

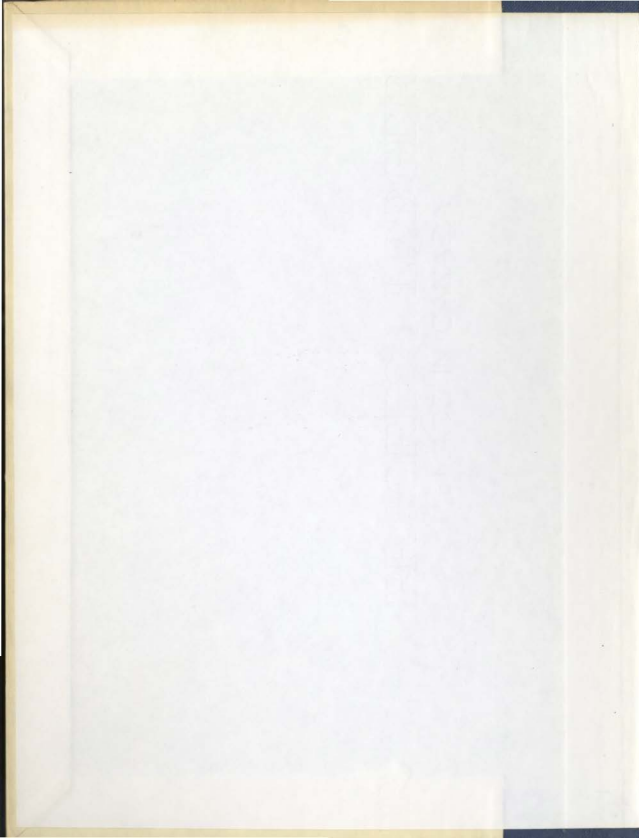
THE FIGURE OF MERLIN IN ENGLISH LITERATURE
FROM THE BEGINNINGS TO 1740

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THE FIGURE OF MERLIN IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

FROM THE BEGINNINGS TO 1740.

by

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the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
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Abstract

This thesis deals with some of the major appearances in English literature of Merlin, the British wizard, and attempts to show how changes in political conditions, historical and quasi-historical research and literary fashions have modified the traditional figure. Merlin's first appearance in early Welsh poetry as prophet and seer was considerably expanded by Geoffrey of Monmouth, who was the first to associate him with the Saxon and British kings of England, particularly Arthur. The French romancer, Robert de Boron, and his successors completed the traditional outline of the history of the wizard, which culminated in English with the prose Merlin. After this crystallization of the legends the wizard's two chief attributes, his gift of prophecy and his magical powers, were accepted and used by many later writers. His prophetic gifts, originally the vehicle for predictions about the history of the nation, continued to appear in this traditional context in Tudor and early Stuart works in both prose and verse; simultaneously purveyors of popular almanacs and prophetic pamphlets were using Merlin's name in a wide variety of contexts. Contemporary political considerations influence the wizard's activities in the works of writers as diverse as Ben Jonson and William Blackmore. The most obvious deviations from the early legends in which Merlin is portrayed as a dignified, wise

and all-powerful magician can be seen in 17th and 18th century drama in which he becomes on several occasions little more than a buffoon; but it is in this period, too, that Rowley wrote a play in which traditional and new material blend to produce one of the most memorable portraits of Merlin in English literature.

The thesis discusses chronologically the material studied from Geoffrey of Monmouth to Fielding. The study closes at a point at which the Arthurian romances and legends were out of favour and the pattern which emerges is therefore one which leads up to a high point, for the portrayal of Merlin, in the romances and then, with some exceptions which are noted, shows a steady debasement of the traditional figure.

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I

FROM MYRDDIN TO MALORY

"Poetry is always turning back on her only valuable material, that which she does not and cannot make, that which was bequeathed to her in the youth of our race, when men wandered in worlds not realized, and explained them by his fancies. In spite of the cry for poetry of our own day and of our own life, great poets have all turned to tradition for their materials. They may use tradition in two ways - frankly appropriating it, never dreaming that its people were in any way other than those they know; or clearly knowing the difference, and making the ancient persons mere personae, masks through which the new voice is uttered."¹

Merlin, the child born of a demonic father, the wizard of Arthur's court, the prophet and shape-shifter, is one of these traditional figures of literature. He appears and reappears in many forms, from the precocious child of Rowley's comedy² to the ancient magical grey-beard of contemporary children's comic books.³ In this thesis I shall attempt to show some of the ways in which writers as diverse as Malory, Ben Jonson, Dryden and Fielding have used tradition, and how, while the traditional elements remain easily identifiable, the function of Merlin changes continuously. From the beginning Merlin did not

appear only as an adjunct to Arthur, as for instance Mordred or Kay did, but had in the early histories, chronicles and romances an independent existence as a prophet and magician, although his story soon became interwoven with that of Arthur. The same division is apparent in later literature; sometimes, as in Chester's Love's Martyr,⁴ in which Merlin's role is subsidiary, he must bring Uter and Igerne together and provide for the care of the infant Arthur; but in other works, for instance Aaron Hill's pantomime opera Merlin in Love,⁵ where Arthur and the Round Table are replaced by Harlequin and Columbine, he appears as a central, though unheroic character. In many works, of course, Merlin is used only in passing, but here too it is possible to see the traditional material being transformed or modified as literary fashions change, or to suit a particular political purpose.

But before discussing the changes in the tradition, the beginnings of Merlin as an established literary figure, with definite attributes and characteristics, must be considered. I do not propose to discuss the arguments for the Celtic origins of Merlin or those for his invention by Geoffrey of Monmouth, or even the minority view that his genesis should be sought among Oriental and early Christian legends.⁶ The difficult and perhaps insoluble problem of Merlin's origin has been discussed by E. K. Chambers, who saw Merlin as wholly a creation of Geoffrey of Monmouth's active brain and comments "This is a hard saying for many

Celticists, who cling to a pre-Galfridian Welsh tradition."⁷ R. S. Loomis⁸ and A. O. H. Jarman,⁹ however, are among the many scholars who find clear evidence of Merlin's Celtic origins in the Welsh Myrddin, and in the parallel Irish and Scots stories of Suibne Gelt and Lailoken. The Merlin of Geoffrey of Monmouth's Vita Merlini, it is argued, owes much to these legends, and Jarman and J. J. Parry¹⁰ suggest that Geoffrey must have been aware of them by the time he wrote the Vita, if not when composing the earlier Historia. Because of the difficulties involved in knowing exactly what form the oral traditions about the prophet took, and the probable loss of the majority of written records from this period, many critical arguments can only be based on assumptions; these, however, are central to the theory of Merlin's Celtic origin, for instance Jarman's "we can maintain with confidence that a complete version of the Myrddin legend existed in Welsh before the close of the Dark Ages",¹¹ and Parry's "it is not necessary for us to assume that Geoffrey used any one of the particular stories that we have been considering, but they point clearly to the existence of a Celtic tradition that must have been accessible to him in some form."¹²

The main purpose of this thesis is to discuss the use of Merlin by Malory and later English writers, and therefore the complicated questions suggested above of influences and borrowings in the earlier period can, to a

certain extent, be ignored. It is, however, necessary to outline the various characteristics and legendary activities attributed to Merlin in the early Celtic, Latin, English and Continental authors, in order to become aware of the kind of man he was popularly supposed to be. Legendary figures such as Arthur, Troilus, Satan and Merlin gain by a process of accretion a recognizable body of characteristics, so that they have much the same connotative value in literature as a frequently used image, and evoke what I. A. Richards would call a "stock response". Just as a poet may use images of roses or wolves or snow, expecting a certain kind of reaction from the reader, because of his earlier exposure to these things both in life and literature, and yet enforce a fresh reaction in the context of a particular poem, so, too, a writer who mentions Merlin now, as at earlier periods, expects a recognition and response from the reader to a common-place, but he, too, may be using the stock symbol either routinely or with an unexpected change that gives it new meaning and force. Our knowledge of roses or snow, and our consequent assumption about a poet's use of them, is based largely on an everyday acquaintance with them, as well as on literary usage, but in the case of a legendary figure such as Merlin the origins of our assumptions are entirely literary: it was the early writers who formed the image and provided the connotations, and these must therefore form the basis for discussion.

