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**The Evolution of Merlin:
Changing Views in Literature and Film**

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ZÁSADY PRO VYPRACOVÁNÍ:

This thesis deals with the character of Merlin that appears in the Arthurian legend. The aim of this thesis is to analyze the character of Merlin, as it changed through time and media. The historical origin and roles of Merlin will be analyzed as well as selected works of Arthurian legend with focus on the character of Merlin.

1. Introduction
2. The Historical Origin of Merlin
3. Summary of Treatments in Literature and Film
4. Thomas Malory
5. The Mists of Avalon
6. Excalibur
7. Merlin, the TV series
8. Conclusion

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1 INTRODUCTION

The aim of this bachelor thesis is to analyze the character of Merlin as it has been portrayed in major English literature and television adaptations since the beginnings of the Arthurian legend up until the present day. The work's main focus is on a three important literary works of the Arthurian legend and two examples of modern media, a film and a television series.

The primary sources were chosen carefully with respect to relevance to the chosen topic. Not all the important works concerning the legend of King Arthur depict the character of Merlin in detail. Nevertheless, there is still an abundance of literature which could be applicable for a bachelor thesis on the character of Merlin. It was necessary to narrow the primary sources, therefore only those originating in Britain, the birthplace of the Arthurian legend, were considered as suitable. From those sources, I chose five specific works which represent as broad a spectrum as possible if one proposes to analyze a legendary character recurring from the twelfth century literature to the present day of mass media. Each chosen adaptation brings some novelty to the treatment of Merlin. Although the type of media is important to the nature of the message it conveys, it is not the aim of this thesis to examine the way the medium shapes the portrayal of Merlin, nor is it to analyze the possibilities and limitations of such a portrayal.

In the following chapter, an overview of the literature, film and television adaptations of the legend of Merlin will be presented. The sources featuring Merlin as a major character will be examined and the way he is represented in these works will be explored. The next chapter will focus on Geoffrey of Monmouth and his treatment of the Merlin legend. The originality of Monmouth's work, his authorship of the character and his contribution will be considered. The fourth chapter will concentrate on *Le Morte Darthur* by Thomas Malory as a work of Romance tradition, probably the most famous and known work of Arthurian literature, and its adaptation of Merlin. T. H. White's *The Sword in the Stone* was chosen as the next important literary adaptation that shaped the modern image of Merlin. White's portrayal of Merlin will be explored as well as the influence of the genre. The sixth chapter will transfer the focus to the film adaptation of the legend as John Boorman's *Excalibur* and its depiction of the character will be studied. The last chapter will explore an example of a television adaptation of the Merlin legend where BBC's *Merlin*'s attempt to bring novelty to the legend of Merlin

will be evaluated. Each of the chapters will try to establish the roles Merlin assumes in the adaptations as a reflection of the author or the time of the work's creation. The purpose is to explore how the character of Merlin is portrayed across centuries and the two media.

2 MERLIN IN LITERATURE AND ON THE SCREEN

This chapter serves as a review of the literary and film treatments of the character of Merlin in mainly English tradition. The character of Merlin first appears in the first half of the twelfth century. Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote two works which portray Merlin, each of them differently. *The History of the Kings of Britain* (ca. 1136) establishes the character as a prophet with great power, who is an essential figure standing behind the conception of King Arthur. The other Merlin is that of the poem *The Life of Merlin* (ca. 1150), a wild man living in a forest after going mad in a battle, a character based on the Welsh legend of Myrddin Wyllt. Both these works influenced the legend of Merlin over the following centuries. Merlin is still predominantly perceived at present as a character of the Arthurian legend, and as such is the main focus of this thesis. Therefore this chapter aims at focusing on the legend of Merlin as part of the Arthurian tradition, and for this reason, works featuring Merlin in any other sense than an Arthurian character will not be considered relevant for this work. This chapter will also be limited to mostly English materials, because Merlin's legend is native to it, and it is the author's field of study.

2.1 Merlin in High and Late Medieval Chronicles

As Alan Lupack has explained, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *The History of the Kings of Britain* in Latin was a starting point for "the figure of Merlin as he appears in virtually all later Arthurian literature."¹ Monmouth's portrayal of Merlin is pivotal to the development of the legend, therefore the subsequent chapter is dedicated to it. Merlin is depicted as a prophet, the son of a demon, a builder of Stonehenge, an advisor to kings and the person who stands behind the conception of Arthur. There is, however, one major difference from the Merlin we know today. Although Geoffrey was the first to connect Merlin with King Arthur, Merlin disappears from the narrative before Arthur is born and does not play any role during his reign. Merlin in the role of King Arthur's advisor emerges in the thirteenth century in French literature.

Geoffrey of Monmouth belongs to the era of chronicles, and it is through this genre that Merlin's legend continues in English literature. Around the turn of the thirteenth century, an English priest Layamon composed *Brut* (ca. 1200), a poem in

¹ Alan Lupack, *The Oxford Guide to Arthurian Literature and Legend* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 331.

Middle English. Layamon adapted a Norman verse chronicle *Roman de Brut* (1155) by Wace, who in turn based his work on Geoffrey of Monmouth. Layamon's contribution to the Merlin legend is unquestionable. In the words of Jeff Rider, Merlin in Layamon as opposed to Merlin in Wace is "distinctly better imagined, more prominent, and better integrated into the work," and "his prophetic gift and trance are more fully circumstantiated, his comings and goings are better noted, and his political role in the British *regnum* is markedly greater."² Merlin in Layamon's chronicle becomes a more complex character, who receives well-deserved attention and respect.

Over the following decades, Merlin appears in more chronicles, most of which follow the story of Merlin by Geoffrey of Monmouth. The most famous and popular was the fourteenth century Middle English *Prose Brut* chronicle. Julia Marvin has pointed out that it was published in 1480 by William Caxton as both the first Arthurian work and the first English history in print.³ Peter Goodrich has observed that the chronicle introduced a new Merlin prophecy to King Arthur instead of adopting the prophecies of Geoffrey of Monmouth.⁴ Other authors of the chronicle tradition were Robert of Gloucester, Robert Mannyng, John Hardyng, Peter Langtoft and Thomas Castleford.

2.2 Merlin in Medieval Romance

It should be mentioned that one of the most important and influential authors of Arthurian romance, Chrétien de Troyes, completely excluded Merlin from his works. William Farina argues that this was because the character of Merlin is a strictly manly subject and de Troyes' audience was mostly female and therefore interested in chivalric romance—knights and courtly love.⁵ Farina also suggests another possible reason for omitting Merlin—the control of the Catholic Church in France and the controversial nature of Merlin.⁶ Because of these reasons, Merlin does not appear in Chrétien's poems, which were crucial to the development of the Arthurian literature. He does, however, become the central figure of another French poet.

² Jeff Rider, "The Fictional Margin: The Merlin of the Brut," *Modern Philology* 87, no. 1 (1989): 9, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/438525>.

³ Julia Marvin, "The English Brut Tradition," in *A Companion to Arthurian Literature*, ed. Helen Fulton (Chichester: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 222.

⁴ Peter H. Goodrich, *Introduction to Merlin: A Casebook*, ed. Peter H. Goodrich and Raymond H. Thompson (New York: Routledge, 2005), 9.

⁵ William Farina, *Chrétien de Troyes and the Dawn of Arthurian Romance* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2010), 166.

⁶ *Ibid*, 170.

Robert de Boron significantly influenced the legend of Merlin. In his poem *Merlin*, de Boron elaborated on Merlin's origin and nature. He established him as an Antichrist saved by baptism, who inherited from his devil father the ability to shapeshift and a knowledge of the past, while the ability to foresee the future was granted to him by God. Although the poem did not survive in its complete form, Goodrich has noted it "grew into the Vulgate or Lancelot-Grail prose cycle" of the thirteenth century,⁷ which was later rewritten and substantially altered to form the Post-Vulgate cycle.

Both these cycles influenced the legend of Merlin in English literature, as well as the treatment of the Arthurian legend itself. One such example is *Of Arthour and of Merlin* (1270), an early Middle English verse romance following the genre of the French cycles. Merlin assumes a role comparable to Arthur in importance. Goodrich explains that "both figures are required for greatness."⁸ In the middle of the fifteenth century, two more translations of the Vulgate cycle were written: the verse *Merlin* by Henry Lovelich and the prose *Merlin* by an unknown author. The prose *Merlin* focused on Merlin's life in particular, beginning with his birth and ending with his death, including the account of his entrapment by Nimiane.

Another work influenced by the French cycles is one of the most famous of Arthurian literature. *Le Morte Darthur* was written by Sir Thomas Malory in 1469 or 1470 and printed in 1485 by William Caxton, who also edited the romance and divided it into books and chapters. Malory put an emphasis on the Arthurian court and values, which resulted in a slight marginalization of Merlin. The story of Merlin's origin is omitted from the narrative and the book begins with Arthur's conception. Merlin appears primarily as the advisor to King Arthur and his knights and as the prophet whose warnings cannot prevent other characters' misfortunes, or his own. Malory also included the episode where Merlin asks for Uther's son to be brought up by strangers, only to have him struggle for the respect of the other kings later when Uther dies. And although it is not explicitly mentioned in the text, the famous scene where Arthur pulls the sword from the stone was most likely, as C. Scott Littleton and Linda A. Malcor suggest, "stage-managed ... that [Merlin] himself put the sword into the stone."⁹ This is quite possible as Merlin needs a method for Arthur to prove that he is heir to the throne.

⁷ Goodrich, *Merlin*, 12.

⁸ *Ibid*, 14.

⁹ C. Scott Littleton and Linda A. Malcor, "Some Notes on Merlin," *Arthuriana* 5, no. 3 (1995): 89, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27869125>.

Merlin's story concludes in the first chapter of Book IV, where, owing to his love for Nimue, "he was shut in a rock under a stone and there died."¹⁰

2.3 Merlin from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Centuries

Merlin as a prophet also appears in a major sixteenth century allegorical epic poem *The Faerie Queene* (1590) by Edmund Spenser. The poem served as a celebration of Queen Elizabeth I. As Goodrich has observed, Spenser shortly recounts Merlin's story while focusing mainly on his supernatural skills.¹¹ He was a tutor to Arthur, the one who "conveyed him to the realm of Faerie after Camlan," and also a creator of several objects.¹²

Goodrich explains that after Spenser Merlin "was not fated to feature in the great literature of the early modern period,"¹³ but rather in "lesser, mostly English fictions."¹⁴ One of these was a comedy play *The Birth of Merlin* written by William Rowley in 1620, where Merlin confronts his devil father and imprisons him in a rock. According to Goodrich, *The Life of Merlin* by Thomas Heywood started a tradition of "pamphlets and astrological almanacs ... adapting the prophetic figure of Merlin to the religious and political unrest of the seventeenth century."¹⁵ Merlin also appears in a 1691 semi-opera *King Arthur* by John Dryden, which was revived several times over the following two centuries. Merlin as a figure of low culture also continued in the eighteenth century, for example in the works of Henry Fielding, Lewis Theobald and Aaron Hill. It was at the end of the eighteenth century that Richard Hole wrote a poem *Arthur: or, The Northern Enchantment* and thus signaled a romantic Arthurian revival and a return to earlier Arthurian literature.

The romantic interest in the Arthurian legend gave rise to topographical histories and travel books concerned with places connected to the legend, such as Stonehenge and Tintagel. The works featuring Merlin include, for example, *The Cambrian Popular Antiquities* (1815) and *The Falls, Lakes and Mountains of North Wales* (1845). In 1829, Thomas Love Peacock wrote a novella *The Misfortunes of Elphin*. Goodrich describes its Merlin as "a druid and spell-caster on intimate terms with nature's secrets."¹⁶ One of

¹⁰ Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, ed. A. W. Pollard (New York: Macmillan, 1903), 106.

