but with increasing discomfort."[64] The fact that Selden's commentary was written at Drayton's own request demonstrates, rather than the triumph of either view, a prevailing "double vision" whereby both supernatural and rationalist conceptions of this ambiguous intermediary continued to be upheld.

Even as he descended into the arena of popular superstitions, Merlin retained an honorable role in epic poetry and dynastic propaganda. The most notable sixteenth-century examples are Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (Orlando's Madness, first published in 1516 and revised until 1532) and Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (the first three books of which were published in 1590, with three more in 1596).[65] Ariosto's chivalric epic derives from Carolingian and Arthurian tradition to continue Matteo Maria Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorata* (Orlando in Love, 1490),[66] and he uses Merlin's prophetic powers from the tomb to celebrate his and Boiardo's patrons, the Este family of Ferrara. It was translated into English heroic couplets by Sir John Harington in 1591, but Spenser probably used an Italian source of this episode for Book III, Canto iii, of *The Faerie Queene,* his tribute to the Tudor dynasty and Queen Elizabeth I. Spenser's version is very close to Ariosto's but relocates Merlin to his traditional Carmarthen cavern, where he prophesies to the female knight Bradamante directly rather than through an intermediary. The enchanter's history is briefly summarized, with special attention to his command of devils, yet his magic works to reveal truth rather than conceal it as corrupt necromancers like Archimago and Busirane do. Moreover, he has tutored Arthur—Spenser's embodiment of Magnificence, a virtue that encompasses all other virtues—and conveyed him to the realm of Faerie after Camlan. His most notable creations are Arthur's arms and armor (which include a shield made of diamond that deflects magical attacks), a mirror that reveals what is happening elsewhere (or elsewhen) and in which Britomart first sees her beloved (Arthur's half-brother Artegall), and an unfinished wall of brass for the protection of Britain.[67] Merlin's prophecies in Spenser depart from Geoffrey to encompass more actual British history and to present, in the words of Harry Berger, a pattern of "early ascendancy followed by some kind of failure which leads to a phase of captivity, withdrawal, or exile."[68] This pattern resonates not only with Geoffrey's *Prophecies,* but also with Old Testament history, Arthur's personal history, and the experiences of Spenser's other heroes as they strive to become worthy of their gifts.

With the decline of romance by the end of the sixteenth century and of chivalric epic after Spenser, the figure of Merlin was not fated to feature in the great literature of the early modern period. Interest in him had by then assumed a distinctly antiquarian

tone. Most often, he is used for incidental purposes, such as the Scottish folk tradition of his prophecy that when the Tweed and Pausayl streams united (as they apparently did at the accession of King James I), so would England and Scotland be united once more as under Arthur. At the same time, the development of empirical modes of inquiry gradually reduced him to a fanciful figure whose magical mechanics were based upon superstition and illusion. Consequently, he becomes a *deus ex machina,* semi-allegorical in function, increasingly divorced from literal belief in either his historical existence or purported powers. Such a diminution of belief could make him a farcical figure, as in Sir Aston Cockayn's *The Obstinate Lady* (1657),[69] where a fop tries to impress a young lady by reporting his visit to "Merlin's Cave, which is obscurely situated on the top of a beech, where all the night he lay on the ground."[70] To be sure, abundant skepticism about him had existed even in the Middle Ages, but during the sixteenth century the figure of Merlin dwindled into a literary convention enlivened by the stage and by lingering popular faith in astrology. The mage's popularity lay in lesser, mostly English fictions, from court masques to astrological almanacs where he became more a marketing device than a character.[71]

Like the Renaissance epics, these fictions increasingly depart from the medieval tradition in their plots, characterizations, and settings. The enchanter's stage potential was little used in Thomas Hughes's tragedy *The Misfortunes of Arthur* (1587),[72] but it proved highly appropriate to the composers of court masques—allegorical aristocratic theatricals that combined dialogue, song, and dance with extravagant settings, props, costumes, and tableaus. In Jacobean masques such as Ben Jonson's *Speeches at Prince Henry's Barriers* (1609) and William D'Avenant's *Britannia Triumphans* (1637)[73]—both collaborations with the brilliant architect and stage designer Inigo Jones—the mage is literally raised from his tomb, not only to act as prophet and counselor, but also to personify the stage illusion and its creators. In Jonson's masque, Merlin is released by the Lady of the Lake to exemplify Jonson's ideas about the poet's importance as a conscience and guide to royalty—here specifically James I's heir Prince Henry. In D'Avenant's spectacular for King Charles I, Merlin declines into the foppish parody of a necromancer with a splendid gown and magic wand, commanding demons and serving Imposture. Jones's contribution was to make their messages as apparent in the material means of production as in the words—an important stage in development toward modern multimedia Arthurian productions.

Burlesque is also the mage's fate during moments in *The Birth of Merlin: or, The Childe hath found his Father* (1620, published 1662), a play ascribed to William Rowley.[74] Here, the mage is begotten by a suave devil upon a woman of dubious propriety, Joan Go-too't, only to suffer Merlin's usual fate of enclosure in a rock. This uneven play modulates from comedy to melodrama, and it includes the episode of Vortigern's tower as well as Merlin's promise to erect Stonehenge as his mother's sepulcher. He asserts his grandest power in the climactic confrontation with his father, banishing him with a Latin incantation that implicitly reverses the one summoning Mephistopheles in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*. Like Jonson, John Dryden is another major writer who employs Merlin in a minor work. His magnificently staged "dramatick

opera" *King Arthur: or, The British Worthy* (1691),[75] with music by Henry Purcell, likewise makes the seer a "spokesperson of heaven's will" who establishes "the religious and national significance of Arthur" and successor kings.[76] He is not only a prophet and guide to Arthur, but in the Renaissance masque tradition a master of industrial light and magic who makes his initial entrance in an airborne chariot drawn by dragons and conducted by his spirits. The popularity of such special effects with the mage as mastermind is attested by the drama's 1736 revival under the title of *Merlin: or, The British Inchanter*.[77] Dryden's theatrical extravaganza was soon followed by Richard Blackmore's *Prince Arthur* (1695) and its sequel, *King Arthur* (1697).[78] These works confirm what little importance historical accuracy (if such a term can even be applied to a legend born as an anachronism!) held for early modern writers. Blackmore's Merlin is almost entirely detached from his roots as a sinister and pagan British necromancer, banished from his homeland and supporting the Saxons against Arthur, and ultimately converted into a prophet by God's holy power.