The surviving Welsh poems which deal with Myrddin are found in MSS of the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, notably the Black Book of Carmarthen (c 1200) and the Red Book of Hergest (c 1400).¹³ Merlin appears as a bard and a prophet of the sixth century, and in the traditional role of the wild man of the woods. Although the manuscripts are late, they appear to preserve earlier material and represent one source for the complex figure of Merlin. The poems Afellannau (Apple Trees), Holanau (Greetings) and Cyfoesi Myrddin a Gwenddydd ei Chwaer (The Conversation of Myrddin and his sister Gwenddydd) are mainly political prophecies, spoken by Merlin and interspersed with legendary material. The bard appears to have gone mad as a result of his experiences in a battle, in which his lord was killed, and he now lives as a fugitive in the Caledonian forest. The prophecies he utters deal with the early history of the Welsh and their later struggles against the Normans and the English. The Myrddin of these early poems is a pathetic figure, hunted by his enemies, abandoned by his friends, an apple tree his shelter, a little pig his companion.

Gwendydd loves me not, greets me not,
 I am hated by the firmest minister of Rydderch,
 I have ruined his son and his daughter.
 Death takes all away, why does he not visit me?
 For after Gwenddoleu no princes honour me;

I am not soothed with diversion, I am not
visited by the fair;

Yet in the battle of Ardderyd golden was my
torques.

Though I am now despised by her who is of the
colour of swans.

... Ten years and forty, as the toy of lawless
ones,

Have I been wandering in gloom and among sprites.
After wealth in abundance and entertaining
minstrels,

I have been here so long that it is useless for
gloom and sprites to lead me
astray.¹⁴

I have quaffed wine from a bright glass
With the lords of fierce war;
My name is Myrdin, son of Morvryn.¹⁵

Listen, O little pig! a trembling pig!
Thin is my covering, for me there is no repose,
Since the battle of Ardderyd it will not concern
me,

Though the sky were to fall, and sea to overflow.¹⁶

In these poems there is no suggestion that Myrddin is a
magician; he is a seer and a bard and there are suggestions
of a noble origin.

Geoffrey of Monmouth's Merlin in the Vita Merlini (c 1150) shares some of the characteristics of Myrddin but the Merlin of the Historia Regum Britanniae (c 1136) has a very different history, and Geoffrey went to some trouble in the Vita to combine the two. The Merlin of the Historia appears to have his origins in Nennius' Historia Brittonum (early ninth century) and perhaps in Talmudic and Apocryphal legend,¹⁷ and much may be ascribed to Geoffrey's own inventiveness. In Nennius' chronicle Arthur and his victories are mentioned by name "Tunc Arthur pugnabat contra illos in illis diebus cum regibus Brittonum, sed ipse dux erat bellorum . . . Duodecimum fuit bellum in Monte Badonis in quo corruerunt in uno die nongenti sexaginta viri de uno impetu Arthur,"¹⁸ but there is no mention of Merlin. There is however the story (whose relevance to Merlin becomes apparent when Geoffrey's treatment of his story is considered) of the marvellous child, Ambrosius.¹⁹ Vortigern, the Saxon king, attempts to build a tower, but is unable to raise it above the foundations; following the advice of his seers a child without a father is found and brought to him. The child reveals that beneath the tower is a pond and two vases which enclose a folded tent containing two sleeping dragons, one white and one red. Upon excavation the dragons are aroused and fight, and the red is victorious. The boy explains that

the pool represents the world; the tent, Britain; and the white and red dragons the Saxons and British respectively. The king asks the child's name and he replies "I am Ambrosius". Nennius interprets, "that is he meant that he was Embreis the supreme prince," The king then enquired of his ancestry and he replied, "My father is one of the consuls of the Roman race." Gildas (c 450) had already recorded how Ambrosius Aurelianus led the Britons against the Saxon invaders after the withdrawal of the Romans, and it appears that Nennius is equating, or perhaps confusing, the marvellous child with the historic ruler.

Geoffrey's treatment of Merlin needs careful consideration, as it is upon his characterization of Merlin that a great many of the later literary traditions are based. In the Historia Regum Britanniae we find Nennius' Ambrosius again, but now he is called Merlin and his story is expanded to cover events from the collapse of Vortigern's tower to the conception of Arthur.²⁰ Geoffrey introduces an explanation of the boy's strange powers when his mother, the daughter of a king of Demetia, goes to the king with an account of Merlin's birth. He is, she says, the son of an incubus. Here we see that Geoffrey has deliberately abandoned the noble but human origins of Ambrosius as suggested by Nennius, in favour of a demonic birth, which is consistent with Geoffrey's attribution of wide magical powers to Merlin, whereas Ambrosius' powers

are only those of a seer. The first demonstration of Merlin's gifts is the removal of the great circle of stones from Kildare to Stonehenge, which, Merlin advises Aurelius, would be a fitting monument to the victims of the Saxon Hengist's treachery. His role as a seer is developed when he interprets for Uther the comet which appears before Uther's battle with Pascentius, the son of Vortigern, and Gillomanus, King of Ireland; the comet he says, portends the death of Aurelius (who is subsequently poisoned) and the rule of Uther's own descendants. Geoffrey seems to have been the first writer to connect Merlin with Arthur, when Merlin aids the entry of Uther to Igera, the wife of the Duke of Cornwall, with whom Uther has fallen in love. Uther appears, through a magical transformation brought about by Merlin, to be Gorlois, the Duke, and is accepted by Igera as her husband. As a result of their union Arthur is conceived.

It was Geoffrey who first developed Merlin's character as a prophet. The Prophetiae Merlini forms Book VII of the Historia but was also circulated independently before the completion of the Historia. Geoffrey originally intended to deal with the prophecies after he had completed the Historia, but when stories about Merlin began to circulate he was urged, particularly by Alexander, Bishop of Lincoln, to publish the prophecies first. This suggests that the idea of Merlin as a prophet was already

firmly fixed in the popular imagination. The prophecies which Geoffrey ascribes to Merlin appear to be a mixture of traditional materials and Geoffrey's own inventions.²¹

The first prophecies concern events about which, as they happened before 1135, Geoffrey is able to make Merlin utter definite, if cryptic, prophecies; the latter part of the book, however, deals with disturbances in nature and uses animal symbolism to suggest unnatural horrors to come. The Prophetiae adds little to the character and history of Merlin himself, this we must look for in the rest of the Historia and the Vita, but it does play an important role in the literary history of the figure of Merlin, for it forms the basis for a long line of political prophecies, all of which gained popular credence merely by being attributed to the famous prophet. The Prophetiae marks clearly the beginning of the dual function of Merlin in later literature: he is to be both a character in his own right, who will appear in many guises, and also a faceless mouthpiece for innumerable prophecies. Paul Zumthor comments on the two simultaneous traditions which grew up around Merlin; he distinguishes between "la fable de Merlin" and "le thème du Prophète" -- "la fable de Merlin: c'est à dire l'ensemble des traits descriptifs par lesquels sont dessinés le personnage et son action" and "le thème du Prophète: . . . un simple motif littéraire que se passent de l'un à l'autre les historiographes et les polémistes, et dont le contenu, on ne peut plus vague, se

ramène a ceci: il existe des prophéties à objet politique, attribuées à un certain Merlin; prophéties dont le catalogue n'est pas établie avec tant de certitude qu'on ne puisse sous cesse en fabriquer de nouvelles et les lui attribuer à leur tour."²²