¹¹ Goodrich, *Merlin*, 19.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

the more original treatments of the legend appears in the verse epic *King Arthur* (1848) by Edward Bulwer-Lytton. Goodrich describes Merlin as “an amply bearded patriarch living in a lonely tower at Camelot, orchestrates a quasi-allegorical struggle between Cymri and Saxons.”¹⁷

Victorian Arthurian literature, which was marked by the influence of Thomas Malory, focused on Merlin in connection with his love affair and the quests for Holy Grail.¹⁸ The most important and influential portrayal of Merlin in the nineteenth century is in *The Idylls of the King* by Alfred, Lord Tennyson, published from 1857 to 1885. Although Tennyson never explains Merlin’s origin or character, he is one of the central figures of the epic cycle. Merlin is an old man, a magician and a counsellor, who proclaims Arthur as Uther’s heir, after the child has been washed up to his feet.¹⁹ He is a central figure of “Merlin and Vivien”, which relates Tennyson’s version of Merlin’s imprisoning in a hollow tree by the evil Vivien, who envies his power and knowledge. Furthermore, Merlin is a key figure of Tennyson’s autobiographical poem “Merlin and the Gleam” (1889), which resulted from the poet’s lifelong identification with the character. Merlin’s fate also appears in other Victorian poetry: Matthew Arnold’s “Tristram and Iseult” (1852) and Charles Algernon Swinburne’s “Tristram of Lyonesse” (1882).

2.4 Merlin in the Twentieth Century

Merlin in the twentieth century plays an important role in a variety of literature that ranges, as Lupack explains, “from satirical and historical novels to science fiction and fantasy.”²⁰ These works are also set in a wide time span, from the traditional Arthurian era of the Middle Ages to the twentieth century and even further in the future.²¹ The twentieth century is also marked by a number of adaptations of the traditional Arthurian legend. As Norris J. Lacy has noted, these retellings were inspired mostly by Malory and intended for adults as well as for children.²²

¹⁷ Goodrich, *Merlin*, 25.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁹ Alfred, Lord Tennyson, “The Coming of Arthur,” in *Alfred, Lord Tennyson Poems* (Poemhunter.com - The World’s Poetry Archive, 2004), 304.

²⁰ Lupack, *Guide*, 352.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Norris J. Lacy, “The Arthur of the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Arthurian Legend*, ed. Elizabeth Archibald and Ad Putter (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 120.

One of the most prominent treatments of the Arthurian legend in the previous century is T. H. White's *The Sword in the Stone* (1938). It is the first novel of the *The Once and Future King* (1958) tetralogy. Lacy has observed that the tetralogy developed "from juvenile fiction through romance to tragedy."²³ It concludes with an additional novel *The Book of Merlyn* (written in 1941), which was not included in the cycle and was published posthumously much later, in 1977. *The Sword in the Stone* focuses on Arthur's childhood and education. He is tutored by Merlyn, an old wizard who lives backwards in time. Merlyn transforms Arthur into a number of animals, teaching him how to be a good king in the future.

Another important and original treatment of the Merlin legend is presented by Mary Stewart in a trilogy focused on Merlin: *The Crystal Cave* (1970), *The Hollow Hills* (1973) and *The Last Enchantment* (1979). Merlin appears in his traditional roles of a prophet and a protector of Arthur, but Stewart also brings innovation. He is poisoned by Morgause, causing his madness and illness, and leading to a coma. Lupack summarizes that Merlin is presumed dead but later awakes in his cave only to decide "to live in seclusion with occasional visits from Arthur."²⁴

Although poetry was becoming overshadowed by novel and later new media, there are also poems concerning Merlin: "The Wisdom of Merlin" (1914) and "To Nimue" (1914) by Wilfred Scawen Blunt, "The Riddles of Merlin" (1920) by Alfred Noyes, "Merlin" (1937) by Edwin Muir and *The Voice of Merlin* (1946) by Alec Craig. The Merlin of science fiction is represented by C. S. Lewis' novel *That Hideous Strength* (1945), where Merlin helps to destroy an institution threatening the natural world and mankind itself. Christopher Fry's play *Thor, with Angels* (1948) portrays Merlin as a God's prophet who brings Christianity to Britain together with Saint Augustine of Canterbury. Merlin is also a character and a narrator of an erotic novel *Merlin* (1978), written by Robert Nye. Another work featuring Merlin in the future is Martyn Skinner's *The Return of Arthur: A Poem of the Future* (1951—1966). Goodrich comments that the plot is set in the year 1999 where Merlin calls upon Arthur to return and fight against a totalitarian regime.²⁵

These works are only a fragment of the literature featuring the character of Merlin in the previous century. Although the number of published Merlin literature kept

²³ Lacy, "Arthur," 124.

²⁴ Lupack, *Guide*, 354.

²⁵ Goodrich, *Merlin*, 37.

increasing with each decade, both the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are marked by the popularity of other media, especially film and television.

2.5 Merlin on the Screen

According to Goodrich, in the twentieth century film “became the most influential artistic medium.”²⁶ It is easy to understand that the successful legend of King Arthur and his court also attracted attention of film-makers looking for profitable subject matter. Lacy suggests that more than a hundred Arthurian films have been made over the years.²⁷ However, as Goodrich points out, only a few major pictures give Merlin the attention he deserves.²⁸ This account of the film and television treatments of Merlin would be even slighter if one would take into consideration exclusively English production. Therefore I will also include films originating in the United States.

The first movie adaptations of the Arthurian legend featuring Merlin were three films from 1921, 1931 and 1949, all adapting the novel *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1889) by Mark Twain. Another adaptation was a historical film *Knights of the Round Table* (1953), which followed Thomas Malory.

One of the movies that helped to establish the image of Merlin for the following years as an old gentleman with a beard and a pointy hat was *The Sword in the Stone* (1963), Walt Disney’s adaptation of T. H. White’s novel. It was the first feature-length animated Arthurian film. As Michael Torregrossa claims, “the older and bewhiskered Merlin has become the stereotype for representing the character—as well as his brother wizards—in popular works.”²⁹ Another important portrayal of Merlin appears in a 1981 British film *Excalibur*, directed by John Boorman. Torregrossa defines Merlin’s roles as that of a “king-maker and magic-user,” describing that “Merlin functions as the driving force behind Arthur’s reign and uses his magic in an attempt to prevent Arthur’s downfall.”³⁰ But even though Merlin defeats his nemesis Morgana despite being imprisoned in a cave, he cannot save Arthur from his evil son Mordred.

²⁶ Goodrich, *Merlin*, 57.

²⁷ Lacy, “Arthur,” 130.

²⁸ Goodrich, *Merlin*, 57.

²⁹ Michael Torregrossa, “The Way of the Wizard: Reflections of Merlin on Film,” in *The Medieval Hero on Screen: Representations from Beowulf to Buffy*, ed. Martha W. Driver and Sid Ray (Jefferson: McFarland, 2004), 172.

³⁰ Michael Torregrossa, “Merlin Goes to the Movies: The Changing Role of Merlin in Cinema Arthuriana,” *Film & History* 29, no. 3-4 (1999): 58, <http://muse.jhu.edu/article/396068>.

Merlin and the Sword (1985), an American TV movie, depicts Merlin trapped with Niniane in a cave under Stonehenge. Another TV movie, *Merlin of the Crystal Cave* (1991), created by BBC and divided into six thirty-minute episodes, is a faithful adaptation of Mary Stewart's novel. As Torregrossa has noted, Merlin in *Guinevere* (1993) arranges the marriage of Arthur and Guinevere and entrusts her with taking care of Arthur and the kingdom.³¹ Films featuring Merlin also include an animated musical fantasy *Quest for Camelot* (1998), *Merlin: The Return* (2000), *King Arthur* (2004), *Merlin and the Book of Beasts* (2010) and the miniseries *Merlin* (1998) and its sequel *Merlin's Apprentice* (2006).

Merlin also makes appearance in a number of television series, for example *Doctor Who* (1963—present), *The Twilight Zone* (1959—1964), *MacGyver* (1985—1992), *The Outer Limits* (1995—2002), the *Stargate* franchise (1997—2009) and most recently *Once Upon a Time* (2011—present). Other popular TV series are purely Arthurian: *Camelot* (2011) and *Merlin* (2008—2012), the latter being far more successful and focused on the character of Merlin. *Merlin* was created by BBC and broadcast in five series. It depicts the adventures of young Merlin and his development from a mere servant to the most important figure of Arthur's fate.

There are numerous works that could be linked to the character of Merlin. He is often thought to be reborn through other wizard and teacher characters of well-known literature and movies, such as Gandalf, Obi-Wan Kenobi, Professor X or Albus Dumbledore. However, not all treatments of the legend are faithful to their sources, and others take only fragments of the legend. Nevertheless, some films are considered Arthurian and generally accepted as a modern continuation of the Arthurian tradition.

³¹ Torregrossa, "Movies," 60.

3 GEOFFREY OF MONMOUTH

Somewhere around the year 1136 Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote a book in which he introduced the character of Merlin. His *Historia Regum Britanniae*—the *History of the Kings of Britain*—is a semi-historical narrative of all the British kings from Brutus, “the first King of the Britons,”³² who named Britain after himself, to Cadwallader. As Lewis Thorpe mentions in the introduction to the *Historia*, Cadwallader was identified as the last British king, because the Saxons invaded Britain in the seventh century.³³

Geoffrey of Monmouth was probably born in the first decade of the twelfth century in the town of Monmouth, Wales. He also used the name Geoffrey Arthur, which was possibly his father’s name, or, as Julia Crick suggests, it could indicate his interest in the character of King Arthur.³⁴ Monmouth was a cleric and probably a teacher at Oxford, serving as a canon of St. George’s College from about 1129 to 1151. After that, he was ordained a priest to qualify for the appointment of Bishop of St. Asaph’s in Wales in 1152. But he never settled in the diocese and died in 1155 in England.

During his time at Oxford, he wrote the *Historia*, as well as two other works concerning Merlin: *Prophetie Merlini* (*Prophecies of Merlin*, written in the 1130s) and *Vita Merlini* (*Life of Merlin*, written around 1150). The former was probably finished before the *Historia* and later incorporated into it. Geoffrey claimed he had translated both these books from British (Welsh) into Latin. In the dedication section of the *Historia* he wrote that it was Walter, Archdeacon of Oxford, who gave him “a certain most ancient book in the British language.”³⁵ This book or any other book that could be the source of Geoffrey’s alleged translation was never identified and scholars concur that it never existed. For example, Kimberly Bell points out that “the narrator’s reference to an unnamed source casts him in the role of translator, who simply transcribes an already documented history.”³⁶ Therefore it can be assumed that this

³² Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. Sebastian Evans, ed. Charles W. Dunn (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1958), 3.

³³ Lewis Thorpe, introduction to *History of the Kings of Britain*, by Geoffrey of Monmouth, trans. Lewis Thorpe (London: Penguin, 1966), 9.

³⁴ Julia C. Crick, “Monmouth, Geoffrey of (d. 1154/5),” in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/10530>.

³⁵ Monmouth, *History*, 3.

³⁶ Kimberly Bell, “Merlin as Historian in ‘Historia Regum Britannie’,” *Arthuriana* 10, no. 1 (2000): 16. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27869518>.

reference to the ancient book serves solely as a means to provide authenticity for the work that presents itself as a genuine history of the British kings.