Although Saxons are the Britons' enemies in these works, Merlin's foresight in Dryden and in other literature from the accession of William and Mary onward often celebrates a Britain in which these enemies are united.[79] In fact, he is frequently invoked solely for the purpose of conferring supernatural approval upon the monarchy, as the prophet of a national identity rooted in King Arthur's legendary unification of Great Britain and (not incidentally) establishment of an imperial hegemony beyond its borders. The popular writer Thomas Heywood makes the most of this convention in *The Life of Merlin,* a hybrid of the chronicle tradition and prophecy printed in two editions of 1641 and 1651.[80] Heywood recycles long sections of Fabyan's *The Chronicles of England and France* and Alanus de Insulis's (Alain of Lille's) edition of Geoffrey's *Prophecies,*[81] explicating them in view of English history, and adding new prophecies as well as a defense of the seer 's veracity and an account of his early life. He recast some of the prophecies in two later pamphlets purporting to be the prognostications of a Puritan preacher named Thomas Brightman (1562–1607).[82] In fact, an industry of such pamphlets and astrological almanacs soon followed, adapting the prophetic figure of Merlin to the religious and political unrest of the seventeenth century. Those by William Lilly, starting in 1644 under the names of Merlinus Anglicus and Merlinus Junior, and continuing from 1689 onward by Lilly's publisher John Partridge as Merlinus Liberatus, remained particularly popular into the early eighteenth century.[83] This vogue and the prescientific credulousness that underlaid it was soon satirized by mock almanacs and by Jonathan Swift's *A Famous Prediction of Merlin, the British Wizard, Written Above a Thousand Years Ago and Relating to the Present Year 1709*.[84] Merlin's continued fame as a prophetic icon was both a response to contemporary needs and a function of his intermediate nature between the pagan past and Christian present, spiritual and material realms of being, and magical and empirical ways of reasoning. He incorporates an uneasy amalgam of revelation and rationality, attractively linked, for the English, to a sense of national identity.

As the eighteenth century Enlightenment progressed, there no longer seemed to be a place for the mage other than as a fanciful figure of popular superstition in vulgar

sideshows. Henry Fielding's *The Tragedy of Tragedies: or the Life and Death of Tom Thumb the Great* (1730) parodies the vogue of Senecan tragedy, Arthurian dramatic productions by authors like Hughes and Dryden, and even the legend itself, making Merlin responsible for the diminutive Tom's conception as well as Arthur's.[85] Lewis Theobald (1734) makes him the Mephistopheles of Stonehenge, whose demons and sorceries corrupt Faustulus, and Aaron Hill's unperformed *commedia dell' arte* pastiche *Merlin in Love* (1737) humiliates the amorous mage by having Columbine, the object of his attentions, turn him into an ass with his own wand so that she may be free to marry Harlequin.[86] The great London actor and producer David Garrick not only revived Dryden's *King Arthur* with increased emphasis upon Merlin, but preceded his revival by three years with *Cymon* (1767).[87] This spectacle reworked Dryden's narrative poem *Cymon and Iphigenia* with a plot driven by Merlin as the rejected lover and rival of the enchantress Urganda.[88] Interest in Dryden continued to provoke interest in Merlin during the nineteenth century, with revivals of *King Arthur* in 1803, 1819, 1827, and 1842.[89]

Even as the legend's popular appeal dwindled into nontraditional spectacles, however, a romantic revival was being prepared by antiquarian scholars and minor poets such as Richard Hole. In Hole's *Arthur: or, The Northern Enchantment* (1789),[90] Merlin is given a forest dwelling and a daughter, Inogen, whom Arthur loves, and he is awarded the supernatural power to aid the king by the Genius of the Isle. The admixture of other literary traditions is manifest: Hole numbers among his influences Virgilian, Scandinavian, and Miltonic epic, as well as Ossianic and fairy lore. Little more Arthurian than its postmedieval forebears, it nonetheless prefigures the nineteenth-century return to early literary sources and, just as significantly, signals that Merlin and Arthur have become figures capable of survival by absorbing other literary models—master tropes in their own right.

On the Continent, Merlin fared even less well during the three centuries after Malory's epochal revision of his French (and English) sources. Ariosto's early-sixteenth-century epic *Orlando Furioso* revives, after all, only Merlin's spirit; his dead body remains locked in its marble tomb. Nevertheless, the volume of printed Arthurian romances and retellings penetrated an ever wider and more socially varied readership, and it thus laid the foundation of the legend's survival on the Continent as in England. The chief Arthurian characters like Merlin even retained enough popular appeal to merit mention by major writers, such as François Rabelais in the sixteenth century[91] and Miguel de Cervantes early in the seventeenth.

Cervantes's use of the mage in Part Two of *El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quixote de la Mancha* (The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of la Mancha, 1615)[92] is unusually suggestive, and in fact is central to the theme of illusion and reality that pervades the work. In chapters XXII–XXIII of this work, Quixote visits a great natural marvel, the cave of Montesinos. He is lowered by rope one hundred feet into the cave and pulled up with eyes shut as in a sound sleep after half an hour. As he tells it, his sojourn there lasted three days, during which he discovered a pastoral Elysium with enchanted inmates (including Guenevere) and a crystal castle (like Merlin's house of glass in Welsh tradition, or castle of air in the Vulgate *Estoire de Merlin*), all enchanted by the

mage more than five hundred years before. There he meets the spirit of the minor Carolingian ballad hero Montesinos and hears the voice of the hero Durandarte speaking, like Merlin, from his tomb. Quixote learns from Montesinos that the lakes of Ruidera are women whom the magician has transformed, and that Merlin has even prophesied "great things" of him. His servant and squire, Sancho Panza, thinks that Merlin has enchanted the Don, too, and even the fictional author of the book, Cide Hamete Benengeli, comments in a marginal gloss on the apocryphal nature of the episode. Quixote's subterranean experience becomes a conundrum about the margins of plausibility, as Merlin's magic often is in Arthurian romances. Because Merlin himself is both a natural and a supernatural being, he is capable of giving space, time, and even the bodies and environments surrounding him a fluid nature in which the concrete particulars of fantasy are coeval with those of the physical world.[93]

The influence of Cervantes extended to France, where theater and ballet made Merlin the center of several seventeenth-century works, including Guérin de Bouscal's adaptation of Cervantes, *Don Quichot de la Manche* (1640) and its revision by Madeleine Béjart, *Don Quichot ou les Enchantements de Merlin* (1660) ,[94] The increasing focus on Merlin's stage magic in the English masque and in such plays as these foreshadows the two versions of Dryden's Arthurian drama. Other elements of the mage's tradition and signs of his decline into a comic figure appeared on the French stage in Rosidor's *Les Amours de Merlin* (1671) and the Comédie Française's *Merlin Peintre* (Merlin the Painter, 1687), Dancourt's 1690 production titled *Merlin Déserteur,* and Jacques Siret's *Merlin Gascon* in the same year.[95] Cervantes's Montesinos episode and the stage appearances of Merlin in England and France had little apparent impact on German or Dutch Arthurian literature, however. There was no Dutch revival of Merlin until the nineteenth century; despite Hans Sachs's interest in the Tristan legend, there was no new German Merlin beyond the occasional allusion, until the Romantic period with Christoph Martin Wieland's brief summary of the mage's legend from Comte de Tressan's *Bibliothèque universelle des romans* in *Merlin der Zauberer* (Merlin the Enchanter, 1777).[96] Then, as it did elsewhere, interest soon focused upon Merlin's prophetic powers and entombed voice, mentioned in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's second "Kophtisches Lied" (Coptic Song, 1787),[97] and followed in the next century with a new round of translations and works by Wieland, Karl Leberecht Immerman, and others.