The prophecies which form Book VII of the Historia are uttered by Merlin during the reign of Vortigern and form part of Geoffrey's development of Merlin from the Ambrosius of Nennius into a much more fully delineated prophet and magician. However in the Vita Merlini we find a different Merlin, the wild man of the woods of Celtic tradition, who is, however, identified by Geoffrey with the Merlin of the Historia. Parry suggests²³ that Geoffrey originally gave his prophet the name Merlinus, the latinized form of Myrddin, because he was aware of Celtic traditions surrounding Myrddin the poet and seer, and that when, later, he learned more about the Welsh Myrddin, he tried to convince readers of the Vita that he had known the full story of Merlin all the time and that his Merlin and the Welsh Myrddin are the same. There is perhaps a hint in the opening lines of the Vita that Geoffrey did not take these stories of the wild poet entirely seriously:

Fatidici vatis rabiem musam que locasam

Merlini cantare paro. (1-2)

He describes the battle in which Merlin, fighting with his lord Rydderch and Peredur, King of North Wales against

Gwenddoleu, king of Scotland, becomes inconsolably grief-stricken and flees to the woods:

Fit Silvester homo quasi silvis deditus esset. (80)

He is portrayed as a wild, unstable but strangely gifted man. Although music soothes him and restores him to sanity, it takes only the crowds at the King's court to drive him mad again and make him attempt to return to his sanctuary in the woods. His gifts of prophecy are used against him by the Queen, who, annoyed at being accused by Merlin of infidelity, tricks him into prophesying three different deaths for the same boy. This can be compared with the Scottish fragment in which Lailoken prophesies three deaths for himself and indeed there are many resemblances between the Merlin of the Vita and Welsh, Scottish and Irish bardic figures.²⁴ Merlin appears to value the idyllic joys of the sylvan life above the pleasures of the court and of his home; he is unhappy when restrained either by gifts, chains or the tears of his wife, Guendoelena, to whom he gives permission to marry whom she pleases and says that he himself will attend the wedding. In later literature Merlin continues to be a man who prefers a mysterious, lonely life, but he is never given a wife and although he figures in many farcical situations, some concerning women, Geoffrey's account of Guendoelena's marriage did not become current. This part of the Vita is however worth mentioning if only to show that Geoffrey's characters

did not suddenly acquire a humorous dimension when he began to be discredited as a historian; he himself made Merlin briefly a buffoon, but with tragic results. He describes how Merlin collected stags, deer and she-goats and went to the wedding mounted on a stag. The bridegroom, not unexpectedly, laughed at him, which so enraged Merlin that he wrenched the horns from the stag, threw them at the bridegroom and killed him. Miss Paton, in discussing this story, concluded that it parallels early stories from Celtic folklore in which an enchanter, whose wife is taken from her by a mortal, attempts to regain her. We have here, she says "indications of an early story of Merlin, in which he was represented, in accordance with a very early conception of the otherworld lord, as assuming a common fairy guise, when he came as a giant herdsman to take vengeance upon his rival."²⁵ However, I think that in Geoffrey's account the fairy elements have been largely submerged, and the episode remains as typical of the "Musam ... iocosam." Merlin returned to the forest, but fell in the river and was again captured and brought back to the city where he relapsed into his usual state of melancholy. Finally, however, he settles in the woods where Ganieda, his sister, builds him a house and he is able to prophesy in peace; he deals with the future of the Britons and the reader discovers, with some surprise, that this married, melancholy, wild man of the woods is

Vortigern's prophet who has lived on into a later age:

Hec vortigerno cecini prolixius olim

Exponendo duum sibi mistica bella draconum

In ripa stagni quando consedimus hausti. (681-683)

He has outlived Arthur too, for Taliesin, visiting Merlin, expatiates at length on the natural order and while speaking of all the islands of the world mentions

Insula pomorum que fortunata vocatur. (908)

It was here, explains Taliesin, that Arthur was taken to be healed by Morgen after the battle of Camlan. Merlin comments on the evils of the kingdom since that time and recalls the battles of Vortigen, Hengist, Horsa, Vortimer and Uther, and he outlines the history of Arthur, his birth, victories and death.

Having successfully integrated the two Merlins, of the Historia and of the Vita, Geoffrey concludes the Vita with a reaffirmation of Merlin's preference for the simple life. A healing fountain restores Merlin's sanity, but he refuses the prince and chieftains who ask him to resume his sceptre, and remains in the forest with Taliesin, Ganiada and another mad man healed at the fountain, Maeldinus.

After Geoffrey, political prophecy in England became extremely popular and many of these prophecies were attributed to Merlin. Before the end of the twelfth

century interpretations of, and commentaries on, the Vita Merlini had appeared. The most comprehensive of these is in seven books and was attributed to Alanus de Insulis. Even an outline of the book shows clearly the author's concern to establish Merlin as a reliable source of prophecy. Book I discusses whether or not Merlin was a Christian, and concludes that he was; Book II is a consideration of the genuineness of Merlin's inspiration; he is compared with Job, Balaam, Cassandra and the Sibyls and the conclusion reached is that God made use of Merlin to protect the future. In Book III the incubus story, with its suggestions of demonic influences in Merlin's activities, is dismissed as an invention of the prophet's mother to hide her shame. Books V to VII are concerned with interpretation of the prophecies.²⁶ Most originators of books of prophecies were not, however, concerned with defending Merlin as a prophet; they seem to have assumed that predictions appearing under his name would automatically be accepted. Shortly after Geoffrey's death there appeared John of Cornwall's The Prophecies of Ambrosius Merlin concerning the Seven Kings.²⁷ This is another version of Geoffrey's material in Latin hexameters, it does not draw on Geoffrey directly but probably makes use of the same traditional material and purports to be a translation from the Welsh.

In 1188 Giraldus Cambrensis found on the west coast of Wales a different collection of prophecies attributed to Merlin Silvestris and professed, as did Geoffrey, and John of Cornwall, to translate them from the original Welsh. Giraldus was aware of the two figures who made up Geoffrey's Merlin and distinguishes between Merlin Ambrosius "who prophesied in the time of King Vortigern" and the other Merlin who was "born in Scotland, was named Celidonius, from the Celidonian wood in which he prophesied, and Silvester, because, when engaged in martial conflict, he discovered in the air a terrible monster, and from that time grew mad, and taking shelter in a wood, lived a woodland life until his death. This Merlin lived in the time of King Arthur, and is said to have prophesied more fully and explicitly than the other." Giraldus' Merlin Ambrosius follows the Historia but the prophecies of Merlin Silvestris and the explanation for his madness are not based on Geoffrey, and must rely rather on the kind of traditional materials also used by Geoffrey in the Vita.²⁸

Taylor mentions several thirteenth century MSS which contain collections of prophecies under the name of Merlin Silvester, or Caledonius, and comments that by the end of the thirteenth century political prophecies had struck deep root in England. Parry says that "the Prophecie Merlini were taken most seriously, even by the learned and worldly wise, in many nations There was

scarcely a cranny of Christendom outside the Eastern Church which did not recognize Merlin as a great seer."²⁹