The *Historia* is, therefore, Geoffrey's own creation, or rather a compilation. Although it was for a long time believed to be an accurate description of history and widely read as such, it is now generally recognized as a work of fiction, drawing on historical events and figures of the past. Nevertheless, it is not the aim of this thesis to analyze *The History of the Kings of Britain* with respect to its sources, or to prove its originality. There are a few works that scholars agree to be Geoffrey's inspiration. All were available to Geoffrey at that time, given his occupation as a cleric. In a bibliographical note to the *Historia* Charles W. Dunn states: *The Ruin of Britain* by a British monk Gildas of the sixth century, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* from the eighth century by Bede, *The History of the Britons* by the ninth century Welsh monk Nennius, and traditional Welsh and Breton legends.³⁷ Of all the sources Geoffrey used to compile his work, *The History of the Britons* by Nennius is the most important for this thesis. It is the most relevant and obvious source of Merlin himself, even though the name originates elsewhere and will be discussed afterwards.

3.1 The Origin of Merlin and His Name

Geoffrey of Monmouth practically borrowed the whole story of Ambrose, a fatherless boy who is summoned to king Vortigern to assist him with problematic building of his fortress. Although Geoffrey renamed the character, he justifies the borrowing of the story of Ambrose by claiming that Merlin was "also called Ambrosius."³⁸ There are only minor differences between the original Ambrose and Merlin. First of them is the fact that Geoffrey gives additional information about Merlin's mother, probably to establish her credibility. In Nennius, she "solemnly affirm[s] that he had no mortal father"³⁹ and is never mentioned again. On the other hand, Geoffrey says that she is a daughter of the king of South Wales and she is brought to Vortigern along with Merlin. "The King received the mother with all attention as knowing that she was of right noble birth" so that she could tell him how Merlin was conceived.⁴⁰ The only further information Nennius reveals about Ambrose's origin is that his father was a Roman

³⁷ Charles W. Dunn, bibliographical note to *History of the Kings of Britain*, by Geoffrey of Monmouth, trans. Sebastian Evans, ed. Charles W. Dunn (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1958), xxvii.

³⁸ Monmouth, *History*, 135.

³⁹ Nennius, *History of the Britons*, trans. J. A. Giles (Cambridge, Ontario: In Parentheses, 2000), 18.

⁴⁰ Monmouth, *History*, 134.

consul.⁴¹ Because Geoffrey's main source on Merlin does not relate much of his origin, Geoffrey probably decided to establish Merlin's history on his own. Firstly in a way that would interest his readers, but more importantly to introduce the character of Merlin the prophet and to rationalize his prophetic talent, as *The Prophecies of Merlin* were already published.

The stories of how Ambrose and Merlin encountered king Vortigern are practically identical, except the fact that Geoffrey incorporates a whole book of Merlin's prophecies whereas Nennius describes only one. Both characters interpret the event that takes place before them, the allegorical fighting between the Britons and the Saxons. Nennius describes a pool with a tent in it, which represent the world and the kingdom of Britain, and two serpents fighting inside that stand for two dragons, the red for Britain and the white for Saxons, as Ambrose explains.⁴² He functions there only as an interpreter of the events, he does not make any predictions. Afterwards, he claims the place where Vortigern meant to build the fortress for himself.

On the other hand, Geoffrey does not disguise the dragons as serpents. He already revealed supernatural powers in Merlin, so incorporating supernatural beings can hardly be surprising. Merlin too interprets the fighting of the dragons and identifies them as the British and the Saxon, but he goes much further than Ambrose. Over some thirteen pages he talks almost in riddles that are generally hard to understand. The first part of the prophecies are events that already happened from the viewpoint of Geoffrey's life. The second part consists of Geoffrey's own predictions where he tries to fabricate the future. He makes extensive use of symbolism and metaphors and the result is even more confusing. Some scholars attempted to connect the prophecies to real events and succeeded to recognize a few, but only in a limited scale because Geoffrey, of course, could not foretell the future. After Merlin's extensive prophetic outburst, Vortigern inquires about his own future. Merlin informs him that he will probably die by burning in a tower. This prediction does not occur in Nennius, as Merlin only advises Vortigern to look for another place to build his fortress and tells him nothing of his fate.

Such is the nature of the connection of Ambrose and Merlin. It closely resembles the manner in which Geoffrey seemed to borrow practically everything—he took what would be convenient for his purposes, transformed it to his liking and imagined the rest.

⁴¹ Nennius, *Britons*, 20.

⁴² Nennius, *Britons*, 19.

In this way he adapted the character of Ambrose to create that of Merlin, which he further developed and invented a new name for. That is another important part of the character and certainly should not be omitted if one is trying to investigate how Merlin was created.

The origin of the name Merlin is closely connected to the origin of his prophetic powers. Both have roots in Welsh legends, primarily a poem “Armes Prydein”—“The Prophecy of Britain”—from the early tenth century. The poem features a legendary Welsh prophet Myrddin and prophecies attributed to him. This figure is known by many names, but it was Geoffrey who translated the original Welsh Myrddin into Latin as Merlinus. He borrowed the figure of Myrddin and created his own prophecies that he attributed to him. Only later he used the work of Nennius to introduce the character that his readers had already known.

3.2 Merlin in *The History of the Kings of Britain*

There are many aspects of the character of Merlin, some clearly borrowed from literature and legend, others created by Geoffrey himself. It is not the aim of the next chapters to analyze where the authors found their sources for their portrayal of Merlin. Only because it was Geoffrey of Monmouth who basically created a new character, it was necessary to at least sketch his primary sources. In the following subchapters, the way Merlin is portrayed in the *Historia* with respect to the roles he assumes will be inspected, and each role he plays in the story will be described. This will be done with each primary source of this thesis, as it is its main aim.

The character of Merlin appears in the *Historia* in four particular sections: in the aforementioned scene with king Vortigern, in connection to king Aurelius and his wish to build a memorial at Salisbury, then when Aurelius’ brother Uther asks Merlin to interpret an appearance of a comet, and finally when the new king Uther seeks out Merlin’s help concerning his affection for a duke’s wife. In each of these episodes, Merlin assumes various roles and Geoffrey thus creates a version of Merlin which is more complex than any of his source characters.

Geoffrey’s portrayal of Merlin was also influenced by the time it was written in. In 1066, William of Normandy conquered Britain and established the Norman rule. Native Britons were oppressed and thus the popularity of traditional British legends arose. Geoffrey used the character of Merlin to give hope to the British. In Merlin’s prophecies, the idea of Britain prevailing and regaining control over their kingdom is

omnipresent. Simultaneously, the motif of prophecy was very popular at the time of Geoffrey of Monmouth.

3.2.1 Merlin as a Demon's Son

The first role Merlin assumes is that of a demon's son, who inherits supernatural powers from his father. After the foundation of king Vortigern's tower collapses, his magicians advise him to look for a boy without a father, as the boy's blood would secure the stability of the foundation. The king's men find the boy in Carmarthen and bring him and his mother to Vortigern. The mother is a daughter of a king in South Wales and lives among nuns. She speaks of the boy's father as if he was an invisible spirit who, sometimes assuming the shape of a young man, was visiting her for some time and left her pregnant. Vortigern's learned man Maugantius explains that Merlin's conception is by no means unique, that there are records of such couplings of human and supernatural beings. He goes on to describe the nature of the being as half man and half angel, an "incubus dæmon".⁴³ It is interesting that Geoffrey chose to use both the words angel and demon in the description of Merlin's father, as those words are nowadays perceived more often as antonymic.

Concerning Merlin's origin, Terri Frongia suggests that "since Merlin is the product of the union of human and supernatural, earth and sky, it is understood that his character will not be like that of other men; from the moment of his conception, his being is endowed with sacred value."⁴⁴ Geoffrey had to somehow justify Merlin's supernatural powers and for this purpose he assigned him the status of a half unearthly child: "Geoffrey's account of Merlin's paternity establishes an essential—and genetic—reason for the wizard's being 'saturated with power,' and for his preternatural ability to divine reality."⁴⁵ Thus the role of a demon's son assigned to Merlin before his birth logically explains his supernatural abilities and prophetic knowledge. It is also crucial for his future development and majority of the roles he later assumes in the *Historia* and other works.

⁴³ Monmouth, *History*, 134.

⁴⁴ Terri Frongia, "Merlin's Fathers: The Sacred and the Profane," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 18, no. 3 (1993): 120, doi: 10.1353/chq.0.1001.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 120—121.

3.2.2 Merlin as a Prophet

One of the most important roles is that of a prophet. Although Merlin as a soothsayer appears even before Geoffrey, it was his character that became the standard for future generations. Geoffrey introduced Merlin as a prophet in the aforementioned *Prophecies of Merlin*, which were in circulation before the publication of the *Historia*.

Merlin's prophetic powers come to light right after we learn about his origin. He demonstrates his superior knowledge in the scene with king Vortigern and his magicians, whom he accuses of lying and proves it by revealing the real reason for the collapse of the tower, something no ordinary man could know. Everyone who witnessed Merlin's power was "astonished at such wisdom being found in him, deeming that he was possessed of some spirit of God."⁴⁶ Merlin is then asked to interpret the two dragons fighting each other, which results in extended prophecies about the fate of the British nation. It is said that he "delivered these and many other prophecies."⁴⁷ Therefore the prophecies recorded by Geoffrey of Monmouth could be considered but a fraction of Merlin's prophetic utterances and thus justify the existence of many prophecies attributed to him in the future.

Another example of Merlin's prophetic ability is manifested in the scene with Uther Pendragon, where Merlin is asked to explain the meaning of a falling meteor which assumed the likeness of a dragon. Merlin's interpretation is again preceded by "bursting into tears and drawing a long breath,"⁴⁸ which might indeed indicate some kind of spiritual possession. In addition, Merlin himself talks of a spirit in the scene where he refuses to utter prophecies for the entertainment of King Aurelius earlier in the story.⁴⁹ Merlin interprets the star as a sign that King Aurelius has died and that his brother Uther is to be king. Furthermore, the two rays coming from the dragon's mouth symbolize Uther's son and daughter. This prophecy of Merlin assigned Uther Pendragon his name.

Merlin as a prophet influenced many authors; Goodrich points out his prophecies "were individually inserted in chronicles, romances, and other texts wherever a text's author deemed them apposite."⁵⁰ They were quite independent from the character of Merlin and practically benefited from the popularity of his name.

⁴⁶ Monmouth, *History*, 136.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 153.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 170.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 164.

⁵⁰ Goodrich, *Merlin*, 9.

3.2.3 Merlin as a Builder

Another role in which Merlin is portrayed is that of a builder of Stonehenge. King Aurelius asked many craftsmen to build a memorial to commemorate Britons buried on Salisbury Plain, but only Merlin agreed and proposed to bring the mystical stones from the Dance of the Giants in Ireland. Uther, accompanied by Merlin, led the army of fifteen thousand to Ireland and they fought and defeated the Irish who refused to yield the stones. Merlin mockingly encouraged the soldiers to use their strength and bring the stones down, but they were unable to do so. He “burst out on laughing and put together his own engines.”⁵¹ The stones were then carried off to the ships and brought to Salisbury, where Merlin raised them the same way they stood in Ireland, in a circle around the burial ground.

Magic is not mentioned anywhere in this episode. Merlin himself refers to his ability as “skill” and his equipment as “engines.”⁵² This would suggest that he is an inventor, who uses his ability to foresee the future to construct his tools that are not known to his contemporaries, rather than a magician who could simply lift the stones with the power of mind. Geoffrey Ashe claims that Merlin “had evidently drawn a plan and taken measurements,”⁵³ which would support the proposition that Merlin was a skilled builder.

3.2.4 Merlin as the Creator of Arthur

When King Uther falls in love with Duke Gorlois’ wife Igera, Merlin appears for the last time. Uther seeks a way to fulfil his desire and Merlin offers a solution. Merlin uses “[his] leechcrafts” to transform Uther so that he looks like Gorlois.⁵⁴ He also transforms himself and Uther’s advisor Ulfen into Gorlois’ friends to accompany him into Tintagel, where Igera waits for her husband, who is besieged by Uther’s army in another castle. Uther enters the castle unrecognized and fathers Arthur.