Nineteenth Century

Most accounts of the Arthurian revival during the nineteenth century begin with reference to the Romantic poets, and poetic interest in Merlin did increase during the 1790s. It is, however, more accurate to emphasize the influence of antiquarian collectors and summarizers like the Comte de Tressan, Thomas Percy, Thomas Warton, Joseph Ritson, and George Ellis.[98] Ellis's commentary and detailed prose paraphrases of much Arthurian romance material regarding Merlin and others in *Specimens of Early English Metrical Romances* (1805) also provided a model for Robert Southey in his influential 1817 edition of Malory.[99] They reintroduced the details of

Merlin's exploits (and to the particular fascination of the century, his fatal love affair), and it was often they upon whom the later Romantic and other Victorian writers drew. Not only were earlier romances rediscovered, but local lore bruited topographical traditions such as the mage's connections with Stonehenge, the confluence of the Tweed River and Pausayl Burn at Drummelzier in Scotland, and assorted caves and supposed resting places in the Isle of Man, Wales, Cornwall, and Brittany. Examples of this group include Peter Roberts's attention to Merlin and Arthur in *The Cambrian Popular Antiquities* (1815) and the Cornish traditions related by Richard Polwhele (*The History of Cornwall,* 1803) and Thomas Hogg (*The Fabulous History of The Ancient Kingdom of Cornwall,* 1827). Even more romantically inclined than historical studies were travel writers reporting on visits to places like Tintagel, Snowdonia, and Barenton in Brittany; for example, Louisa Costello's guidebook *The Falls, Lakes and Mountains of North Wales* (1845) locates Merlin's grotto for the "fairy Viviana, or the White Serpent" near the top of Mount Snowdon. As Roger Simpson observes, the term "Enchanter" was commonly applied to Merlin,[100] with his mantic power, command of spirits, and fate at the hands of his fairy lover being the primary invocations of his legend. By Tennyson's day, interest in the mage had reached such a pitch in some quarters that he had been reclaimed, not only as an attraction of romanticized travel literature, but as the archetypal Druid of pre-Christian British religion. He was proudly identified in the banner of the *Monmouthshire Merlin,* a regional newspaper inaugurated in 1829 with "Merlin Redivivus," a poem reviving him to witness the wonders of newly industrialized Wales.[101]

While romantic interests were piqued by Merlin and the Arthurian legend, the great Romantic poets made only sparing references to them in their work, including William Blake's "Merlins Prophecy," Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Pang More Sharp than All," John Keats's "The Eve of St. Agnes," Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Charles the First," Robert Southey's *"Madoc,"* and four poems by William Wordsworth.[102] Only Wordsworth's "The Egyptian Maid" (1835) is Arthurian.[103] Except for Southey, their acquaintance with the legend also seems scant: Wordsworth's narrative poem relates an original tale in which Merlin is all-powerful but "freakish" and "envious," wrecking the vessel carrying the Egyptian Maid on a whim. Nonetheless, Wordsworth is following both a major and a minor tradition. Merlin has always been a dualistic if not Manichaean being (the major one), who also had cast malicious spells (the minor one) in Blackmore and Theobald; in Reginald Heber's *The Masque of Gwendolyn* (1816), the infernal enchanter turns the unlucky Gwendolyn, after she rejects his advances, into a loathly crone who may only be restored by her knight's kiss.[104]

A no less freakish but considerably more compassionate wizard is portrayed in Sir Walter Scott's poem "The Bridal of Triermain" (1813), where he raises a whirlwind and earthquake to end the carnage of a tournament and casts its cause, Arthur's daughter Gyneth, into an enchanted sleep.[105] Henry Hart Milman's *Samor, Lord of the Bright City: An Heroic Poem* (1818) is an extended revision of Arthurian legend in which the mage's prophecies about Britain's destiny are recast by the author's royalist hindsight and Christian faith.[106] Milman's hero is a completely new invention; even his traditional characters such as Uther and Gorlois, Merlin and Arthur, jarringly trade

some of their received roles (with Uther as lawful husband, Gorlois as adulterous abductor, and Arthur, not Merlin, as the infant prodigy). Thomas Love Peacock's Merlin in *The Misfortunes of Elphin* (1829) and two lesser works (the fragmentary *Calidore,* 1816, and "The Round Table; or, King Arthur's Feast," 1817) is a druid and spell-caster on intimate terms with nature's secrets.[107] Peacock's interest in Welsh legend, despite his use of it to satirize contemporary British society and politics, points out the intense antiquarian interest in rediscovered sources; Merlin's entertainment for King Arthur in "The Round Table" echoes his illusions summoned for Viviane in the Vulgate and for Vortigern in Heywood's *Life of Merlin,* and his inexhaustible picnic hamper in *The Misfortunes of Elphin* recalls magical vessels such as Ceridwen's cauldron and the Grail. Some writers, like John Moultrie, conceived of his magic as thoroughly up to date. In his comic verse narrative *La Belle Tryamour* (1823–24, revised 1837), Moultrie shows the eclectic influences of Thomas Chester's *Sir Launfal* (1400), Dryden, and Peacock.[108] He not only recapitulates Merlin's biography, but has him cure Arthur of the "blue devils" by providing a magic-mirror peep show of Guenever taking a bath. Moreover, he reveals, "He knew as much as ever mortal knew" (I. xlviii),[109] in such varied occupations as literary critic, pharmacist, cobbler, surgeon, and farrier. Such readjustments of Arthurian legend, and even the mage's frequent detachment from his original legendary context and placement into new plots, show his power both as a popular icon and as a Romantic symbol of supernatural forces penetrating natural mysteries. Even the infernal element of Merlin's character could serve the Romantic temper, with some portrayals of his titanic capabilities verging upon the gothic—as in Wordsworth and Heber, as well as in John Magor Boyle's *Gorlaye* (1835),[110] which emphasizes his demonic, even animalistic, appearance.[111]

Iconoclastic plots like these expanded traditional Arthurian ones with new or reconfigured episodes, as had been the case even in medieval romance. The most ambitious departure from tradition was Edward Bulwer-Lytton's verse epic *King Arthur* (1848).[112] Although its author's favorite among his voluminous works, it seemed stilted and pretentious to most critics even in its own day. In it, Merlin, an amply bearded patriarch living in a lonely tower at Camelot, orchestrates a quasi-allegorical struggle between Cymri and Saxons. A plethora of individual quests (especially for Arthur, Gawaine, and Lancelot) that were never in Malory compose a "national romance" that is not only awkwardly reminiscent of Spenser's *Faerie Queene* but also freighted with an antiquarian pot-pourri of allusions. Nevertheless, it has occasional defenders, such as Christopher Dean, who perceives a certain "grandeur" in its portrayal of the prophetic master-mind: in Lytton's own words, "less as the wizard of popular legend, than as the seer gifted with miraculous powers for the service and ultimate victory of Christianity."[113]

During the first half of the nineteenth century, therefore, Merlin was known primarily as a magician and secondarily as a prophet.[114] The steadily increasing references to him and to the Arthurian legend continued the pattern of the previous three centuries, with scattered allusions, gradual rediscovery of original sources and local lore, and eclectic adaptations or departures from a medieval legend that was

partially and imperfectly remembered. In the hands of major Victorian poets, however, the treatment of Merlin and other Arthurian characters became less "freakish," more soundly based upon Malory, and particularly focused on the mage's connection with the Grail quest and even more so with his fatal love affair, which became a major theme. Merlin takes a secondary role to Arthur's knights in the Grail quest, but he prepares and foretells its events. As the Grail itself became a mystical talisman of Victorian true manhood and the spiritual aspirations of the Victorians, in literary fiction the mage remains a guide to the quest but not to its purportedly Christian theological mysteries. With his compromised origins, either he departs from the scene before the quest takes place or, as in Robert Stephen Hawker's *The Quest of the Sangraal* (1863),[115] he remains only to show the significance of its loss. In the nineteenth-century reinvention of druidism and subsequent occult studies, however, he would develop a much more active role as an initiate and shower of the way.