While the name of Merlin was becoming widely known as that of a prophet and seer, the chroniclers were establishing him as a magician, as well as a prophet, although some of them dismissed the magical elements as the fancies of the vulgar and others omitted the prophecies as being too obscure. In 1155 Wace finished his Anglo-Norman translation of Geoffrey's Historia.³⁰ It is a free paraphrase of Geoffrey but Wace's treatment of Merlin is more like that of the later romancers. He omits all the prophecies, except those about Vortigern, because he says he does not understand them, but he deals vividly with Merlin the magician. Merlin's power and position appear to be established and accepted; for instance, in Geoffrey's account when Uther is perplexed by the comet he sends for a group of wise men, among whom is Merlin, and hopes to obtain an explanation from one of them; Wace, however, says that Uther sent for Merlin only, knowing he would be able to interpret the sign in the heavens. In Wace, again, Merlin's supernatural powers are readily accepted. He moves the stones to Stonehenge by muttering an incantation; in the Historia, however, Geoffrey rationalizes this feat by introducing ingenious mechanical devices.

With Layamon's Brut³⁵ (1190) Merlin's history begins to be recorded in the vernacular. The legendary life of the magician-seer is already well defined: his strange birth, Vortigern's tower, the removal of Stonehenge, the conception of Arthur and the prophecies are all there, but there are also indications of characterization. Merlin comments on his powers and on his reasons for exercising his magic powers, and the reader becomes aware of him not only as a magician and prophet whose powers are always conveniently there when needed, but also as a man with self-awareness and a will of his own. Like the Merlin of Geoffrey's Vita he prefers the simple life of the forest to the rewards of the court. When Aurelius's messengers find him, they offer him rewards in return for his counsel. Merlin replies

Ne recche ich noht his londes
his seolver no his goldes,
no his clathes, no his hors
mi seolf ich habbe inowe. (11, p 290, 15-19)

Aurelius asks him to prophesy the future of the kingdom, but Merlin says that the spirit of prophecy would leave him if he were to indulge it idly, but

for whom swa cumeth neode
to aeur aei theode
and mon me mid milde-scipe
wulle me bisechen

and ich mid min iwille

mot wunne stille

thenne mai ich suggesten

hu hit feothen scal iwurthen. (11,p294, 15-22)

The same themes of the uselessness of worldly goods and the knowledge that his gifts depend on a particular attitude to life reoccur when Uther offers to reward Merlin if he will help him win Ygerne. Merlin's reply is again

for nulle ich ayeen na lond

neother seolver na gold

for ich am on rede

rihchest alre monne,

and yif ich wilne aehte

thenne wursede ich on crafte. (11,p 370, 13-18)

The earliest English metrical chronicle,³² by Robert of Gloucester (c 1300) is again chiefly a paraphrase of Geoffrey, the parts concerning Merlin are therefore familiar, and Robert too, thinks it important to record Merlin's comment that he must only prophesy when there is great need. He does however change Merlin's expected sympathy for Uther in his passion for Ygerne to disapproval,

Merlyn was sory ynow for the kynge's folye

And natheles 'Sire Kyng' he seide 'here

mot to maistrie'.

In 1338 Robert Mannyng of Brunne's chronicle appeared.³³

This, too, depends ultimately on Geoffrey; the first part paraphrases Wace and the second, Peter Langtoft's French chronicle (c 1307), which is itself a paraphrase of Geoffrey. He omits Merlin's prophecies as incomprehensible to the unlearned, but otherwise his Merlin is the conventional figure of the chronicles. Other chronicles were circulating at this time, for instance, a Latin metrical version of Geoffrey's Historia, the Gesta Regum Britanniae (mid thirteenth century) and the prose Brut of England (c 1272).

At the same time as the numerous chronicles were popularizing the whole history of Britain and with it the story of Merlin, the Arthurian legends, one part of that history, were becoming part of the great cycles of romance. Just as the chronicles passed through Latin, Anglo-Norman and French and finally into English, so too the English romances and notably, of course, Malory depend on their earlier French counterparts and these must be outlined before the English romances can be discussed.

Chretien de Troyes did not use the Merlin legends, appearing to prefer the more romantic tales such as that of Lancelot, and the first development of the Merlin stories in French was that by Robert de Boron in the late twelfth century.³⁴ Only a fragment of his poem remains, but a prose redaction was made which forms the first section of various prose Merlins of the first half of the thirteenth

century. Although much of Robert's story depends ultimately on Geoffrey of Monmouth, he is consciously making Merlin his hero and therefore suppresses some parts of the story and expands others. The story of demonic influences at Merlin's conception becomes interwoven with popular Medieval beliefs about the coming of anti-Christ. Just as Christ had been born of God and a virgin, it was believed that a virgin would bear the child of the devil. The council of the demons which plots this revenge upon Christ and man is described in the Gospel of Nicodemus.³⁵ Robert probably planned his Merlin as a continuation of, and a parallel to, themes introduced in his Joseph: in that poem is recounted God's scheme to overthrow the devil by the gift of His Son to man; in the Merlin we have the infernal plot to undo the work of the Messiah. However, Merlin, while gaining supernatural powers from his parentage, becomes an agent for good rather than evil, through the actions of his mother whose virtue and good sense thwart the devil.

This expansion of the legend of the origins of the prophet became in later literature a very fruitful basis for discussion, both implied and explicit, about the morally ambiguous nature of his powers. The birth of Merlin, like that of many folk-heroes, contains miraculous elements and with the introduction of the anti-Christ motif, the story becomes specifically a parody of the story of Christ. The full implications of this are never worked out,

as Merlin is not allowed to fulfill the role the devils have prepared for him. The ambivalence in many later accounts of the wizard seems to stem from the authors' knowledge of Merlin's demonic origins which conflict with his role as divinely inspired prophet and guardian of kings. The account of the infant Merlin's rescue from the forces of evil through the intervention of Blaise or the saintliness of his mother explains the reason for his change from evil to good, but the imagination often works independently of rational explanation and seems to ignore this second miracle, and thus allow the ambivalence of attitude I have mentioned.

Robert also enlarges Merlin's role at Arthur's birth. In Geoffrey's account Uther marries Igerne immediately after the conception of Arthur and the death of Gorlois, so that only Merlin and Uther know the secret of the substitution of Uther for Gorlois; in Robert's poem the marriage is delayed for two months, the infant Arthur is taken by Merlin and entrusted to Antor's care, and so, when Uther dies fifteen years later, the heir to the kingdom must be found through the test of the sword in the anvil.

Perhaps Merlin's most important action in Robert's poem occurs before the conception of Arthur when he causes Uther to establish the table which is to complete the trinity of holy tables. He recounts to Uther the stories

of the tables of the Last Supper and, recalling his Joseph, of Joseph of Arimathea, the table of the Grail; Uther's table, like the others, is to have a vacant seat which, Merlin prophesies, will be filled in the reign of Uther's son by the knight who will end the adventure of the Grail. Thus Robert gives to Merlin an important place in the Arthurian cycle, for by his wisdom and foreknowledge he can both guide the worldly destiny of Arthur and influence spiritual affairs by preparing the way for the Grail quest.