Bell points out that “Merlin uses his art to aid in the fruition of the history he foretold.”⁵⁵ Arthur’s existence is closely connected to Merlin and his supernatural abilities. If Merlin did not have prophetic powers, there would probably be no Arthur.

⁵¹ Monmouth, *History*, 166.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Geoffrey Ashe, *Merlin: the Prophet and his History*, (Stroud: The History Press, 2008), 42.

⁵⁴ Monmouth, *History*, 176.

⁵⁵ Bell, “Merlin as Historian,” 23.

Robert W. Hanning claims that Merlin's "insight into predetermined history gives him some control over the historical process."⁵⁶ If we, however, do not consider history as predetermined, it can be said that Merlin has full control over what happens and Arthur is Merlin's creation. Maybe Merlin, as a reflection of Geoffrey, saw that the time he lived in needed a strong figure to lead the British nation, someone worth fighting for. It is possible that Merlin helped King Uther fulfil his desire for Igera because he had seen that Arthur would be born. Therefore, if Merlin did not have the prophetic powers to foretell Arthur, he probably would not be King Uther's advisor and so would not help Arthur's conception—there would be no Arthur. Thus the existence of Arthur seems to be dependent on Merlin's powers; Merlin and his abilities made the conception of Arthur possible.

⁵⁶ Robert W. Hanning, *The Vision of History in Early Britain*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), 154.

4 THOMAS MALORY

One of the most well-known books of Arthurian literature is *Le Morte Darthur* by Sir Thomas Malory. Although more than one Thomas Malory lived at the time the book was written, the author himself gives some clues regarding his person. At the end of the *Morte*, Malory prays for “good deliverance” from prison, states his name—“Sir Thomas Maleore, knight”—and the fact that the book “was ended the ninth year of the reign of King Edward the Fourth.”⁵⁷ These facts lead scholars to concur that the author was Thomas Malory of Newbold Revel in Warwickshire, whose nature was, however, greatly at odds with the qualities praised in his book.

Sir Thomas Malory was born in the second decade of the fifteenth century to an old Warwickshire family. Malory lived in the unsettled time of the Hundred Years’ War and the Wars of the Roses. He fought in France under the Duke of Warwick. He had been knighted by the year 1441 and became a member of parliament for Warwickshire in 1445. After the year 1450, however, he was accused of numerous crimes over the years. Among his charges were robbery, extortion, rape, ambush and theft. He was imprisoned several times, escaped, was released on bail or pardoned by Edward IV. When he went to prison for the last time, the charge was treason against the Yorkist King Edward. Malory was excluded from general pardons twice, being finally released upon Henry VI’s return to the throne in 1470. Sir Thomas Malory died on March 14, 1471.

4.1 *Le Morte Darthur*

The book was finished in 1469 or 1470 during Malory’s final imprisonment and published in 1485 by William Caxton. It was one of the first books printed in English. In the preface, Caxton states that he divided Malory’s work into 21 books, which further develop into 507 subchapters⁵⁸. He also wrote a short summary for each chapter and edited the whole work. Caxton’s edition had been the sole source for all subsequent editions until the discovery of the Winchester Manuscript by W. F. Oakeshott, a headmaster of Winchester College, in 1934. Both Caxton’s edition and the manuscript probably come from the same source. The latter one is thought to be more corresponding to the original Malory, even though some parts of the Winchester

⁵⁷ Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, 742.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 30.

Manuscript have been lost. Since the discovery of the manuscript, both versions have been published, in modernized as well as original spelling.

J. W. Trapp points out that even though the first edition of *Morte* had no title, the colophon at the end of the book that William Caxton designed reads *Le Morte Darthur*.⁵⁹ The romance, written in Middle English, was also referred to as “the Book of King Arthur and of His Noble Knights of the Round Table.” Unfortunately, the Winchester Manuscript fails to support any claim regarding the book’s title.

Although King Arthur is the most crucial figure around whom everything else revolves, Malory also substantially focused on Lancelot. For Malory, chivalric values were fundamental and that is the territory where Lancelot excels the most. John Steinbeck suggests that Lancelot was Malory’s “self-character,” that is the character that author identifies himself with the most, reflecting both good and bad traits of the author.⁶⁰

Among Malory’s sources for *Le Morte Darthur* were the Vulgate and Post-Vulgate cycles, the *Prose Tristan*, the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* and the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur*.⁶¹ Although Malory’s version of the story of King Arthur is itself an adaptation, it became a source for countless Arthurian authors over the following centuries. As Lupack has observed, “Malory's book has remained a dominant force in literature and an important factor in the continuing interest in Arthur and his knights.”⁶²

4.2 The Author and his Time

It is very common that literary works reflect the times their authors lived in. This is no exception to Thomas Malory and his romance. As mentioned above, he lived and wrote during the Wars of the Roses, the historical period where the two houses fought for the throne for decades. It was an era of unrest and instability, where loyalty was rare and where to transfer one's allegiance was to survive. Because Malory experienced this, it is only natural that he should long for better times.

The era and virtues of Arthurian court were certainly more appealing. It is an era of a great flowering of culture, knighthood and chivalry. The knights fight for their

⁵⁹ J. B. Trapp, “Sir Thomas Malory,” in *The Middle Ages through the Eighteenth Century* vol. 1 of *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature*, ed. Frank Kermodé and John Hollander (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 445.

⁶⁰ John Steinbeck, *A Life in Letters*, ed. Elaine Steinbeck and Robert Wallsten (New York: Penguin, 1989), 553.

⁶¹ Lupack, *Guide*, 134.

⁶² *Ibid*, 133.

honor and their king. Trapp suggests that to Malory, “the example of Arthur and his knights was something ... political and practical, an example of a firmly ordered, well-ruled commonwealth under a strong king.”⁶³ This certainly was not Britain during Malory’s lifetime. Therefore the concept of a functioning Arthurian world can be considered as a goal that the society of his time should strive for. So, in Trapp’s words, “Malory is recommending the example of Arthur to the English King, as well as ... the example of Arthur’s knights to English nobility.”⁶⁴ Unfortunately, even Arthur’s kingdom would not last. Trapp points out that “the knights fail in oath and loyalty one by one” and Arthur is “killed by the forces of evil and disorder.”⁶⁵ In the end, not even Arthurian kingdom is safe from sin and corruption. And this should be the warning for Malory’s readers. It is not enough to build a functioning kingdom with a strong king. Arthurian knights have many human weaknesses, as do all people. For the kingdom to endure, people would need to be selfless and put the well-being of the realm before their own selfish needs and desires.

4.3 Merlin in *Le Morte Darthur*

As opposed to many earlier Arthurian works, *Le Morte* begins with Arthur. It follows his life from the beginning to its end, while other characters come as already established individuals. Among those is Merlin, who so far benefited from the attention he received. He was special; writers took advantage of his peculiar conception and supernatural abilities to interest the readers. However, this is not the case with Malory. His book focuses more on Arthur’s court and the values it represents. And it seems that to Malory, those are more important than Merlin’s origin and prophecies. Therefore he omitted the story of Merlin’s origin, departing from his sources. Nevertheless, Merlin still plays an important role in the life of King Arthur as well as in the lives of the knights and the whole kingdom.

The first time Merlin appears in *Le Morte Darthur*, King Uther is madly in love with Igraine. Uther’s knight Ulfius seeks Merlin and finds him disguised as a beggar. Merlin already knows what ails the king and asks to have his own desire fulfilled in return for helping Uther. Furthermore, he sends Ulfius to go back without him, only to appear at Camelot moments after the knight came back. This suggests that Merlin in

⁶³ Trapp, “Sir Thomas Malory,” 445.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 446.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

Malory has the power to see into the future, which he already had in *Historia*. On the other hand, he also has the ability to teleport. Both these abilities are introduced as a matter of fact, not as something special and peculiar. Malory does not give any explanation of Merlin's origin that would account for his powers. However, there are a few comments from other characters on the nature of Merlin, which suggest that his origin is commonly known.

In Geoffrey of Monmouth, Merlin vanishes from the story after he helps Uther to satisfy his desire, while in Malory, this is only Merlin's introduction. This introduction also includes the part where Merlin asks Uther for the new-born boy so that he can take him to Sir Ector for nurture and have him christened as Arthur, which supports the fact that Merlin has some kind of knowledge of the future. And it is this foreknowledge that forms the basis for his role of an advisor.

4.3.1 Merlin as an Advisor

Although Merlin as an advisor already marginally appears in *Historia*, Malory makes use of this role much more extensively. Naturally, this is due to the fact that Merlin appears on many occasions in the first four books of *Le Morte*, where he gets a number of opportunities to manifest his abilities.

During the war between Arthur and eleven kings that oppose him, Merlin proves his capabilities of a war advisor. For example he advised Arthur to send for Kings Ban and Bors and to ask them for help. Also, when Arthur defeated the eleven kings, Merlin warns him not to pursue them: "For God is wroth with thee, that thou wilt never have done; for yonder eleven kings at this time will not be overthrown, but an thou tarry on them any longer, thy fortune will turn and they shall increase."⁶⁶

Merlin's importance as an advisor is emphasized in the chapter 1 of Book III where Malory writes: "But yet many kings and lords held great war against him ..., but well Arthur overcame them all, for the most part the days of his life he was ruled much by the counsel of Merlin."⁶⁷ And Arthur himself stressed Merlin's role when he asked him for help: "I must take a wife, and I will none take but by thy counsel and by thine advice."⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, 55.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 90.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

However, what follows is an example of the advisor's shortcomings. Merlin lets Arthur choose Guenever only to warn him against it afterwards. He is not capable of discouraging Arthur from his decision. His knowledge of the future does not in fact help to change it. Hoffman has stated that "Merlin is actively engaged in creating the kingdom whose downfall he perceives. ... He devotes himself to the completion of a project in the full knowledge of his eventual defeat."⁶⁹ This incapability means that Merlin carries a terrible burden, in fact the one that was imposed on him by his father. Merlin tries to help others, but ultimately, all he can do is to warn them. It almost seems like he is giving up and accepting the fact that future cannot be changed. This is most recognizable when he speaks of his own death with Arthur: "Ah, said the king, since ye know of your adventure, purvey for it, and put away by your crafts that misadventure. Nay, said Merlin, it will not be."⁷⁰ This clearly shows that Merlin will not escape his own fate. The main reason for this is probably the fact that the Arthurian legend had been told numerous by the time Malory wrote his romance. And it was impossible to change the crucial events of the plot and still write the legend of King Arthur. Thus all that was necessary for Arthur to become the legend had to happen and there were much stronger forces behind it than Merlin's will. It would be a completely different story if the characters listened to Merlin's advice.

4.3.2 Merlin as a Magician

Merlin's identity of a magician again is not explicitly stated in the text but for only in instances when other characters intend to insult him. For instance King Lot calls him a "dream-reader" and others call him "a witch."⁷¹ Instead it is his special abilities that establish his image of a magician, for example shape-shifting and teleportation, creation of the sword that only Arthur can pull from the stone, and enchanting King Pellinore.

His shape-shifting abilities are evident when he first appears in the story and Ulfius mistakes him for a beggar,⁷² and also when he comes before Arthur asking for a gift.⁷³ It can be argued that this could be achieved by merely wearing different clothing, but when Merlin changes the appearance of King Uther himself, there is no doubt about

⁶⁹ Donald L. Hoffman, "Malory's Tragic Merlin," *Quondam et Futurus* 1, no. 2 (1991): 17, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27870118>.

⁷⁰ Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, 107.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, 42–43.

⁷² *Ibid*, 34.