From early in the century, Merlin's often pyrotechnical magic was frequently contrasted to the Lady of the Lake's gentler spells, whether she was treated as his paramour or not. Even the earlier Welsh tradition occasionally becomes a source, as in Glasgow professor John Veitch's "Merlin" (1889).[116] In this poem, Merlin has pursued a Faustian thirst for knowledge and power, only to be redeemed from his madness by his sister Gwendydd and lover Hwimleian just before he drowns in the Tweed. The Lady of the Lake (effectively displacing Merlin's sister in medieval romance) and beloved Nimuë were often conflated following Malory's identification of Nimuë/Nyneve as one of the Lady's damsels, and both figures had retained characteristics of fairy folk. But Victorian public morality also suppressed a strong sexual undertow. The Lady herself often became (when differentiated from her damsel as in Wordsworth and later Tennyson) a gracious, almost allegorical paragon of "true womanhood" and feminine wisdom, with an interest in reconciliation akin to Wealtheow's in *Beowulf*. But Nimuë, under her various names, often acquired more duplicitous and sinister characteristics as a *femme fatale,* with destructive consequences for Arthurian society through her removal of its chief advisor. In this respect, Merlin's affair with her could resonate with similar transgressions—especially Tristram and Iseult's. Matthew Arnold's *Tristram and Iseult* (1852) and Charles Algernon Swinburne's *Tristram of Lyonesse* (1882) both establish links between those fated lovers and Merlin's attraction to Vivian/Nimuë, as in each poem the love-death theme is mirrored through the mage's enclosure in a serene stasis that escapes mortal disappointment and physical decay.[117] The two poems present Merlin's romance as a story or dream rather than an event, elevated from the realm of action to that of art. In Arnold's poem, Iseult of Brittany tells the story to a group of children; her Vivian is a fairy, "witching fair" (l. 181), who ensorcels her lover in the "magic ground" (l. 220) of Broceliande because, as in Malory, "she was passing weary of his love" (l. 224). Vivian's "weariness" of the wizard (as Iseult of Ireland and Tristram are at times "wearied" by their inescapable attachment to one another) contrasts with Merlin's sleepiness, and she transforms his sleep into a kind of death; an undercurrent of the second Iseult's narration is her own frustrated love for Tristram. In Swinburne, Tristram tells his lover the tale of Merlin's begetting in his mother's sleep, and later he

imagines with her how Nimuë, who is also the Lady of the Lake, "shut him in with sleep as kind as death" (p. 48). In this state, he passes the seasons listening to her song, sensuously absorbed into nature and united with her "as blood recircling through the unsounded veins/Of earth and heaven with all their joys and pains" (p. 116). It is a fate envied by the lovers.

The definitive treatment of the wizard in nineteenth-century English literature is that of Alfred, Lord Tennyson. In the unpublished "Ballad of Sir Launcelot" (early 1830s), he envisions Merlin Emrys conventionally enough as a bony, thin-legged enchanter "wise and gray"—"Worldly Prudence" according to Tennyson's friend J.M.Kemble. His prose drafts of the same period describe him allegorically as Science, who marries his daughter to Mordred.[118] Dean regards this relationship with Mordred as an indication that Tennyson began by regarding Merlin as "evil,"[119] but the evidence is too slight and speculative for such a conclusion. It is more feasible to say that, as Tennyson's characterization of him developed, he became a more sympathetic and less stereotypical academic figure. The magic of this embryonic Merlin seems uneasily poised between superstition and rationalism. His development during the composition of *The Idylls of the King,* from 1857 when the first trial edition appeared, to 1885 when the last idyll ("Balin and Balan") was added, remained significantly allegorical but became fascinatingly complex. Part of the reason for this complexity may be apparent in Tennyson's growing personal identification with the character: by 1852 he was employing "Merlin" as a pseudonym; he later had his picture taken as the wizard; and at the end of his career he wrote "Merlin and the Gleam" (1889) as a capsule verse autobiography.[120] Dan Beard caricatured this self-identification in his illustrations for Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) by using Tennyson's portrait as the basis for Merlin.

The Merlin of the *Idylls* is a major character, with emphasis on his roles of prophet, counselor, wizard, and "lover" (reflecting, while simultaneously pushing the boundaries of, Victorian delicacy about the last). Though playing only a supporting role in the early idylls, he becomes a major harbinger of the kingdom's decline and failure in the central idyll of "Merlin and Vivien" (1859). Moreover, he is presented as the kingdom's architect, the man whose vision prepares the way for Arthur, receives him, and builds his citadel. In the initial idyll "The Coming of Arthur," Tennyson introduces the mage whose "vast wit/ And hundred winters" (ll. 279–80) are described by Bedivere and immediately contrasted to the Lady of the Lake, "Who knows a subtler magic than his own—" and who gives Arthur Excalibur (l. 283). Despite "knowing all arts" ("Gareth and Lynette," l. 300) and "the range of all their [i.e., Camelot's] arts" ("Merlin and Vivien," l. 165), Merlin's ability to distinguish between illusion and reality falls prey to melancholy at the encroaching enviousness and dissolution in Camelot's society, and this leaves him vulnerable to the snakelike wiles of Vivien, whose own "subtler magic" is rooted in sex and death. Following a hint by Tennyson's son Hallam, who saw Vivien as "the evil genius of the Round Table," Fred Kaplan suggests that she is an anima figure, "a projection" of the mage's own romantic imagination in its darker, perverse aspect.[121] The young Vivien functions not only as a foil to Merlin but also as an ignoble counterpart to the noble

Lady of the Lake; together, they encompass the range of women's arts that even Merlin cannot master. In this sense, their female magic is like the "scroll/Of letters in a tongue no man could read," carved "like a serpent" on the Siege Perilous where "once by misadvertence Merlin sat/…and so was lost" ("The Holy Grail" ll. 170–71, 175–76)—a chair that dooms all but the virginal Galahad. That Merlin himself has fashioned the chair, as he has Camelot's towers and so much else, is no proof against his human weakness. Completely reversing his dogged pursuit of Nimuë in Malory, Vivien stays with him, fixed in her purpose to seduce and destroy until she learns his charm of enclosure and uses it against him.