The fragment of Robert's poem ends with the crowning of Arthur, but his complete poem survived in two prose redactions, the Merlin of the Vulgate cycle and the Suite du Merlin.³⁶ Robert and his redactors assign to Merlin "a puckish spirit" which "delights in pranks and mystifications";³⁷ this probably derives from the Vita Merlini, and we find in the prose Merlin constant disguises and frequent displays of prophetic power on the part of Merlin. The redaction is followed in the manuscripts of the Vulgate cycle by a lengthy pseudo-chronicle, (the Vulgate Merlin) extending the history of Arthur from his coronation to the height of his military victories, and perhaps the most interesting feature of this work from the point of view of Merlin's history in later literature, is the introduction of Merlin's passion for Viviane and its results. The earliest version of this story appears to be

that in the prose Lancelot, which recounts how the Lady of the Lake, the fairy who carried off the infant Lancelot, had beguiled the enchanter and imprisoned him forever through a spell which she had learned from him. In the Merlin the story is expanded to include the sad fatalism with which Merlin, although fully aware of his own impending doom, teaches Viviane the very secrets of witchcraft through which she is able to confine him in the forest of Broceliande.

One of the manuscripts containing the prose redactions of Robert's poem is followed not by a pseudo-historical sequel, but by a romantic continuation, The Suite du Merlin. Fanni Bogdanow believes this to form part of a larger, composite but unified work which she calls the Roman du Graal, which begins "with the Estoire del Saint Graal, followed by the prose redaction of Robert de Boron's Merlin, the Suite and the Post-Vulgate versions of the Quests and the Mort Artu."³⁸ Miss Bogdanow assigns a date of between 1230 and 1240 to this work, and very soon after we can find evidence of the popularity of the Arthurian romances and, with them, of the Merlin legends in most European countries.³⁹ In Spain and Portugal redactions of the French prose romances were numerous, and Merlin in his role of political prophet appeared frequently after 1350 when "political propaganda dictated new prophecies of Merlin with every new king".⁴⁰ In Italy, too, compilations

of Merlin's prophecies were made; one of these, the Prophecies de Merlin (c 1279)⁴¹ is a French prose work by an Italian author. The prophecies in this work have little connection with Geoffrey of Monmouth's treatment of Merlin and are mainly concerned with political events of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in Italy. This is clearly an example of the use of Merlin's name to lend weight to the opinions expressed by the writer, who in this case was probably a Venetian minorite whose main concern was the reform of abuses in the church. He stresses the necessity of obedience to the church, and attacks the cupidity of the Papal Curia and the luxurious lives of the friars. However, the figure of Merlin as popularized in the romances is also made use of in the Prophecies: the work takes the form of dialogues between Merlin and his scribes and includes conversations with Blaise, Perceval and Dinadan, all well-known figures from the romances, and familiar stories, such as the entombment of Merlin by the Dame du Lac, add variety and interest to the didactic material. The Dutch Arthurian romances fall mainly into two cycles, one of which corresponds to the French prose versions of Robert de Boron's work, and includes the Historie van den Grale and Merlijn's Boeck. There is also a sixteenth century Merlin in Dutch, which differs considerably from all other versions, although it can be compared with the English Arthour and Merlin. In Scandinavian literature there is a poem, the Merlinusspa, by Gunnlaug Leifsson, an Icelandic monk (d.1218),

which is based on Book VII of Geoffrey's Historia. But, as Phillip Mitchell comments, "the poem seems to have inspired no imitators, and the figure of Merlin failed to excite the Scandinavian imagination, if we may judge by the fact that the prophet makes no later appearance in Northern literature." The English imagination, however, as it is the purpose of this thesis to demonstrate, was excited by the figure of Merlin. At first he was to appear, in chronicles, romances and Malory, as a legendary figure of dignity and importance at the court of King Arthur, with greatest stress being given to his exploits in support of the King and the British side in battles. Later he could be seen in isolation, that is separated from the Arthurian court, as a figure with supernatural gifts and as a symbol of the forces of righteousness working through the supernatural, as he is in Spenser or Rowley. He was to be a useful figure, too, when a political writer wished to stress the glories of the British line or compliment a British monarch, and by the eighteenth century the full potentialities of the conjurer as buffoon were being explored.

The earlier interest, generated by Geoffrey of Monmouth, Wace and Layamon, which I have mentioned in connection with development of the chronicles and the proliferation of books of prophecies using Merlin's name, was paralleled and accompanied by the production of numerous romances, both in prose and verse. These romances were derived from the French romances and influenced by

the chronicles; the earliest is Arthur and Merlin⁴² (mid thirteenth century), the best version of which is found in the famous Auchinleck manuscript. R. W. Ackerman argues, with Kölbing, that the source of the Auchinleck poem must have embodied two distinct stages in the history of the development of Merlin. "The first portion, up to the coronation, represents the pre-Robert story expanded from the chronicles; and the remainder the Vulgate sequel".⁴³ The story extends from the death of Constans to Arthur's victory over King Rion, and includes all the familiar features of Merlin's history: his conception and birth, his precocious development (at two years old he reveals that he is 'turned to gode' and that he has gifts of prophecy), the episode of Fortiger's tower, the establishment of the Round Table, the conception, birth, nurture and coronation of Arthur, and finally an interminable series of battles and single combats at which Merlin's presence or interference is the decisive factor. There are, however, some unexpected gaps in the story; the whole episode of the battle on Salisbury plain and Merlin's removal of the stones from Ireland to Stonehenge as a fitting memorial to the dead is omitted, as is the enchanter's love of Vivian and his magical imprisonment by her. The author, however, is obviously aware of the Merlin-Viviane story and expects his audience to be so too, for he refers without any further explanation to Niniane,

That with her queint gin

Begiled the gode clerk Merlin. (4446-7)

The next few lines are, however, an ironical comment on the fate of the wizard at the hands of his pupil when the author mentions Carmile (Morgan le Fay) whose magic loses its potency in Merlin's presence:

Ac Carmile, par ma fay,

Bi Merlines liif day

No might do with her wicheing

In Ingland non anoiing. (4457-60)

The characterization of Merlin in this romance reproduces several traits I have noted in other writers, so that one can see not only a definite sequence of events emerging which forms the life of Merlin, but also a pattern of behaviour and a variety of roles for Merlin which are integrated with this sequence.

There is already in Arthour and Merlin a hint of Merlin's awareness of himself as specifically the agent of God in Arthur's affairs; this concept was to be developed thematically by Malory but in this poem it appears only fleetingly, for instance when Merlin tells Uther of his approaching death and that

Thi sone after worth king

Bi godes grace and min helping

Bi wos day worth don alle

The mervails of the sen greal, (2745-48)

and the same idea of a divine mission is behind the infant

Merlin's statement

With right may me no man spille,

For icham a ferly sond

Born to gode to al this lond. (1117-19)

In the lengthy battle sequences it is Merlin who is the strategist and advisor to the king, and who feels able to counsel him in very strong terms; for instance when Ban offers to take on Arthur's duty of wreaking vengeance on Saphiram for the supposed death of Leodegan,

Tho seyð Merlin to Arthour

A word of gret deshonour

'Wat abidestow, coward King?