⁷³ *Ibid*, 56.

his skill. Merlin also manifests his shape-shifting abilities when he comes before Arthur first as a 14-year-old boy and then as an old man.⁷⁴ Moreover, Merlin remains unrecognized by his fellows in some scenes. There is no other explanation but magic. Also, there are several occasions where “Merlin vanished away suddenly”⁷⁵ or disappeared to come to Arthur to inform him of something that had just happened.

One of the most known examples of Merlin’s magic skills is the enchanted sword with an inscription: “Whoso pulleth out this sword of this stone and anvil, is rightwise king born of all England.”⁷⁶ It is obvious that Merlin was involved, as it was him who initiated the gathering of all the knights on Christmas Day when the stone appeared in the yard of the biggest London church. Merlin also creates an iron and steel bridge that only good men can pass, or a marble stone always floating on water.⁷⁷

Another important manifestation of Merlin’s magic is the enchantment of King Pellinore by which Merlin prevents him from killing Arthur in a duel: “Merlin cast an enchantment to the knight, that he fell to the earth in a great sleep.”⁷⁸ Merlin casts another spell when they meet Pellinore again, this time allowing Arthur pass unseen.⁷⁹

4.3.3 Merlin as a Lover

The only instance of Merlin’s depiction in the role of a lover is at the end of his story in Book IV. Malory describes Merlin’s foolish infatuation with Nimue, which leads to his entombment in a rock under a stone.

This episode portrays Merlin, who had been known as a prudent advisor so far, in a way that makes the readers wonder what caused such an irrational behavior. Merlin loses himself in the obsession with Nimue, who fails to return his affection. Malory stresses Merlin’s suffocating possessiveness by repeating his need to keep her with him: “Merlin would let her have no rest, but always he would be with her.”⁸⁰ Amidst this madness, Merlin displays his former soundness when he informs Arthur that he “should not dure long” and also tells him “many things that should befall.”⁸¹ Arthur suggests

⁷⁴ Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, 60.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 76.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 38.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 89.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 65.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 66.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 106.

⁸¹ *Ibid*.

escaping the fate by the use of Merlin's magic, but Merlin knows that this is not possible. They part their ways and Merlin travels with Nimue everywhere she goes.⁸²

S. E. Holbrook comments that Merlin's lecherous behavior lead Nimue, who took advantage of his condition to learn his supernatural skills, to break free from him in any way she could in order to protect her chastity.⁸³ Given the chance, "by her subtle working she made Merlin to go under [the] stone" and "she wrought so there for him that he came never out for all the craft he could do. And so she departed and left Merlin." Despite the chapter's title, Merlin does not die under the stone. When Sir Bagdemagus came across Merlin's rock, "he heard him make great dole" and tried to free him, but Merlin told him that only Nimue could set him free,⁸⁴ which, of course, she never does. And such is the end of Merlin in *Le Morte Darthur*.

⁸² Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, 107.

⁸³ S. E. Holbrook, "Nymue, the Chief Lady of the Lake, in Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*," *Speculum* 53, no. 4 (1978): 770–771, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2849785>.

⁸⁴ Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, 112.

5 T. H. WHITE

Terence Hanbury White was born on 29th May 1906 in Bombay, British India. He came from a troubled family. Elisabeth Brewer mentions that his father was an alcoholic and frequently argued with White's mother.⁸⁵ When he was still a child, he was sent to England to live with his grandparents. White attended Cheltenham College and later University of Cambridge, where he studied English. Afterwards he taught at Stowe School, but after publishing a novel *England Have My Bones* (1936), he dedicated all his time to writing.

In 1938, White wrote *The Sword in the Stone*, which he edited and published in 1939. It was a huge success, and it came to be, in the words of Ad Putter and Elizabeth Archibald, "[a] great classic of Arthurian children's literature."⁸⁶ *The Sword in the Stone* was followed by *The Witch in the Wood* (1939, later retitled as *The Queen of Air and Darkness*), *The Ill-Made Knight* (1940), *The Candle in the Wind* (1958) and *The Book of Merlyn* (1977). The first four books were published in 1958 under the title *The Once and Future King*. *The Book of Merlyn*, written in 1941, was intended as the final part of the cycle. Even though it was first published posthumously, White incorporated some parts of it into the four books of *The Once and Future King*.

5.1 The Author and *The Sword in the Stone*

There are several aspects of T. H. White's life which influenced and shaped his Arthurian works. The most important is the influence of Thomas Malory. It was during White's studies at Cheltenham College that he first encountered Malory,⁸⁷ and at Queen's College in Cambridge that he wrote a thesis on *Le Morte d'Arthur*. In his letter to Leonard James Potts, his Cambridge teacher and a friend, White says about *The Sword in the Stone* that he had written "a preface to Malory."⁸⁸ White also writes that he is "afraid it is rather warm-hearted" and expresses worry about its success, as he believes it to be too good for the common reader.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Elisabeth Brewer, *T. H. White's The Once and Future King* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1993), 1.

⁸⁶ Ad Putter and Elizabeth Archibald, *The Cambridge Companion to the Arthurian Legend*, ed. Elizabeth Archibald and Ad Putter (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 7.

⁸⁷ Brewer, *White*, 2.

⁸⁸ Francois Gallix, *Letters to a Friend: The Correspondence Between T. H. White and L. J. Potts* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1982), 93–95, <http://lettersoftheday.blogspot.cz/2007/10/s-word-s-tone.html>.

⁸⁹ Gallix, *Letters*, 93–95.

Another significant influence on *The Sword in the Stone* was that of White's residence situation. After earning some money by publishing *England Have My Bones*, White decided to quit his teaching post and to move to a gamekeeper's cottage to focus on writing. There he started falconry, intending to write a book on falcons. As Brewer points out, "it was in the gamekeeper's cottage with his dog Brownie and the falcons and other livestock for company that White wrote *The Sword in the Stone*."⁹⁰ In the book, Merlyn's house closely resembles this picture as he also lives secluded in a forest with a number of animals accompanying him.⁹¹ The falconry is also significantly portrayed in the book, the names of some birds corresponding to those White trained.⁹²

White's pedagogical experience also influenced the book, mainly the character of Merlyn, but also the theme of the work itself. Merlyn's primary role is that of Arthur's teacher, a person who guides him and helps him learn. White spent several years teaching. Throughout his writing career, he created a number of characters who are teachers and educators. According to Brewer, White "was considered a responsible tutor, and an inspired and inspiring teacher, though one of his pupils later recorded that he was also a very severe one, who would pour scorn on those who tried to impress by their cleverness"⁹³ This very much resembles the teacher figure of *The Sword in the Stone*. Learning is also a theme of the book. Arthur (called Wart) is a young boy who is yet to become the famous king. Next to traditional education, Wart is learning how to be a better person too. The lessons he receives from Merlyn help him become a good leader and a wise king.

One more aspect of White's life shaped his retellings of Malory; White was writing during the Second World War. Although he lived in Ireland at that time and could not directly participate in the fighting, he was heavily influenced by the conflict. Brewer comments that "the growing Arthurian epic became more and more concerned with the problem of finding an antidote to war"⁹⁴ And Andrew Hadfield adds: "[White] came to see his sequence of novels as a more valuable war effort"⁹⁵ White's war opinions are also manifested in the character of Merlyn, which I will deal with in one of the following chapters.

⁹⁰ Brewer, *White*, 8.

⁹¹ White, *The Once and Future King* (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2011), 31.

⁹² Brewer, *White*, 8.

⁹³ *Ibid*, 6.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 71.

⁹⁵ Andrew Hadfield, "T. H. White, Pacifism and Violence: The Once and Future Nation," *Connotations* 6, no. 2 (1996/1997): 209.

5.2 Merlin in *The Sword in the Stone*

The book begins with Arthur as a boy, who is living at the castle of his guardian Sir Ector, not knowing who he really is. Wart is receiving education alongside Ector's son Kay, who is going to be a knight one day. Wart first meets Merlyn after he has been wandering through a forest. He got lost while looking for a hawk Cully. Wart comes to a clearing where he finds Merlyn outside his stone cottage. The magician is

dressed in a flowing gown with fur tippetts which had the signs of the zodiac embroidered over it, with various cabalistic signs, such as triangles with eyes in them, queer crosses, leaves of trees, bones of birds and animals, and a planetarium whose stars shone like bits of looking-glass with the sun on them. He had a pointed hat like a dunce's cap He also had a wand of lignum vitae ... and a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles⁹⁶

Furthermore, he is described as having “a long white beard and long white moustaches,” “some large bird seemed to have been nesting in his hair,” he “was streaked with droppings over his shoulders,” and “a large spider was slowly lowering itself from the tip of his hat.”⁹⁷ That is the visual appearance of the great wizard, according to T. H. White.

Merlyn has been waiting for him. He explains he is living backwards in time, which some people know as “having second sight.”⁹⁸ They go back to Sir Ector's and Merlyn becomes Wart's tutor.

5.2.1 Merlin as a Teacher

T. H. White chose to write a retelling of Malory which features Arthur as a young boy. And according to White, one of the most important things a young boy needs is a good education. Merlin, who has previously appeared in the roles of a wise man and an advisor, now adopts the role of a teacher. He is Wart's private tutor, who insisted on teaching Wart in isolation, because he knows who Wart will become one day.

Probably the most important thing Merlyn is trying to teach Arthur is self-reliance. He does that by transforming him into various animals, leaving him alone to

⁹⁶ White, *King*, 28–29.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 29.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 35.

take care of himself, and, above all, to think for himself. He emphasizes the importance at the beginning of Arthur's learning: "education is experience, and the essence of experience is self-reliance."⁹⁹ The animal world serves as a mirror to the world of humans, Wart learns about people and society through the political systems of animals.

As C. M. Adderley points out, Merlyn knows what is going to happen to Arthur and his kingdom. Nevertheless, he prepares him the best he can. Not because he hopes Arthur can avoid his fate, but to create an ideal for next generations.¹⁰⁰ Adderley also mentions that Merlyn is the only possible choice for Arthur's tutor, because he is living backwards in time: "Merlyn, whose past lies in the future, is able to be an idealist, to leave [the] sense of ancestral wrong behind. ... This faculty enables him to concentrate less on the causes of strife than on the consequences."¹⁰¹ This means he is the only one who believes that people can better themselves, as the kingdom's past leaves a mark on Arthur's reign and his subjects. He is the one with hope, guiding Wart "to become the idealist-king."¹⁰²

In the character of Merlyn, White centralized all his love for teaching. According to Putter and Archibald, Merlyn "is the kind of teacher every pupil dreams of: a teacher who positively encourages youthful adventure and curiosity."¹⁰³ Merlyn is kind and supporting, but also strict when needed. He knows exactly what Arthur needs to become in the future, and he tutors him accordingly.

5.2.2 Merlin as a Pacifist

Another reflection of T. H. White in the character of Merlyn is his attitude towards war and fighting. Merlin certainly does not appreciate knights. He says they are "a lot of brainless unicorns swaggering about and calling themselves educated just because they can push each other off a horse with a bit of stick!"¹⁰⁴ In the scene where King Pellinore and Sir Grummore joust simply because jousting is what knights do, Merlyn wants Wart to see the absurdity of it. The fight between the knights is comical and far from noble.

Merlyn also expresses pacifist views through other Wart's lessons. He shows him animals whose behavior or thinking resembles that of people involved in wars. The

⁹⁹ White, *King*, 46.

¹⁰⁰ C. M. Adderley, "The Best Thing for Being Sad: Education and Educators in T. H. White's *The Once and Future King*," *Quondam et Futurus* 2, no. 1 (1992): 57, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27870174>.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ Putter and Archibald, *Companion*, 7.