The patriarchal, Victorian conception of ideal womanhood as domestic, nurturing, and subservient to male authority was significantly undercut by fear of the independent, seductive woman who threatened to usurp the masculine prerogative of power and active involvement in public life. Tennyson's *Idylls* defined this ideology as memorably as any literary work of the period, representing Merlin, Arthur, and the knights of the Round Table as either supported or betrayed by their women. In the first official edition, *The True and The False: Four Idylls of The* King (1859), the true women Enid and Elaine are contrasted with the false women Guinevere and Vivien (renamed from Nimuë in the 1857 trial edition of two idylls), and it is indicative of Camelot's fate that the two betrayers are erotically linked to the kingdom's two most powerful men. Tennyson's theme of the highest aspirations undone by the power of the worm, of Adam cast out from Eden through Eve and the serpent, thus speaks not only to a certain social model (that would itself be rewritten a century later by the feminism and the neopaganism that were already beginning to stir in Tennyson's time), but to suppressed and sublimated masculine fear of women's sexuality. Tennyson's Merlin, for all his powers, ultimately becomes a "rotted branch," not simply as a lustful old devil in the *senex amans* tradition, but in an uncharacteristic moment of weakness—wavering among avuncular indulgence, erotic importunity, and suppressed recognition of his seducer's evil. Noted as a riddler, the mage himself becomes a riddle, unmanned by forces more sweeping than either he or Vivien can command. As the dying Arthur observes, these forces transcend human morality: "And God fulfils himself in many ways,/Lest one good custom should corrupt the world" ("The Passing of Arthur," ll. 409–10). In God's order, even Vivien's corruption is finally another expression of change in "the hall that Merlin built" ("Pelleas and Ettare," l. 542).

Merlin's demise, however, necessitates that Arthur and his knights and ladies work out their destinies on their own, and in this fact lies perhaps the story's strongest appeal for the Victorian-era conscience: every individual must eventually assume responsibility for his or her own fate; no Merlin can guide us forever, nor should he. This point is made at the century's end even in J.Comyns Carr's *King Arthur* (1895), a dramatic spectacular starring Ellen Terry and Henry Irving, the most famous actors of the day.[122] There the wizard's chief function is to comment upon the fated actions of the principals, beginning with the achieving of Excalibur and ending with a valedictory upon Arthur's passing. But when Arthur asks, "Hath not thy magic art all power to stay/The hand of Fate?" Merlin answers, "Our knowledge is not power"

(240). Ultimately it is the sage's human limitations, not his allegorical weight as magus ex machina, that ironically redeem him by making him perennially interesting as a literary character.[123]

Despite these limitations, Merlin is capable of inspiring and even undergoing rebirth himself. Ernest Rhys's interest in romance and Welsh tradition produced a series of short Arthurian works between 1897 and 1915, including poems such as "The Death of Merlin" (1898) in which a monk named Morial writes Merlin's history, reflects upon traditions of the mage's burial in a Cornish cave or enclosure in an otherworldly glass ship or castle, and dies dreaming of his rebirth (that will lead to Arthur's) through a druid ceremony. In American literature, this theme developed increasing importance as the mage gradually became associated with democratizing models of individualism. As the work of Alan and Barbara Lupack demonstrates, "Merlin, like the mythic American, has the potential to create a new world," just as the Grail quest that he foresees or prepares has the potential to become "a common metaphor for the American Dream."[124]

It was in the nineteenth century that Merlin first entered American literature—not surprisingly, as a prophet—through Joseph Leigh's anti-British pamphlet *Illustration of the Fulfilment of the Prediction of Merlin* (1807).[125] He next became a symbol of magical power in Lambert A.Wilmer's *Merlin: A Drama in Three Acts* (1827), where he unites the star-crossed lovers Alphonso and Elmira.[126] Despite its undistinguished verse and nodding acquaintance with Arthurian tradition, Wilmer's poem foreshadows what would become an American tradition of altering the wizard's received legend with influences from non-Arthurian literature: hardly a new strategy, but one perhaps more readily applied to a tradition that is itself imported rather than native, at least until that tradition has rerooted itself in the new cultural milieu. In Wilmer's case (as in many others), a major influence was another commander of spirits associated with the New World, Shakespeare's Prospero.

The litany of Merlin's functions continued in a group of lyric poems by transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson, which represent him as the ideal poet just before Tennyson came to regard him as a personal icon of that vocation.[127] In five poems, mostly from 1846, Emerson's "kingly bard" and his "mighty line" are identified with the harp. Whether plucked by human or the wind's fingers, its rhymes "Extremes of nature reconciled" ("Merlin I"). Like Ben Jonson's master bard, prophet, and counselor, he governs "the king's affairs," bringing all things into balance ("Merlin II") and "modulating all extremes" ("The Harp"). As the Lupacks point out, by recognizing the order of the universe he establishes the necessity for human society to reflect that order.[128] Thus Merlin's bardic function links prophecy and counseling. Yet in Emerson Merlin is still not so much a person as a concept, marking both an absence and a potential in American society—as the critic R.A.Yoder describes him, a *deus absconditus,* or visionary force that is missing from mundane life and needing the poet's voice to be restored.[129]

Nathaniel Hawthorne's Merlin is similarly absent, but his potential influence in "The Antique Ring" (1842) is less benign.[130] In this story, Edward Caryl invents a romantic tradition for the antique ring he gives to his fiancée, in which the wizard

imprisons in its diamond a demon who may work only good when faithful love unites the giver and recipient, but evil if it does not. This pastiche treatment of Merlin's own double-edged pledge to his lover invokes both his magical art and his infernal nature, and it typifies the way that most American writers use the mage: indicating at least a partial dependency on European cultural roots by appropriating and reinterpreting them for local purposes.

Two widely differing treatments of Merlin's legend that appeared in 1889 do just this to both the character and Tennyson's influence. The minor work (from Britain), Ralph Macleod Fullarton's *Merlin,*[131] portrays a love triangle of Morgan, Merlin, and Vivien. Seeing Morgan as a rival for the magician's power and affection, Vivien schemes to entomb him but then dooms herself as well by entering the tomb to ensure that he is dead. The mage is presented as attuned to nature and to love, the "secret soul" of all things (12), but he has little personality. The opposite, however, is true of him in the major work from 1889, Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*.[132] There, Merlin is a humbug enchanter and rival of Hank Morgan, the arms factory superintendent who is transported back in time by a blow from a crowbar. Twain himself described this premise at a reading prior to the novel's publication: "Take a practical man, thoroughly equipped with the scientific enchantments of our day and set him down alongside of Merlin the head magician of Arthur's time, and what sort of a show would Merlin stand?"[133] Arthur's wizard unsuccessfully attempts to have Hank burned at the stake, but Hank's knowledge of a fortuitous full eclipse saves him and establishes his reputation, which he enhances first by blowing up Merlin's tower in a duel of "magic" and then by assigning him to work (ineffectually) the weather. Envious of the Yankee's nineteenth-century technical know-how, and especially of his growing power in the kingdom, Merlin is bested during two more confrontations—the Yankee's restoration of the fountain in the Valley of Holiness and his joust with Sir Sagramor and the assembled knights-errant of Camelot, using a lariat and a pistol in lieu of lance and armor. "Somehow, every time the magic of fol-de-rol tried conclusions with the magic of science, the magic of fol-de-rol got left" (393). Nevertheless, Merlin's magic proves not to be completely impotent, for when Hank proclaims a republic after Arthur's death and defeats the traditional forces assembled against him by the Church, the magician casts him into a thirteen-century sleep before electrocuting himself.