The palem gif anon meteing.' (6341-44)

Arthur trusts Merlin's judgment, even when as harshly expressed as this, and allows his powers of divination and magic to guide him to victory; this function of Merlin is common to the chronicles, romances and to Malory. Alongside Arthur's faith in the wizard is an equally strong distrust of him on the part of Arthur's enemies; when Merlin explains Arthur's origins to the barons, they are unconvinced and unwilling to accept him as king and

seyð to Merlin,

'He was found thurch wicking thin,

Traitour' thai seyð. 'verrament,

For all thine enchauntement

No schal never no hores stren

Our king no heved ben.' (3154-59)

Merlin's delight in disguises and shape shifting, and what has been referred to before as a "puckish" enjoyment of his powers, is well illustrated in Arthour and Merlin and derives ultimately from the Vita through the French romances. The humour of the situations is often underscored by Merlin's gulling of the king so that his wisdom and dignity are both brought in question. For instance when Uther is searching for a means of meeting Ygerne, he goes out with Ulfin, his counsellor, and they meet a beggar, who shows disrespect for the king; Uther comments

'Ulfin, no mightow here
Of this begger aposeing,
That dar so speke to a king'
Ulfin the begger biheld on
And him knewe wel sone anon
Bi his semblaunt and winking
That he made upon the king. (2450-56)

Not only can the counsellor penetrate Merlin's disguise when the king cannot, but it is, ironically, only the disrespectful beggar who can solve Uther's problem. Again, at the successful conclusion of a battle against Rion, the three kings, Arthur, Ban and Leodegan, hold a feast at which

Merlin tho toforn hem pleyd
And cleped up king Arthour and Ban

And her feren fram Leodegan,
 So that Leodegan might of no thing
 More wite of her being. (6578-82)

Here too, the dignity of the victorious kings is shattered by Merlin's tricks.

The history of Merlin in Arthour and Merlin is fragmentary; a complete narrative account of his life in the vernacular did not appear until the middle of the fifteenth century. The English prose Merlin (c 1450) is a very close translation of the French prose romance and shares with it all the latter's faults, from a modern reader's view point, of prolixity, tediously detailed battles and a multiplicity of ill-related themes. R. W. Ackerman sums up its value and defects by saying "if, by chance, it had been the manuscript of the Prose Merlin rather than Malory's book which was printed by William Caxton in response to the demand of 'many noble and dyvers gentylmen of thys royaume of England', we would have had a far more systematic narrative of the career of Merlin than Malory affords, yet we would also be immeasurably the poorer for the substitution."⁴⁵ At about the same time as the English Merlin appeared, Henry Lovelich produced his vast, rhyming translation⁴⁶ of the Vulgate Merlin. Although the poem is possibly incomplete it comprises 27,852 lines and yet still only represents about half of the original romance. This work, too, has little literary merit and is important in the

context of this thesis mainly as proof that interest in the Merlin romances was not confined only to professional translators, for, to quote Ackerman again, "Lovelich was a member of the London Company of skimmers and wrote his prodigious Merlin and Holy Grail as a compliment to a fellow gildsman of no small importance in his day, Harry Barton. By choosing to emulate in his work the products of the poor translator-versifiers in the manuscript shops, Lovelich all too plainly reveals his level of literary sophistication."⁴⁷ A summary of Merlin's activities, as recorded in the English prose Merlin will suggest how complete a history those later writers who dealt with Merlin now had access to in the vernacular. Many of these authors, of course, particularly the antiquarians and historians, would know Geoffrey of Monmouth, the chronicles and romances equally well and the prose Merlin must be regarded as only one among many sources for later work.

What follows is a very brief summary of the prose Merlin; a fuller analysis can be found in the E.E.T.S. edition of the romance. (Mead, xv-xliii)

1. The Council of devils and the birth of Merlin.
2. Vortiger's tower; Merlin's prophecies.
3. Merlin's laughter at the churl with new shoes; the bereaved father.⁴⁸

4. Merlin's continual reports to Blase⁴⁹ who records all the events; (the author comments later that it is to this habit of the wizard that we owe this detailed and true

record.)

5. His disguises and foreknowledge of events.

6. Merlin's aid to Uther and Pendragon,⁵⁰ the battle at Salisbury, the transportation of the stones from Ireland to Stonehenge as a memorial to Pendragon.

7. Merlin advises Uther to construct a third table at Cardoell, and tells him the story of the Grail.

8. Uther's love for Ygerne; Merlin's part in the conception of Arthur.

9. The child is delivered to Antor at Merlin's command.

10. The trial of the sword in the stone; Merlin explains Arthur's right to the crown to the barons, who are unconvinced, and arm themselves.

11. Merlin aids Arthur in wars against the seven kings.

12. By his advice, Ban and Bors become Arthur's allies.

13. Wars against the rebel kings, and the Saxons.

14. Merlin's encounter with Nimiane; she promises him her love in return for instruction in his magic art.

15. Merlin's advice leads to the betrothal of Arthur to Gonnore, daughter of Leodegan.

16. Merlin helps Arthur to relieve the besieged city of Trebes; after the ensuing feast Queen Helayne, Ban's wife has a dream, which Merlin later explains. This is followed by the episode of the Emperor's dream. Since I have not mentioned this 'Grisandole episode' before, I will use Mead's convenient summary to outline it at this point.

"The Emperor has a strange dream which he keeps to himself, but he sits at meat pensive among his barons. Suddenly Merlin in the form of a great hart dashes into the palace, and falling on his knees before the Emperor says that a savage man will explain the dream. In a moment he has vanished. The Emperor in wrath promises his daughter to anyone who will bring the hart or the savage man. Now, the Emperor has a steward named Grisandol, who, though a maiden has come to the court in the disguise of a squire. To her the hart appears in the forest, and shortly afterwards the savage man. He allows himself to be taken in his sleep and brought before the Emperor, to whom he explains the dream, showing that the vision means that the Empress has twelve youths disguised as maidens, with whom she disports at pleasure, and advising the Emperor to marry Grisandol, who is a maiden in disguise. The Emperor follows the advice of the savage man, who, of course, is Merlin, and lives happily with his new wife, after burning the old one!"⁵¹

17. Merlin frustrates the plot to substitute the false for the true Gonnore on her wedding night.

18. Merlin takes part in the truce between Loth and his followers and Arthur; the parliament at Salisbury and the subsequent defeat of the Saxons.

19. At the castle of Agravadain Merlin by enchantment causes the daughter of Agravadain and Ban to fall in love.

20. The feast at Camelot; a blind harper harps a beautiful lay of Britain, and when the message from Rion arrives demanding Arthur's beard to complete the furring of his mantle, the harper asks to bear the chief banner in the first battle; he is refused, and reappears as a naked child: the harper and the child are both, of course, Merlin.

21. Merlin helps Arthur in the ensuing battles against the giant, Rion.

22. Merlin appears at the court of Flualis, King of Jerusalem, and interprets a dream which had puzzled all the wise men.

23. Merlin visits Nimiane on many occasions and teaches her more and more of his arts.

24. Arthur's war with the Emperor Lucius; Merlin frequently intervenes.

25. Merlin tells the king of the great cat near the Lake of Losane, which Arthur kills.

26. Merlin predicts to Arthur, to the Queen and to Blase that he will be imprisoned by his love. Nimiane enchants him in the forest of Broceliande.

27. The knights seek Merlin; Gawain hears his voice and reports his fate to Arthur.

The next major treatment of Merlin in English is that of Malory (c 1485). He, too, falls within the familiar pattern of fifteenth century writers of Arthurian romance

in English, that is, much of his work is translated from the French cycles but he differs from Lovelich and the anonymous author of the Merlin in his obvious attempts to bring design to the mass of material available to him, and to stress some themes, even at the danger of ignoring others. But in order to complete the account of Merlin in literature before Malory, mention must be made of a fourteenth century work which falls outside the general pattern of chronicles, prophetic works and romances dealing with Merlin, but which is, I think, important.