¹⁰⁴ White, *King*, 59.

fish in Wart's first lesson is a terrible monarch with twisted values, the raptors are an assembly of bureaucratic officers, who "do not really understand that they are prisoners, any more than the cavalry officers do,"¹⁰⁵ and the ants are a reflection of people blindly following their leaders and accepting fabrication as an excuse to kill other people. On the other hand, Merlyn changes Wart into a goose, too, to learn about peace, love and respect from Lyo-Lyok, who is shocked by human savageness. Furthermore, Wart learns from a badger that not all animals are like humans, trying to kill others of their kind for no real reason.

In the second book of *The Once and Future King*, Merlyn directly condemns war: "wars are a wickedness, perhaps the greatest wickedness of a wicked species. They are so wicked that they must not be allowed."¹⁰⁶ He, however, agrees that there is one exception: "When you can be perfectly certain that the other man started them, then is the time when you might have a sort of duty to stop him."¹⁰⁷

5.2.3 Merlin as a Humorous Character

The next role Merlin plays is that of a humorous character. T. H. White decided to implement it because of his intention to write a book suitable for children. However, not only children appreciate this portrayal of Merlin; White created a memorable character that is wise and respectable but also comical.

One of the humorous elements connected to the character is introduced when Wart first meets Merlyn. The fact that his clothes are streaked with droppings and his hair is a nest suggests that he is not exactly a dignified person. Sometimes Merlyn practices childish spells, for example "a spell to make the sergeant's moustaches uncurl," which does not go well: "he made the sergeant's ears flap by mistake."¹⁰⁸ Quite often Merlyn's spells do not work, which is a major humorous element in the story. Merlyn is also often distracted, which leads to funny situations, for example when he "[knits his] beard into [a] night-cap."¹⁰⁹ Another humorous aspect of the character are his warnings, mostly to Wart: "You run a grave risk, my boy ... of being turned into a piece of bread, and toasted."¹¹⁰ These, of course, are more funny than intimidating.

¹⁰⁵ White, *King*, 75.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 232.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid*.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 59.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*, 75.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*.

Furthermore, Merlin sometimes talks with a person or spirit unseen by anyone else. This also leads to humorous scenes, such as when he asks for his hat, but this person keeps sending him the wrong ones:

“Now,” said Merlyn furiously, apparently to nobody, “do you think you are being funny?”

“Very well then, why do you do it?”

“That is no excuse. Naturally I meant the one I was wearing.”

“But wearing now, of course, you fool. I don't want a hat I was wearing in 1890. Have you no sense of time at all?”¹¹¹

After Wart had his final lesson as a badger, King Pellinore brings news that King Uther is dead and that there is no heir to the throne, but that a sword in a stone appeared in a churchyard in London bearing an inscription “Whoso Pulleth Out This Sword of this Stone and Anvil, is Right-wise King Born of All England.”¹¹² At this point, Kay convinces his father that they should go to London to a tournament where all the great knights from the country would joust, and Wart comes with Merlyn who says his goodbyes. When they are at the tournament, Kay forgets his sword at their inn and commands Wart to fetch it. But the inn is closed. Desperate not to disappoint his brother, Wart sees the sword in the stone and manages to pull it out the third time. After the coronation, Merlyn returns to King Arthur to be at his side “for a long time.”¹¹³

¹¹¹ White, *King*, 91.

¹¹² *Ibid*, 197.

¹¹³ *Ibid*, 209.

6 EXCALIBUR

In April 1981, one of the most famous films about King Arthur and his knights was presented to American audiences. *Excalibur* is an American and British co-production filmed in Ireland. It was directed by John Boorman, written by Raspo Pallenberg and Boorman, and many well-known actors star in the film: Nigel Terry, Nicol Williamson, Helen Mirren, Nicholas Clay, Cherie Lunghi, Corin Redgrave, Patrick Stewart and Liam Neeson. For some of them, it was the beginning of their acting careers.

The reviews for *Excalibur* were a mixture of praise for Nicol Williamson's role of Merlin and Helen Mirren's Morgana and, in the words of Roger Ebert, "a triumph of production design, costumes, and special effects,"¹¹⁴ and at the same time a critique of the storyline and other characters who, as Vincent Canby has expressed, "are as invisible as ghosts."¹¹⁵ Brian Hoyle summarizes the negative in *Excalibur* as: "an occasional inability to maintain narrative momentum and coherence, awkwardness in the writing and handling of dialogue and characterizations, and unevenness in tone."¹¹⁶ However, the film is often celebrated for its visual eloquence.

Although the final credits of *Excalibur* state that the film was adapted from Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, Lacy argues that "even the briefest comparison of the film and the medieval text reveals that Boorman modifies the story in substantial and significant ways, innovating in fact and detail alike ... to enhance the cinematic impact of his presentation."¹¹⁷ By the time Boorman was making the film, there was an enormous number of Arthurian literature and films and therefore his sources of inspiration could have been fairly diverse. As Hoyle explains, "*Excalibur* is nothing less than a visionary attempt to revitalize the legends for a new generation by bringing together the complete canon of Arthuriana from Geoffrey of Monmouth through to Monty Python."¹¹⁸

According to Lesley Coote, *Excalibur* is also influenced by New Age Celticism, which leads to the fact that "the supernatural, the magic, and the prophetic overwhelm

¹¹⁴ Roger Ebert, "Excalibur," *Roger Ebert*, January 1, 1981, <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/excalibur-1981>.

¹¹⁵ Vincent Canby, "Boorman's 'Excalibur'," *The New York Times*, April 10, 1981. [http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9505EFD61138F933A25757C0A967948260#p\[TAlYsf\]](http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9505EFD61138F933A25757C0A967948260#p[TAlYsf]).

¹¹⁶ Brian Hoyle, *The Cinema of John Boorman* (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, 2012), 133.

¹¹⁷ Norris J. Lacy, "Mythopoeia in *Excalibur*," in *Cinema Arthuriana: Twenty Essays*, ed. Kevin J. Harty (Jefferson: McFarland, 2002), 34.

¹¹⁸ Hoyle, *The Cinema*, 120.

the chivalric element of Malory's text."¹¹⁹ She also points out that the authors' view of *Le Morte Darthur* "is filtered through the views of modern commentators, in particular the 'Celtic' interpretations of Jessie Weston."¹²⁰

Another influence on *Excalibur* and its visual aspects is J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954—1955), which was itself influenced by the Arthurian legends. John Boorman and Raspo Pallenberg wrote a screenplay for Tolkien's trilogy, but the studio that had asked for the film adaptation was no longer interested. Janet Brennan Croft writes in her essay that the director "eventually used some of the special-effects techniques and locations developed for *The Lord of the Rings* in other films, most notably *Excalibur* in 1981."¹²¹ There is, however, one more example of the influence of Tolkien's books on *Excalibur* apparent in the film—the emphasis on the sword of power. Film critic Mark Fletcher writes: "the Arthurian influence on *Rings*, whilst far from hidden, becomes glaringly pronounced in the context of watching *Excalibur*, with its talk of fellowships and a single, all-consuming object of power that binds itself to the one who possesses it."¹²²

6.1 The Film

At the beginning of the film, Uther receives from Merlin "the sword of power"—*Excalibur*, a sword "forged when the world was young, and bird, and beast, and flower were one with man and death was but a dream."¹²³ Uther makes peace with Cornwall only to break it hours later when he desires Igrayne and starts a war again only to have her. This he achieves with the help from Merlin and the Dragon—the Earth itself. Coote explains that *Excalibur*'s concept of "the Dragon" contains "the power of pagan Celtic spirituality. ... The film is dominated by lush, green landscapes, offering a loose connection with the Celtic association of supernatural, divine powers with natural phenomena such as rocks, streams, and lakes."¹²⁴ This becomes clear in the scene where Arthur talks with Merlin for the first time:

¹¹⁹ Lesley Coote, "The Art of Arthurian Cinema," in *A Companion to Arthurian Literature*, ed. Helen Fulton (Chichester: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 519.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ Janet Brennan Croft, "Three Rings for Hollywood: Scripts for *The Lord of the Rings* by Zimmerman, Boorman, and Beagle," in *Fantasy Fiction into Film: Essays*, ed. Leslie Stratyner and James R. Keller (Jefferson: McFarland, 2007), 10.

¹²² Mark Fletcher, "Four Frames: *Excalibur* (John Boorman, 1981)," *The Big Picture Magazine*, June 25, 2016, <http://thebigpicturemagazine.com/four-frames-excalibur-john-boorman-1981/>.

¹²³ *Excalibur*, dir. John Boorman (Burbank, CA: Warner Bros., 1981).

¹²⁴ Coote, "The Art," 521.

“The Dragon... a beast of such power that if you were to see it whole and complete in a single glance it would burn you to cinders.”

“Where is it?”

“It is everywhere. It is everything. Its scales glisten in the bark of trees. Its roar is heard in the wind. And its forked tongue strikes like... like lightning.”¹²⁵

Cornwall’s daughter Morgana is a witness to Arthur’s conception. She is deeply affected by the scene, partly because she knows her father is dead. When Arthur is born, Merlin takes him away. Running after them, Uther is attacked and as he dies, he drives Excalibur into a stone, crying “nobody shall wield Excalibur but me.”¹²⁶

Years later, it is Arthur who coincidentally draws the sword from, as Lorraine K. Stock describes this important object of the Arthurian legend, “a lushly green, moss-covered boulder in the woods.”¹²⁷ She continues: “throughout the film, Boorman’s visual echoes of this moss-covered rock (particularly during Guinevere and Lancelot’s tryst in the woods) juxtapose the ‘old’ nature-based religion with its vexed successor, Christianity.”¹²⁸ With the guidance of Merlin, Arthur fights his opponents and becomes king. He successfully rules his lands, builds the round table and marries Guenevere. At their wedding, Merlin meets Morgana again and she asks to be his companion so that she can learn from him.

Later in the story, Morgana is eager to learn more from Merlin, but she prompts Gawain to accuse Guenevere of driving Lancelot away with her desire for him.¹²⁹ Arthur refuses to fight for Guenevere because his kingship comes first, even before love. There is a trial by combat and Lancelot wins despite a previously self-inflicted wound—a wound that symbolizes his love for Guenevere. Lancelot leaves the court to heal in the forest, but Guenevere follows him and they consummate their love. Arthur asks Merlin whether they are together, Merlin tells him the truth and parts with him: “my days are ended. The gods of once are gone forever. It’s a time for men. It’s your time, Arthur.”¹³⁰

¹²⁵ *Excalibur*.

¹²⁶ *Ibid*.

¹²⁷ Lorraine K. Stock, “Reinventing an Iconic Arthurian Moment: The Sword in the Stone in Films and Television,” *Arthuriana* 25, no. 4 (2015): 71, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/606196>.

¹²⁸ *Ibid*.

¹²⁹ *Excalibur*.

¹³⁰ *Ibid*.

As Morgana traps Merlin in a cave—“the coils of the Dragon,”¹³¹ Arthur drives Excalibur between the sleeping lovers—as Roberta Davidson explains, it is “the ‘sin’ of Excalibur striking into the dragon, a sin against nature.”¹³² From this moment, everything goes awry. Morgana seduces Arthur and conceives Mordred, Arthur is struck by lightning, his health deteriorates, and the land declines and decays. Coote explains that “the idea that a weak or depraved king would affect the physical well-being of his country was common in medieval England.”¹³³ Arthur sends his knights on a quest for the Holy Grail, which they believe is the only thing that can save the land and the king.

Years later, Mordred plans to attack Arthur to take his place as a king. Most of Arthur’s knights died searching for the Grail, but Perceval is the only one left and he proves worthy of finding the Grail. Arthur drinks from it and his health is restored, and with it the health of the land, which begins to bloom and grow again. As Arthur prepares for the battle with Mordred, he calls for Merlin. His spirits answers: “your love brought me back—back to where you are now, in the land of dreams.”¹³⁴ Merlin also visits Morgana and carefully makes her use all her magic. She grows old and her own son murders her. In the battle, Mordred and Arthur kill each other. Perceval throws Excalibur into a lake and when he returns to Arthur, he sees his body in a boat, sailing away.