Twain's parody of the Arthurian legends' idealism and Tennyson's sage was made all the more pointed by Dan Beard's visual jabs at the Poet Laureate and aristocracy, and it was taken unkindly by many British critics. The anonymous reviewer of the January 13, 1890, London *Daily Telegraph* accused Twain of "fling[ing] pellets of mud upon the high altar" of Arthurian idealism, and the book even offended British authors otherwise appreciative of Twain's humor, like Andrew Lang and Rudyard Kipling. Yet the narrative is much more than the simple parody of Twain's early conception. For Hank is clearly Merlin in modern guise, his darker qualities as well as his rivalry with Merlin suggested by the eventual choice of "Morgan" over "Smith" as his last name, as well as his imprisonment in a cave by Merlin himself in woman's guise (an "anti-Vivian," one could say). If Merlin is Camelot's architect in Tennyson, Hank becomes

its engineer in Twain. Moreover, the narrative is intentionally slanted by framing the Yankee as its amusing, impassioned, but untrustworthy narrator. Both characters are interlopers, rearranging history to suit their vision. The satire is double edged: not just against the "benightedness" and injustices of a Middle Ages dominated by aristocratic and ecclesiastical privilege, but against the consequences of human and technological abuses in modern times as well. Thus the novel has two Merlins as well as two Morgans, who merge in the Yankee. Twain's dual Merlins are primarily magicians, counselors, and prophets, but Merlin is also a bard of sorts (his lengthy story puts everyone to sleep) and Hank becomes a lover (marrying Alisande la Carteloise, the damsel who accompanies him on a quest and bears him a child, Hello-Central). The contrasts among these intentionally replicated figures demonstrate the corrupting influence of power and eventually call into question nineteenth-century assumptions about reality and progress, as Henry Nash Smith suggests about Hank's account of the joust: "The most obvious meaning is, of course, that Merlin is only a fraud, with no real power, whereas the Yankee wields the true power of science, which is magical only in the eyes of ignorant spectators. But the Yankee implies that he and Merlin are almost evenly matched…."[134] Does the Yankee say this only for purposes of showmanship and suspense? And what should the reader make of this implied equivalence?

By the century's end, it was clear that the Arthurian legends and character of Merlin in particular had been absorbed into the mythopoeic imagination of North America. Indeed, Richard Hovey's nine-part cycle *Launcelot and Guenevere: A Poem in Dramas,* begun in 1891 and unfinished at his death in 1900,[135] draws wholesale upon the European mythological inheritance by placing Greek and Roman, Scandinavian, Celtic, Christian, and folkloric divinities on the same stage as the Arthurian characters. The opening masque, *The Quest of Merlin* (1891), has the mage travel to Avalon—where it appears that all mythological beings reside—for advice about Arthur's impending marriage. Philosophically aligned with the Pre-Raphaelites and Swinburne rather than with Tennyson, Hovey translates his own flamboyantly non-Victorian romance with an older married woman into Merlin's relationship with his guide and lover Nimuë, and even more into the transgressive love of Lancelot and Guenevere.

On the European continent during the nineteenth century, Merlin and the Arthurian legend remain in eclipse except for antiquarian revivalism, occasional nationalistic themes, and romantic symbolism—and then only in France and Germany. In France, the work of Hersart de la Villemarqué and Paulin Paris adapted the Arthurian legends into modern French, but with little immediate influence on other writers. Villemarqué's main contribution to the Merlin legend, however, was *Myrdhinn ou l'enchanteur Merlin, son histoire, ses œuvres, son influence* (Myrdhinn or Merlin the Enchanter, His History, Works, and Influence, 1862) and a group of Merlin poems in his *Barzaz-Breiz: Chantes populaires de la Bretagne* (Breton Poetry: Popular Ballads of Brittany, 1867).[136] For many years, the ballads were considered to be Villemarqué's own forgeries, but recently they have been discovered to be authentic, though greatly emended.[137] As Françoise le Saux summarizes them, "The

Breton ballads chart Merlin's development from wonder-child to powerful enchanter to marginalized victim, culminating with his reconciliation with God and the social group that had never truly adopted him."[138] The four poems capture different aspects of the wizard, from his conception by a spirit in bird's shape impregnating his mother by song and kisses at her ear, to his gifts of prophecy and divination, to his involvement in a betrothal quest where the bride's suitor must retrieve Merlin's harp, ring, and person, to his final retreat as a madman into the forest and blessing by St. Kado (the Breton equivalent of St. Kentigern). They reflect the early themes associated with Merlin, emphasizing the otherness that makes him an object both of wonder and fear. In Le Saux's view, they ultimately construct a tale about Christian mastery of the supernatural and the conversion of Merlin himself.

Perhaps the major French work of the nineteenth century to feature Merlin is Edgar Quinet's immense philosophical novel *Merlin l'enchanteur* (Merlin the Enchanter, 1860).[139] As a supporter of the French Republic critiquing the nation's decline under Emperor Napoleon III, Quinet took Merlin as an alter ego of himself and the symbolic spirit of France. As in the Breton ballads, his epic is not simply about exile but, according to Michael Glencross, about its "inner experience…, a sense of the gulf between the artist and society and of the conflict or misunderstanding between individuals."[140] Villemarqué had recast the early Merlin tradition in romantic form, but Quinet liberally uses anachronism to bring Merlin together with a cross-section of historical and literary figures, such as Hengist, Robin Hood, Robespierre, Faust, and Don Juan during his wanderings, and the enchanter eventually rescues Arthur (and the republic) from apparent death with the cup of the Grail. Quinet thus reaffirms the otherness of Villemarqué's enchanter as an essential part of the French spirit, combining rationalism with questing "Celtic" individualism in contrast with stereotypical Germanic abstraction and pedantry.[141] Unusually, Merlin's falling in love with Viviane (a nature deity in the narrative; also the name of Quinet's second wife) proves not the end but the beginning of his magical powers, and his final enclosure is in the Vulgate tradition of her wish to preserve him for herself in a life-in-death embrace. In Quinet's imaginative world, as in Twain's, however, corrupting forces beyond the control of democratic champions sometimes whittle away the difference between despots and charismatic leaders such as Arthur and Merlin. This potential for corruption is, of course, inherent in Merlin's character and used "against the grain" by writers wishing to emphasize it; it had been part of Merlin's attraction to the Romantic temperament and would soon be featured in Guillaume Apollinaire's *L'Enchanteur pourrissant* (The Putrescent Enchanter, 1904).[142] Although French nineteenth-century writers explored all of Merlin's roles, they appeared most enchanted with Merlin's mercurial talents and symbolic availability as a magician.