A character called Merlin appears in two tales in The Seven Sages.⁵² This traditional collection of stories stands completely outside the Arthurian tradition, and yet some of the attributes of Merlin in these tales are related to the composite figure of Merlin which was well rooted in literature by the late fourteenth century, the date of the English version of The Seven Sages, and indeed by the thirteenth century when the Latin Historia Septem Sapientum Romae, on which the English version depends, was produced. The framing story for the subsidiary tales concerns the Emperor of Rome, his son, his second wife and the seven sages who were entrusted with the boy's upbringing after his first wife's death. The Empress tricks her husband into sentencing to death the boy, whom she hates, but the sages intervene and he is thrown into prison. Then the Empress and the sages alternate in telling tales either

encouraging the Emperor to, or dissuading him from, the execution. The Empress's sixth story tells of a king struck with blindness from heaven to punish him for the bad government of seven sages, in whom he had placed all his confidence. He sought someone to help him in his plight and

At the last hyt was hym told
Of a wys clerke and a bolde,
that was hotyn Merlyn,
That couthe many a medicyn. (2324-2327)

Merlyn is able to explain the Emperor's blindness and suggest a remedy, and the Emperor
anoon undirstood

Merlyn was trew and couthe good. (2357-2358)

This story is of Indian origin and is found in several Eastern collections, but it is significant that in the English version the wise clerk who can divine the presence of a boiling cauldron deep in the ground under the Emperor's bed and explain the significance of the "seven walmes" in it, is given a name which in so much other literature of the time is connected with a seer who can counsel kings and explain portents.

The second use of Merlin in The Seven Sages also points clearly to a strong connection in medieval literature between magicians and seers and the name of Merlin. The Latin version of the Empress's seventh tale tells of the magician Virgil and his tower with images which guarded

the Roman provinces: if the province represented by an image was preparing to revolt, the magical image rang a bell and the Romans would punish the disobedient subjects. The legendary history of Virgilius the magician was well known in the middle ages and the story of Virgil's tower, the "salvatio Romae," was a popular part of it. But in the late fourteenth century MS of The Seven Sages in the Public Library of the University of Cambridge (Bibl. Publ. Cantab. Dd. 1,17) Merlin was substituted for Virgil, and a magical pillar with mirrors for the tower and its images. Thus within a collection of traditional stories we find two mentions of prophets and magicians and on each occasion the name of Merlin is transferred to a figure in the original tale, suggesting that the legends surrounding Merlin were already not entirely dependent on the Arthurian cycles and had an appeal in other contexts.

Notes

¹ Andrew Lang, Introductory Essay to Book III, Morte d'Arthur ed. H. O. Sommer (London, 1891), Vol. iii, 14.

² William Rowley, The Birth of Merlin or the Child hath found his Father, (London 1662) printed in Tudor Facsimile Texts, vol. 105, ed. John S. Farmer (London, 1910).

³Walt Disney Wart and The Wizard (1963) based on characters featured in Walt Disney's film The Sword in the Stone, which is based on T. H. White's novel The Once and Future King, which was, in turn, a modern interpretation of Malory.

⁴Robert Chester, Loves Martyr, (London, 1601) printed in New Shakespeare Society, Series VIII. Miscellanies no. 2, ed. Rev. Alexander B. Grosart (London, 1878).

⁵Aaron Hill, Merlin in Love or Youth against Magic. The Dramatic Works of Aaron Hill Esq., Vol. 1 (London, 1760).

⁶M. Gaster, "The Legend of Merlin", Folklore, XVI (1905) 407 ff. and J. D. Bruce The Evolution of Arthurian Romance, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (Gloucester, Mass. 1958) I, 129-151.

⁷E. K. Chambers, Arthur of Britain, (London, 1927), 95.

⁸R. S. Loomis, Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance, (N.Y. 1927) deals throughout with the Celtic origins of the Arthurian figures, including Merlin, esp. Chap. XIV "Merlin, the Shapeshifter".

⁹A. O. H. Jarman, The Legend of Merlin, (Cardiff, 1960).
A. O. H. Jarman, "The Welsh Myrddin poems" Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages, ed. R.S. Loomis (Oxford, 1959) - hereafter cited as A.L.M.A.

¹⁰J. J. Parry, "Geoffrey of Manmouth" A.L.M.A., pp. 72-93.

¹¹Jarman, Legend of Merlin, 23.

¹²J. J. Parry, "Celtic Tradition in the Vita Merlini", Philological Quarterly, IV (July 1925).

¹³Printed in W. F. Skene, Four Ancient Books of Wales, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1868).

¹⁴Skene, 370, "Afellennau" Black Book of Caermarthen XVII.

¹⁵Skene, 478, "A fugitive poem of Myrdin in his grave" Red Book of Hergest II.

¹⁶Skene, 490, "Hoianau" Black Book XVIII.

¹⁷H. Gaster, "The Legend of Merlin" Folklore XVI (1905) 407 ff. Gaster discusses the oriental tales of Solomon and Asmodeus, and the legendary history of Jesus ben Sira and shows parallels between these and the legends of Merlin's origins and childhood.

¹⁸The Arthurian portions of Nennius' History are printed by E. K. Chambers, pp. 238-240.

¹⁹J. D. Bruce, op. cit. Chapter IV "Merlin".

²⁰Bruce, 134 ff.

²¹J. J. Parry and R. A. Caldwell "Geoffrey of Monmouth", A.L.M.A., 72 ff.

²²P. Zumthor, Merlin le Prophete (Lausanne, 1943).

²³J. J. Parry, Vita Merlini, University of Illinois Studies in Language and Literature Vol.X, No.3, August 1925.

²⁴These parallels and resemblances are described and discussed in Jarman, Legend of Merlin and J. J. Parry "Celtic Tradition".

²⁵L. A. Paton, "The Story of Grisandole; A study in the legend of Merlin", PHLA XXII (1907), 253.

²⁶R. Taylor The Political Prophecy in England (New York, 1911) p.88 A.L.M.A. 62, 79.

²⁷Printed by Carl Greith, Spicilegium Vaticanum (Frauenfeld 1838), 92-104. Discussed by Taylor, The Political Prophecy, pp.16-24.

²⁸Giraldus Cambrensis "Itinerarium Cambriae" The Historical Works of Giraldus Cambrensis trans. Hoare and Wright (London, 1892) 452. Discussed in A.L.M.A., p.26, 76 ff. et passim and Taylor, p.21.

- ²⁹Parry, A.L.M.A., p.79.
- ³⁰For description and discussion see Charles Foulon, "Nace" A.L.M.A., 94-103.
F. M. Fletcher Arthurian Materials in the Chronicles (1906) pp. 127-143.
- ³¹Layamon Brut, ed. Madden, 3 vols. (London, 1847).
- ³²Robert of Gloucester Metrical Chronicle ed. T. Hearne (London, 1810).
- ³³Robert of Brunne Chronicles ed. F. J. Furnivall, Rolls Series (London, 1887).
- ³⁴Robert's Joseph and Merlin are described by Pierre Le Gentil "The Work of Robert de Boron" A.L.M.A., 251-257 and his work and the Vulgate Merlin by Alexandre Micha, "The Vulgate Merlin" A.L.M.A., 319-324.
- ³⁵Gospel of Nicodemus, ed. S. J. Crawford, Awle Ryale Series (Edinburgh, 1927), Ch. XVII. The Gospel had been translated into French before Robert de Boron wrote.
- ³⁶See Fanni Bogdanow "The Suite de Merlin and the Post Vulgate Roman du Graal". A.L.M.A., 325-335; A.L.M.A. passim; J. D. Bruce I, Part III, "The Prose Romances" 365-482; Merlin, a prose romance, ed. H. B. Wheatley, Part IV, "Outlines of the History of the Legend of Merlin", ed. W. E. Mead, E.E.T.S., O.S. 112, London 1899, cxxii-clxxxiv.
- ³⁷A. Micha, A.L.M.A., 321.
- ³⁸P. Bogdanow, A.L.M.A., 331-2.
- ³⁹Maria Rosa Lida de Malkiel "Arthurian Literature in Spain and Portugal", A.L.M.A., 406-418; Antonio Viscardi "Arthurian influences on Italian Literature from 1200 to 1500", A.L.M.A., 443-461; Phillip N. Mitchell, "Scandinavian Literature", A.L.M.A., 462-471.
Mead, "Various Forms of the Merlin Legend" Merlin IV, xlv-lxxxii.
- ⁴⁰M. R. Lida de Malkiel, A.L.M.A., 413.