6.2 Merlin in *Excalibur*

When Merlin first appears on screen, we see his dark figure emerging from a smoke, only his staff and a tattered cloak discernible. His other characteristic feature is a metal skull cap, which, according to Coote, denotes his ‘hard edge,’ while his “wild, ragged, and hermit-like clothing emphasizes his liminality.”¹³⁵ Merlin witnesses the battle between Uther and Cornwall and promises Uther to give him the Excalibur the next day. When he does, he proves to be the real advisor and leader as he has to guide Uther to peace. In this scene, the character of Merlin is revealed in its whole: he controls Uther, tells him what to do. He gave him the Excalibur because he thought that he was the king to unite the land. Later in the film, he realizes that he was wrong and that Arthur is the one, so he helps him to become the king.

¹³¹ *Excalibur*.

¹³² Roberta Davidson, “The Reel Arthur: Politics and Truth claims in *Camelot*, *Excalibur*, and *King Arthur*,” *Arthuriana* 17, no. 2 (2007): 72–73, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27870837>.

¹³³ Coote, “The Art,” 522.

¹³⁴ *Excalibur*.

¹³⁵ Coote, “The Art,” 521.

As Davidson has explained, Merlin in *Excalibur* is also a teacher, but Arthur's education "occurs in a single night. It consists of bringing Arthur to realize that he and Excalibur are both part of 'the dragon.'"¹³⁶ Even though his education happens in one night, Merlin stays close to Arthur throughout the story to help and advise him. When Arthur helps a knight who backed him, Merlin directly tells him what to do almost every minute. But he soon realizes that it is not really necessary and that Arthur can manage on his own sometimes.

John Boorman cast Nicol Williamson to play Merlin, and he has with no doubt an enormous influence on how the character is perceived. Boorman's words from an interview by Philip Strick capture the real essence of Williamson's Merlin: "he has the humor, the power, the irony. He is intimidatingly *more* human and *less* human than ordinary people."¹³⁷ His eyes sparkle, he is witty and superior. Everyone values his knowledge and guidance, and some are even afraid of him. He is a magician with ultimate power. However, the time of magic nears its end. Boorman explains the situation: "in the film, Merlin is disappearing, fading out as rational man takes over the world. The magic is still there, but it's no longer part of the foreground, it has passed into the unconscious."¹³⁸ Also Williamson comments on Merlin: "at the beginning of many scenes you can see him jerk into the living world, pick up the thread of it, but afterwards comes the *lachrymae mundi*, melancholia."¹³⁹ In the end, he is trapped by Morgana in his cave. The reason why she manages to do so could be the fact that Merlin is old and tired and therefore distracted by watching other events unfolding elsewhere—Arthur finding Guenevere and Lancelot in the forest. Even though Morgana tricked Merlin and learned "the charm of making," he is eventually victorious as he also tricks her in her dream.

6.2.1 Merlin as a Representative of the Old Religion

Throughout the film, Merlin reveals that his time is ending, just like the time of magic and, in words of Stock, "the 'old' nature-based religion"¹⁴⁰—Celtic paganism. He says to Morgana: "the days of our kind are numbered. The one God comes to drive out the many gods. The spirits of wood and stream grow silent. It's the way of things. Yes. It's a

¹³⁶ Davidson, "The Reel Arthur," 70–71.

¹³⁷ Philip Strick, "John Boorman's Merlin," *Sight and Sound* 49, no. 3 (1980): 170.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 170–171.

¹⁴⁰ Stock, "Arthurian Moment," 71.

time for men and their ways.”¹⁴¹ He also says this to Arthur: “my days are ended. The gods of once are gone forever.”¹⁴² Merlin belongs to the past; there is no place for him and his beliefs in the future. According to Davidson, “Merlin ... is an agent of creative imagination, unlimited by coherence, logic, or science.”¹⁴³ She continues: “the transformation of the dragon’s world to a world of men feels like a loss of creativity and connectedness, even if it is the initiation of more formal ideals of morality and civilization.”¹⁴⁴ Merlin is connected with nature above all, but there is no place for such an uncontrolled organism in a civilized world. Merlin, as a representative of the Celtic paganism, has to yield to the new belief.

¹⁴¹ *Excalibur*.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ Davidson, “*The Reel Arthur*,” 71.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 72.

7 BBC'S MERLIN

On 20th September 2008, the British Broadcasting Corporation introduced a new television series *Merlin*, also known as *The Adventures of Merlin*, to its audience on the BBC One channel. The show was created by Julian Jones, Jake Michie, Johnny Capps and Julian Murphy, who based it on the Arthurian legends. It has 65 episodes in 5 series and stars Colin Morgan as Merlin, Bradley James as Arthur, Angel Coulby as Guinevere, Katie McGrath as Morgana, Antony Head as Uther Pendragon and Richard Wilson as Gaius in the leading roles. Just as it was with *Excalibur*, *Merlin* also launched careers of many previously unknown actors.

Probably the most striking difference between the BBC's *Merlin* and other Arthurian adaptations is the setting of the show. The creators went further back than T. H. White, because the BBC wished to commission a program that would focus on the early years of Merlin.¹⁴⁵ But instead of just focusing on Merlin's early life, before he became King Arthur's advisor and a great magician, the creators made Merlin Arthur's contemporary. The two characters are the same age roughly—they mature together and become the legendary king and magician alongside each other. Another difference between traditional portrayals of the Arthurian legend and *Merlin* is the fact that Uther and Arthur are both alive in the show. Arthur is a prince who will inherit the throne one day, and Uther is an example of an old king who is blind to his mistakes, stubbornly refusing to acknowledge Arthur's opinions or wishes. In words of Erin Chandler, Arthur has the opportunity to “attempt to define himself against the failures of his father,” which she describes as “a key aspect of his development throughout the series into the prophesied Once and Future King”¹⁴⁶

Merlin enjoyed much success, running at the peak time on Saturdays. It also started a cult following, many fans being obsessed with the series and creating their own *Merlin* inspired art and fiction. Jon Sherman explains *Merlin*'s attractiveness:

much of Merlin's appeal to its audience is found in its masterful manipulation of viewers' expectations, based on their knowledge of the Arthurian legend derived from sources including Geoffrey of Monmouth and Chrétien de Troyes, but also

¹⁴⁵ Jason Deans, “BBC1 Seeks Magic Touch for Merlin,” *The Guardian*, December 7, 2006. <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2006/dec/07/broadcasting.bbc>.

¹⁴⁶ Erin Chandler, “Pendragons at the Chopping Block: Elements of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in the BBC's *Merlin*,” *Arthuriana* 25, no. 1 (2015): 103, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/579542/>.

more modern authors like T.H. White and Marion Zimmer Bradley. Although we are frequently reminded that there are no absolutes in the legends of King Arthur ... readers and viewers have come to have certain expectations regarding Camelot and its inhabitants. ... Well aware of these expectations, the BBC series begins by freeing itself from these constraints, only to spend five seasons playfully addressing them.¹⁴⁷

BBC created a program that is suitable for young children as well as older audiences, a program that is family-oriented and attractive for the whole spectrum of BBC viewers.

Merlin is set during the reign of Uther Pendragon, a king who outlawed magic twenty years ago and pursues anyone who practices it. Arthur is a prince, the heir to the throne, who is twenty years old. After saving his life, Merlin becomes Arthur's manservant. Although they despise each other in the beginning, they grow fond of each other with time. Due to Uther's hatred of magic, Merlin has to keep his abilities secret. Sometimes he claims to be a sorcerer, but others, especially Arthur, never believe him. The only people who really know that he is a magician are his mentor Gaius, who is a court physician and something of an advisor to the king, Mordred and Lancelot.

Among other important characters are Morgana, Uther's ward and daughter, and Gwen, a blacksmith's daughter and Morgana's maid. There are also the Knights of the Round Table that Arthur as a king later in the show establishes: Lancelot, Gawaine, Percival, Leon and Elyan, although they are based on their predecessors rather loosely. Only Lancelot can be said to follow the legend more faithfully, as he falls in love with Guinevere. But in *Merlin*, he is a true knight who does not let his feelings ruin Arthur's happiness. In the end, he sacrifices himself so that Arthur can live, a sacrifice he made out of his love for both Gwen and Arthur. Mordred, who is not related to Arthur in the show, is a young druid boy whom Morgana, Arthur and Merlin save. He is the one who first calls Merlin by his druid name Emrys. When grown up, Mordred becomes a knight but later joins Morgana in her hatred for the king as Arthur justly executes Mordred's loved one.

A character original to the show is Kilgharrah, the Great Dragon. Uther imprisoned him in the caves below Camelot when the king allegedly drove magic from his lands. He is the character that Merlin turns for advice all the time, especially when

¹⁴⁷ Jon Sherman, "Source, Authority, and Audience in the BBC's *Merlin*," *Arthuriana* 25, no. 1 (2015): 83, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/579541>.

he is troubled with doubts or unable to decide himself. Kilgharrah has extensive knowledge about magic, the past and the future. He resembles the character of Merlin from other works as he has prophetic abilities and often speaks of destiny.

7.1 Merlin in the BBC Series

The character is played by Colin Morgan, a Northern Irish actor who was twenty-two years old when the show started. His Merlin has a short dark hair and protruding ears. He is rather slim and most often wears a blue or red shirt and a red or grey scarf together with a brown jacket and pants. When Merlin uses magic, his eyes change color to gold as the spell is cast.

In the first episode, young Merlin comes to Camelot from a small village where he clearly does not belong, because, as his mother writes in a letter to his new guardian Gaius, he is special. Merlin was born with magic in his blood. He uses magic to help Arthur become the king and unite Albion, but dark forces triumph in the end and Arthur is mortally wounded. The show ends with a scene of Merlin in the present day, waiting for Arthur to return.

Apart from being a young man and a student, Merlin in the BBC series also assumes the roles of Arthur's friend and his equal, and sometimes he disguises himself as Dragoon the Great.

7.1.1 Merlin as a Student

Even Merlin has to learn so that he can become the legendary magician. He received a book of magic from Gaius and he often studies it secretly, but this way of learning is not enough for the eager Merlin. He says: "If I don't practice, how do I become this great warlock?" But Gaius has to moderate his temper and often remind him what would happen if people found out about him. So, he learns from the book and practices magic secretly, even though it still worries Gaius.

Another important teacher figure in the show is without doubt the Great Dragon. Despite the fact that he is evasive and hardly ever answers Merlin in a way that he can understand, he still manages to lead him towards his destiny. It almost seems as if Kilgharrah's only role is to make sure everything happens as it should, telling Merlin only what is necessary for him to keep going.

Not only is Merlin a student in the traditional sense, but he is a student of life and people too. Experience shapes him into the person he becomes, often learning the

hard way. This is part of the most challenging lesson for Merlin: he cannot change his destiny. He keeps trying and fighting against it, but, as being part of a legend, he can never succeed.

7.1.2 Merlin as a Friend and Arthur's Equal

Merlin's fate is interwoven with Arthur's. As Kilgharrah says, they are two sides of the same coin.¹⁴⁸ Merlin has to lead Arthur to become a great king, saving his life on many occasions, secretly aiding him on many adventures and defeating powerful opponents who seek to harm Arthur and destroy Camelot. According to Sherman, "Merlin's loyalty to Arthur—to the point where he is prepared to offer his life for him—is an extreme expression of the friendship and bonds between the series' two protagonists."¹⁴⁹ There are also enemies who try to kill Merlin, usually those who learn about his true nature and the role he plays in Arthur's life. And there are also situations where Merlin sacrifices his life or puts himself in the harm's way for Arthur. In these cases, Arthur repays Merlin and saves his life.