German Romantic literature treated Merlin in similar symbolic ways, but more frequently—emphasizing Merlin's demonic inheritance, nation-making powers, and internment by his beloved. The elegiac motif of Merlin prophesying from his tomb was used by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and established by *Geschichte des Zauberers Merlin* (Story of Merlin the Magician, 1804) published by Friedrich Schlegel.[143] This

book was actually a translation by Schlegel's wife, Dorothea, of the French Vulgate *Merlin;* its influence in Germany was comparable to that of Southey's edition of Malory in England, and like Southey's Malory reestablished patterns that would be mined repeatedly. Ludwig Tieck translated two English farces: Henry Fielding's *Tom Thumb* (in 1811) and William Rowley's *The Birth of Merlin* (in 1829),[144] but these proved to be anomalies in the century's thrust to make Merlin a touchstone of German philosophical concerns and of nature. Near the end of his career, Christoph Martin Wieland followed his eighteenth-century prose summary of Merlin's life with a long narrative poem, *Merlins weissagende Stimme aus seiner Gruft* (Merlin's Prophetic Voice from His Grave, 1810), in which he uses the passing of Camelot to express nostalgia over the end of the German classical age. Karl Leberecht Immerman's two poems, "Merlins Grab" (Merlins Grave, 1818) and "Merlin im tiefen Grab" (Merlin in the Deep Grave, 1833), also employ Merlin as a symbolic voice for the natural world,[145] the circularity of life, and the immortalizing influence of mortal love—motifs once more foreshadowing his fate as envisioned by Swinburne and others. Through these motifs, the prophetic or bardic voice even outlasts the speaker's removal from active life in society and his absorption into the processes of nature.

This philosophical thrust of his entombment implicitly contrasts his attunement to nature, both in the sense of "enlightenment and consolation"[146] and in the more limited sense of the beauties and rhythms of the physical environment, with the narrowness and hurley-burley of everyday concerns, social fashions, and political ideologies. Merlin's return to his roots in nature, either as a recluse or as a lover, is also alluded to by several other poems. Ludwig Uhland's "Merlin der Wilde" (Merlin the Wild Man, 1829)[147] explores the early Welsh identity of Merlin as covalent with the forest from which he draws his strength and for which he rejects the court of King Roderick (Rhydderch)—far from the predominant medieval Christian view of the wild man as suffering from bestial reversion and extremes of weather. Yet the motif of his love for Nimuë also remains important in poems by Heinrich Heine (1837) and others, as well as in a modernization of the affair in Paul Heyse's novel *Merlin* (1892); Alexander Kaufmann's "Merlin und Niniane" (1852) further demonstrates the tendency to associate Merlin with thought and his beloved with nature or emotion.[148]

Another enduring motif regarding Merlin in nineteenth-century German literature is his dualism. Rudolph von Gottschall's novel *Merlins Wanderungen* (Merlin's Travels, 1887), for instance, features the conflict between his infernal origins and his redemptive goals.[149] The century's most ambitious treatment of the figure, Karl Leberecht Immermann's lengthy drama *Merlin, eine Mythe* (Merlin, a Myth, 1832),[150] used this theme to enlarge the scope of his character. Drawing from a wide array of sources, including Wolfram von Eschenbach, Schlegel, and Tieck, Immerman conceives of Merlin in a post-Romantic mode as a super-powered Everyman who is tainted (but unbowed) by his infernal inheritance. Artus (not Vortigern, who does not appear in this drama) "searches for the child without a father"; in a meeting at Stonehenge, Satan fails to recruit his son's assistance. Satan does enlist the aid of Merlin's rival at Artus's court, the magician Klingsor, who suffers Vortigern's fate by dying in his burning castle. Merlin rebels against the demonic plan that he become the

Antichrist, but his attempt to crown Artus as the Grail King fails: he is seduced by Ninianna, who takes advantage of his equivocal being and his need for love to work his magic. Lacking his guidance, the questing knights die in a desert, and the discovery of his guilt drives Merlin mad. He is killed by his father when he once more refuses to obey his bidding. An epilogue invokes the device of the voice from the grave to deliver Immerman's message: one must save oneself before saving others, support nature and family, and search for the Grail in one's heart. Merlin becomes "a myth" in that he is a guide and example: his spirit can never die nor rest until this message is fully comprehended. The voice therefore implies that the dualism of human nature impels a constant and largely unsuccessful struggle to resolve our conflicting impulses, making tragic our predominant experience of history. The consequences of eventual perfection are perhaps uplifting, but less compelling than imperfection.

Twentieth Century

The steadily increasing volume of Merlin literature during the nineteenth century has necessitated the omission of many lesser works from mention here; it becomes all but impossible to cover adequately the spate of literature that ensues in the twentieth—especially during its last two decades. The steadily increasing wealth of scholarly editions and translations of both old and new works, together with rapidly developing efficiencies of distribution, have vastly improved access to previous treatments of the Arthurian legends; in turn, this availability inspires their continued adaptation to current issues and technologies.

This popularity of the legend necessitates some further classification to help sort out the permutations of Arthurian characters and themes, such as those discussed in the Scholarship section later in this Introduction. Formal generic systems of classification work best, however, to organize a large chronological sequence of works related to the Arthurian legend. For the study of individual characters, roles such as the seven previously described for Merlin (Wild Man, Wonder Child, Prophet, Poet, Counselor, Wizard, and Lover) are most suitable. Because most Arthurian characters have a history, to these may also be usefully added overlapping modern modes of representation, such as whether the fig-ure is portrayed as an atavism, anachronism, avatar, adaptation, or commodity. The figure of Merlin is an atavism when he appears in the costume of an earlier time or practices an outmoded form of science; an anachronism when he is placed into an age where he and his belief system are not native; an avatar when he assumes a new body or persona (which tends to establish him as a divine or mythological creature); an adaptation when this avatar is recognized as an independent identity (like Gandalf, Spock, or Doctor Who); and a commodity when any of these forms is employed for commercial purposes. Through these modes of representation, as well as the genres and subgenres described previously, the figure of Merlin has attained ubiquity. Consequently, rather than attempting complete coverage of multitudinous short poems, plays, and stories, the following discussion of twentieth-century works is limited mostly to influential or illustrative treatments featuring these primary roles and modes of representation.

In Great Britain, both Malory and, to a lesser extent, Welsh and folkloric traditions continued to sculpt portrayals of Merlin early in the century, as did reactions to Tennyson. Dramatic and lyric poetry remained popular vehicles, though with decreasing frequency throughout the century. Francis Burdett Coutts's tetralogy of verse plays *The Romance of King Arthur* (1907)[151] presents Malory's (by twentieth-century standards) atavistic Merlin in all of his roles, but especially as commentator and exemplar of the dramas' main theme: "the eternal conflict between the spiritual and sensuous part of man's nature."[152] His wizard is "grown so wintry old/That none alive had seen his autumn days" (*King Arthur,* 3), perhaps making inevitable his betrayal by Nimuë, whom Coutts portrays as a Saracen slave girl. Gordon Bottomley's one-act verse play "Merlin's Grave" (1929)[153] locates a reenactment of Merlin's demise at Nimuë's hands in Caledonia when a young gipsy woman encloses an old man pruning "Merlin's tree" within its thorny branches. Whether this occurs through possession or reincarnation, the spirit of place or the power of legend, is unclear, yet the play features the pair as erotically linked avatars, suggesting that eternal patterns organize reality and compel human actions. This sense of recurring experiences and paradigmatic narratives underlies much of the Arthurian legend's appeal, and is perhaps the fount of Merlin's "wisdom."