Risking his life for Merlin is something Arthur's father never understands, which leads to arguments between them. It is hard for Arthur to admit to himself that Merlin, his servant, is important to him and that he might be his friend. It takes him some time before he admits it:

"Were you worried about me?"

"No. I was making sure we weren't being followed."

"You came back to look for me."

"All right, it's true. I came back because you're the only friend I have and I couldn't bear to lose you."¹⁵⁰

Merlin often suffers from not being given any credit for all the good he does, as he also suffers from hiding his skills from Arthur. He tries to turn Arthur to favor magic and to see that it is not all evil, but it does more harm than good. Arthur is the same as his father, which ultimately leads to his end. In the last episode of the series, when Merlin is trying to save Arthur, there is no point in lying anymore. After an initial shock, Arthur

¹⁴⁸ *Merlin*, "The Mark of Nimueh," series 1, episode 3, directed by James Hawes, written by Julian Jones, BBC One, aired October 4, 2008.

¹⁴⁹ Sherman, "Source," 93.

¹⁵⁰ *Merlin*, "The Sword in the Stone, part 2," series 4, episode 13, directed by Alice Troughton, written by Julian Jones, BBC One, aired December 24, 2011.

finally sees Merlin for what he truly is and accepts him, as a real friend should: “I don't want you to change. I want you to always be you. I'm sorry about how I treated you.”¹⁵¹ He also acknowledges Merlin's importance: “everything you've done, I know now. For me, for Camelot. For the kingdom you helped me build. ... I want to say something I've never said to you before. Thank you.”¹⁵²

Despite the fact that Merlin is Arthur's manservant and the king usually treats him like that, the viewers of the show know that he is not in the least inferior to him. Without Merlin, Arthur would never achieve the legendary status of the Once and Future King.

7.1.3 Merlin as an Old Man

From the third series, Merlin sometimes appears in the form of an old man. Dragoon the Great is a character Merlin created as a disguise. Despite the fact that it is a disguise, he is never more himself than in these transformations. Everybody knows he is a magician, they treat him with respect and they also fear him. Merlin, or, as Morgana calls his old self, Emrys, always speaks his mind. He does not have to withhold any of his opinions and thus properly admonishes both Uther and Arthur for their errors.

Merlin first encountered his old self in a crystal cave where he saw the future. When he needs to save Gwen later in the season because she is accused of enchanting Arthur, he casts a dangerous aging spell. He manages to save Guinevere, but he is himself captured and sentenced to death, unable to turn back to his young self. Gaius makes him a potion that reverses the effect of the spell and Merlin escapes, but he often returns to the semblance of Emrys when he needs to perform magic publicly.¹⁵³

It could be said that Emrys is Merlin's true form. Except his humorous side and sarcasm, when he serves more as a comic character, he is very similar to Merlin known from other sources, the one who is a great magician and an advisor to Arthur respected by all. During Arthur's final battle, Emrys significantly influences the outcome. He is standing high above the field, defeating enemies with lightning. Arthur looks up to him, finally realizing that not all magic is evil. After Arthur is taken to Avalon, the final

¹⁵¹ *Merlin*, “The Diamond of the Day, part 2,” series 5, episode 13, directed by Justin Molotnikov, written by Julian Jones, BBC One, aired December 24, 2012.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ *Merlin*, “The Queen of Hearts,” series 3, episode 10, directed by Ashley Way, written by Howard Overman, BBC One, aired November 13, 2010.

episode shows old Merlin in the modern day, disguising himself as a homeless person while he awaits Arthur's return.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁴ *Merlin*, "The Diamond of the Day, part 2."

8 CONCLUSION

This bachelor thesis aimed at exploring the character of Merlin as part of the Arthurian tradition. It focused on the portrayal of the character in literature, film and television. Five different sources were chosen as representative examples of the treatment of Merlin. These sources were studied and the roles Merlin plays in them were examined for the purpose of establishing the evolution of the character through time and media.

In the second chapter of this bachelor thesis, all important sources of the character of Merlin as part of the Arthurian legend were reviewed. The works of literature, film and television were considered and a brief account of the roles Merlin plays in these sources was presented. It was necessary to give an account of the way Merlin is represented in these media before analyzing particular works in order to distinguish these chosen works against the background of Merlin literature as a whole. The sources were divided into five subchapters, four of them focusing on Merlin in literature from the twelfth century to the twentieth century, and the fifth subchapter reviewing Merlin as he appears on the screen—film and television.

The third chapter focused on the *History of the Kings of Britain* written by Geoffrey of Monmouth and its depiction of Merlin. Monmouth was introduced as the first person to write about the character of Merlin as part of the Arthurian legend. It was shown that Monmouth created Merlin by merging already existing characters from Nennius' *History of the Britons* and Welsh legends; and also the degree of Monmouth's originality was considered. Beside his origin, Merlin's roles in the *History of the Kings of Britain* were explored. In the twelfth-century chronicle, Merlin was observed to appear in the roles of a demon's son, a prophet, a builder and a creator of Arthur.

The next chapter focused on Thomas Malory and his romance *Le Morte Darthur*. The book and its publication history were discussed as well as the contribution of the book's editor and publisher William Caxton. It was also shown how the time the author lived in influenced his work. Malory's treatment of Merlin was explored and it was discovered that unlike in his sources Merlin is not introduced in the book and appears as an already established character. His roles were described as an advisor to King Arthur, a magician and a lover, a role which proves fatal as Nimue imprisons him in a cave. Merlin's acceptance of his and others' fate was also considered and it was concluded that the destiny cannot be evaded as it is crucial to a faithful adaptation of the legend.

T. H. White's *The Sword in the Stone* is a children's book that occupies an important place in the Arthurian literature. It influenced the twentieth-century image of Merlin and magicians in general. In the fifth chapter, the connection between the author and the book was studied. It was demonstrated that White's profession as a teacher, his living arrangements, hobbies and the time of his life all influenced his writing and Merlin's character in particular. Merlin was observed to play the roles of a teacher, a pacifist and a humorous character.

The sixth chapter focused on the treatment of Merlin in the film *Excalibur* directed by John Boorman. The film's originality and contribution to the Arthurian legend was discussed and the main storyline was outlined. It was suggested that the creators of the film not only drew from other Arthurian adaptations, but also the work of J. R. R. Tolkien, which is noticeable in the film. Merlin in *Excalibur* was observed to adopt the roles which are not very original, those of a teacher and an advisor, but still *Excalibur* portrays Merlin in these roles with innovation. Originality is also apparent in Merlin's role of a representative of old religion which is disappearing as civilization comes to the fore.

Merlin, a BBC television adaptation, focused on the portrayal of Merlin and his role in the Arthurian legend. It was observed to be innovative in its depiction of Merlin as Arthur's contemporary. The target audience was also considered as a reason for the modern adaptation, which was created to appeal to a large number of viewers. In this chapter, the setting of the program was described, as well as other characters that influence Merlin and his story. Merlin in the BBC series was portrayed in the roles of a student rather than a teacher, Arthur's friend and equal, and an old sorcerer that Merlin uses as a disguise.

In the present day, Merlin continues to excite interest of wide audiences. Many writers, creators and businessmen take advantage of the ongoing popularity of the legend to gain profit. Merlin in the twenty-first century so far appears in literature, film and television, but also in computer games and comic books. He even has his own Barbie doll. In 2017, the film *King Arthur: Legend of the Sword* directed by Guy Ritchie is expected to launch a franchise of six films relating the story of King Arthur. The Arthurian legend has the potential to inspire more adaptations in the years to come as it is the mystery connected to it that arouses curiosity and interest. The character of Merlin will probably be further shaped by the issues of contemporary society and culture; it is likely that the problems of racial equality, gender and sexual orientation

will influence the future portrayals of Merlin and the adaptations of the Arthurian legend.

RESUMÉ

Tématem této bakalářské práce je vývoj postavy kouzelníka Merlina v literatuře, filmu a televizním zpracování. Součástí práce je kapitola popisující všechna důležitá vyobrazení postavy právě v těchto médiích. Jelikož je Merlin zobrazován v nesčetném množství různých děl od dvanáctého století až po současnost, tato práce si pro analýzu zvolila pět adaptací artušovské legendy. Jako první práce bylo zvoleno literární dílo *Dějiny britských králů* od Geoffreyho z Monmouthu z dvanáctého století. Druhým zástupcem literatury je *Artušova smrt*, román napsaný Thomasem Malorym v patnáctém století. Třetím literárním dílem je *Meč v kameni*, první část tetralogie, kterou ve dvacátém století napsal T. H. White. Zástupcem filmové tvorby byl zvolen *Excalibur* z roku 1981 od režiséra Johna Boormana. Poslední vybranou adaptací zobrazující postavu Merlina je stejnojmenný televizní seriál od BBC vysílaný v letech 2008 až 2012. Všechny tyto adaptace byly zkoumány s ohledem na jejich originalitu, vliv autorů nebo doby tvorby. Role, ve kterých je Merlin vykreslován, byly popsány a zasazeny do kontextu konkrétního díla.

V druhé kapitole byla shrnuta všechna důležitá díla zobrazující Merlina jakožto artušovskou postavu. První čtyři podkapitoly poskytly chronologický přehled všech literárních děl, pátá kapitola se zabývala filmovými a televizními adaptacemi. Třetí kapitola této práce se věnovala knize *Dějiny britských králů*, jejímž autorem je Geoffrey z Monmouthu, jakožto je autorem samotné postavy Merlina. Právě toto autorství bylo studováno spolu s rolemi, které Merlin v knize zaujímá. Merlin byl popsán v roli démonova syna, proroka, stavitele a tvůrce Artuše. Čtvrtá kapitola se zabývala románem *Artušova smrt* od Thomase Maloryho. Merlin se zde objevuje jako vedlejší postava, jejíž původ není vysvětlen, čímž se Malory liší od dřívějších autorů. Bylo ukázáno, že Merlin se zde objevuje v rolích rádce, kouzelníka a milence, ale také člověka, který se srovnává se svým osudem. Třetím literárním dílem je *Meč v kameni*, jejímž autorem je T. H. White. Vliv života autora na knihu a postavu byl popsán a označen jako zásadní pro vyobrazení Merlina jako učitele, pacifisty a humorné postavy. Šestá kapitola se věnuje filmu *Excalibur*, který natočil John Boorman. Merlin se zde objevuje v tradičních rolích učitele a rádce, ale také v roli představitele starého náboženství, pohanství. Televizní zpracování artušovského příběhu od BBC, seriál *Merlin*, je středem pozornosti poslední kapitoly. Tato adaptace byla označena jako netradiční ve svém pojetí časového zasazení postavy Merlina. Ten se objevuje jako

dospívající čaroděj a Artušův vrstevník. Jeho role jsou definovány jako student, starý kouzelník a Artušův kamarád, který je pro příběh stejně důležitý jako samotný Artuš.

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ANOTACE

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Klíčová slova: Merlin, Geoffrey z Monmouthu, Thomas Malory, T. H. White, Excalibur, vývoj postavy

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá postavou Merlina jakožto součástí Artušovské legendy zobrazované v literatuře, filmu a televizi od dvanáctého století do současnosti. Hlavním cílem je popsat role, ve kterých se Merlin objevuje, v pěti odlišných adaptacích této legendy. Každá adaptace je zkoumána s ohledem na originalitu, kterou do zpracování postavy přináší.

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This thesis deals with the character of Merlin as part of the Arthurian legend portrayed in literature, film and television from the twelfth century to the present day. The main focus is on describing the roles Merlin assumes in five different adaptations of the legend. Each adaptation is considered with respect to the novelty it brings to the treatment of the character.