Charles Williams's Arthuriad suggests a similar pattern of anachronism and avatar, though in a much more abstruse way. The poems *Taliessin Through Logres* (1938) and *The Region of the Summer Stars* (1944) form a knotty mystical sequence whose ambiguities and multiple layers of signification readers must sometimes untangle by conjecture. Several factors feed this complexity. First, Williams constructs a series of symbolic and allegorical relationships between the female body and geophysical topography, between historical and fictional geography, between political geography and social systems, and between characters, their societies, and philosophical or religious concepts. These relationships are often more mystical than concrete, flavored with Williams's iconoclastic Anglicanism and evoked in difficult syntax. Second, the poems are not in a clear linear order, but constitute a series of snapshots, vignettes, and episodes that allude to traditional Arthurian legends rather than retell them; when events such as Arthur's coronation, Merlin's relationship with Nimue, Galahad's birth, the Grail quest, Lancelot's and Guinevere's adultery, and Arthur's passing are recounted, they bear little resemblance to the same events in Malory. Rather than rewriting the legends, Williams disassembles them into their constituent parts, selects elements of them, adds new elements of his own, and reassembles them evocatively. Third, his conceptions of the sequence and its meaning changed as they developed and were still incomplete at the time of his death in 1945. Many readers find all this exhilarating and rewarding; others find it simply incoherent. Either way, it demonstrates that Arthurian legend can be reshaped in the minds of its artists and readers to fit their individual interests.[154]

Merlin is a good example of Williams's muse. In his notebook, he first describes Merlin as "natural man ('heathen') conscious of the quest, planning it and working for it, ignorant of its full meanings."[155] His mother is Nimuë, who in "Nimuë's Song of

the Dolorous Stroke," an unpublished poem written in 1929–31, names herself "The Lady of the Lake" and describes her unusual relationship with

> Merlin, my fosterchild and care,
> whom I have taught his art and rare
> sciential mastery, to quell
> the evil working of the earth
> and be a watcher by the king
> …
> He is my secret and I his,
> we also having ways of love;
> though men shall make a mock thereof
> saying 'an old man seeks to kiss
> a young girl' they shall never see
> how I am his and he is mine,
> he being my voice and I his shrine,
> yea, his the speech of Nimuë. (193)

Here, and in another unpublished poem of the same period, "Taliessin's Song of the Passing of Merlin," in which Merlin "is gathered" to her (221), Nimuë derives from Swinburne, and their relationship shows clear signs of the archetypal great goddess/priest-lover bond that predominates in esoteric and feminist treatments of the late twentieth century. In the later, published poems, she becomes even more the personification of Broceliande, the forest that represents the shaping processes of nature; Brisen, formerly her servant, becomes Merlin's sister who (like Dame Brusen in Malory) arranges the conception of Galahad. By 1941, Williams's symbolic conception of Merlin also personified him as Time and Wisdom, and Brisen as his complement Space; together, "the children of Nimuë timed and spaced the birth [of Galahad]" ("The Son of Lancelot," 67). The mage is a shape-changer who also retains bestial or demonic characteristics; to the young Arthur, he first appears "Wolfish… coming from the wild,/ black with hair, bleak with hunger, defiled/from a bed in the dung of cattle, inhuman his eyes" ("The Calling of Arthur," 31). He intercepts Lancelot while both are in wolves' shapes, before the maddened knight can kill the newborn Galahad, and carries the child to Logres on his back. The lycanthropic motif signals both the debased state of human society before Arthur's coming and the continuing curse of its appetites; yet it mirrors as well the natural processes of Nimuë, in which shape changing shows not only what we are but also that we carry within us the makings of redemption—spiritual metamorphosis out of wolves' shapes. Thus, Williams's Merlin is rooted in the roles of wild man and wonder child, while growing into his other roles—especially as prophet (but not as poet, a role taken over by Williams's Taliessin)—in the service of the Grail quest that measures the spiritual values of Arthur's court at Logres.

Laurence Binyon's verse drama *The Madness of Merlin* (1947)[156] was also an uncompleted work that gave the mage's atavism and anachronism symbolic weight,

retelling the Lailoken/Myrddin story as the first of a three-part sequence reflecting upon the war-torn first half of the twentieth century. Merlin is unredeemed from madness at the end, but in the birth of their son his peasant lover Himilian sees the dawning of new hope. Binyon's plan for parts two and three was to develop Merlin's reputation for wizardry and his search for utopian happiness in Atlantis and other mythical societies (ix).

Another drama, Christopher Fry's *Thor, With Angels* (1948),[157] reverses Merlin's traditional end and strengthens his anachronism by having a servant girl dig him up on a Jutish farmstead in 596 after the dissolution of Arthur's kingdom:

> I found him in the quarry where it caved in.
> His beard was twisted like mist in the roots of an oak-tree,
> Beaded and bright with a slight rain, and he was crying
> Like an old wet leaf. His hands were as brown as a nest
> Of lizards, and his eyes were two pale stones
> Dropping in a dark well. (121)

Thus Merlin's sleep is treated as a motif for insight; taking him out of history is a convenient way to ponder it. Although he is recognized, he soon disappears again, feeling out of place in time and wishing to resume his dreaming despite the "very obdurate pressure/Edging men towards a shape beyond/The shape they know"(46).[158]

He also reawakens in Martyn Skinner's long and playful satire *The Return of Arthur: A Poem of the Future* (1951–66),[159] but, unlike Fry's Merlin, he adapts readily to the future. A farmer himself, Skinner was one of many twentieth-century English writers who saw the figure of Merlin as a champion of agrarian landscapes and village culture against modern industrialization, urbanization, and technocracy. His anachronistic mage is "an oracle-of-all-work" who "can-cel[s] out" opposites (26) and brings Arthur from Avalon to stage a counter-coup against a totalitarian Marxist regime in 1999. Their major opponent is, of course, the sorceress Morgan.

One more notable drama, John Arden and Margaretta D'Arcy's *Island of the Mighty* (1974) combines an atavistic Caledonian setting and characters, with socialist comment on modern affairs, bringing on stage all three legendary Welsh bards: Aneirin of *The Goddodin,* Taliesin, and Myrddin.[160]

The tendency throughout most of the twentieth century to revive the earliest Merlin legend as well as the legend according to Malory, and to explore the figure's multiple roles—most often with atavistic or anachronistic portrayals—also holds true for prose fiction, the major vehicle of twentieth-century Arthurian literature. The chief examples in Britain are Clive Staples Lewis, John Cowper Powys, and Terence Hanbury White. Lewis's Merlin in *That Hideous Strength* (1945)[161] is both atavistic and anachronistic, aroused from an age-long sleep under the wood on the grounds of Bracton College to side with the reincarnated Pendragon (named Elwin Ransom, also the hero of two previous novels in Lewis's "Space Trilogy") and his allies against the chillingly fascist and technocratic National Institute of Coordinated Experiments