⁴¹Discussed by Cedric E. Pickford A.L.M.A., 352-354; Bruce, II, 28-30; L. A. Paton, "Notes of MSS of the Prophecies de Merlin", PMLA 28 (1913), 121 ff.

⁴²Arthour and Merlin ed. Kölbing, Altenglische Bibliothek, IV (1890) 1-272.

⁴³R. W. Ackerman, A.L.M.A., 485-6.

⁴⁴ed. H. B. Wheatley, E.E.T.S., x, xxi, xxxvi, cxii, (1865, 1866, 1869, 1899).

⁴⁵A.L.M.A., 488-9.

⁴⁶Discussed by Ackerman, A.L.M.A., 486-488; Mead E.E.T.S., cxii, lxii-lxix.

⁴⁷A.L.M.A., 486.

⁴⁸These incidents are paralleled by those in the Vita Merlini in which Merlin laughs at a beggar who has a concealed treasure and a young man with a new pair of shoes, who will soon be drowned. Mead (p.ccxix) comments "The incident of the shoes appears to have been a widely diffused medieval legend; and there is good ground for thinking that Robert de Boron did not get it from the Vita Merlini". The Jewish origins of these legends have been mentioned p.2, 7, and nn. 6, 17; and see A.L.M.A., p.91, nn. 6, 7.

⁴⁹Blaise first appeared in Robert de Boron's Merlin, although a hermit whom Merlin knew and visited is mentioned by Layamon, and for a discussion of 'Master Blihis' and Blaise see E. K. Chambers, Arthur of Britain, 149, 157, and A.L.M.A., passim.

⁵⁰Robert de Boron and subsequently the English Merlin give Constance three sons, Moyne, Pendragon and Uter; this is an obvious confusion of Geoffrey's original account in which the three sons of Constantine were Constance who became a monk (hence, Moyne), Aurelius and Uter-Pendragon. It has been suggested (see A.M.L.A. 320) that perhaps part at least of Robert's knowledge of Geoffrey and Wace came to him in oral form.

⁵¹The Grisandole episode is discussed by Mead, ccxxix; the episode first appears in the Vulgate Merlin but L. A. Paton "The story of Grisandole: A Study in the Legend of Merlin," PMLA, 22 (1907) 234 ff, concludes that it is ultimately of Oriental origin and that although it is "obscured by much foreign material, and subjected to late influences, it clearly preserves the story of Merlin, the wild man and shape shifter, coming in pursuit of his truant love; - a story which the author of the Vita Merlini knew, but which could not have been derived from his version by the author of 'Grisandole', who presents the material in so different a form. It occupies an almost unique position in the Merlin legend, in as much as it bears testimony to a tradition independent of the Historia of Geoffrey of Monmouth, whereas the vast mass of Merlin material in the prose romances consists of accretions that have gathered about Geoffrey's narrative".

⁵²The Seven Sages in English Verse edited from a MS in the Public Library of the University of Cambridge, ed. Thomas Wright, Percy Society, Early English Poetry, Ballads and Popular Literature of the Middle Ages, Vol. XVI (London 1845).

II

MALORY'S TREATMENT OF THE WIZARD

Malory, says Eugene Vinaver, "is the man to whom Arthurian romance owes its survival in the English-speaking world".¹ It is to Malory, also, that nineteenth and twentieth century authors are largely indebted for their conception of Merlin but earlier writers owe surprisingly little to his influence. I have outlined the process by which Merlin's character and history became established in European and English literature before Malory, and now it is necessary to consider Malory's treatment of the wizard.² There is not in Malory's works any new material about Merlin such as earlier authors had added, for instance, the council of demons or his entanglement with Viviane; Malory used the old materials "out of certyn books of Frensche and reduced it into Englysshe", and any changes in Merlin's history which he introduces are minor. Many of these minor changes, however, mark important changes in emphasis and attitude. Thomas L. Wright⁴ has shown how Malory's handling of Merlin's role as the spokesman of God at the conception, birth and crowning of Arthur introduce "a singular innovation in Arthurian legend: it suggests a new pattern of causes, a new ground upon which the epic adventures are played, and it casts a new meaning on the reign of Arthur ... [Malory projects] Arthur's reign as a destiny ordained by God and established through Merlin,

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an event distinct in its own promise - no longer, as in his source, mainly a preparation for the recovery of the Grail". (p.27) Merlin, Wright points out, is portrayed in two important offices, as the agent through whom God's will and grace is expressed, and as the omniscient strategist who leads Arthur to victory over the rebel kings. These functions are, of course, derived from the French tradition where Merlin is prophet, semi-priest, shapeshifter and strategist, but it is Malory, and not the French romancers, who creates the role in which Merlin contrives the birth of Arthur and guides him to the throne.

The guiding hand of Merlin, as God's agent in Arthur's affairs, occurs not only in the matter of the succession to the throne but also in the battles where Merlin is Arthur's guide to victory. For instance Merlin comes to counsel Arthur to call a halt to the battle during his conquests over the eleven kings; in the French original he asks "que veus tu faire? Dont n'as tu tant fait queru as vencus tes anemis?" (III, 1291, notes) but Malory adds a religious consideration, "Hast thou not done inow? ... therefore hit ys time to sey 'who!' for God ys wroth with the for thou woll never have done". (I, 36) Similarly, in his condensation of Arthur's conversations with Merlin in his disguises of boy and old man, Malory stresses the displeasure of God at Arthur's incestuous relationship with King Lot's wife, and the inevitable

consequences, "hyt is Goddis wyll that youre body sholde be punysshed for your fowle dedis". (I, 44)

Malory stresses Merlin's close relationship with Arthur; most battles and many individual encounters with unfriendly knights end propitiously only because of Merlin's intervention. Arthur advises his barons to respect Merlin's powers - "but wol ye all that loveth me speke with Merlyn? Ye know wel that he hath done moche for me, and he knoweth many thynges. And whan he is afore you I wold that ye prayd hym hertely of his best avyse." (I, 19) Arthur's enemies, as I noted also when discussing Arthur and Merlin, take a more sceptical view of the wizard's powers, "'Be ye wel avysed to be aferd of a dreame-redex?' said King Lot", (I, 18) and later, "thys faytoure with hys prophecy hath mocked me". (I, 76) Malory's own attitude towards Merlin is sometimes ambivalent. When Arthur orders the slaughter of all the children born on May Day, so that he may escape the fate awaiting him at the hand of his son, Malory is unwilling to allow the full guilt of the children's deaths to fall on his hero and adds that "many putte the wyghte on Merlion more than of Arthure". (I, 56) The same suspicion that Merlin's powers may not always be used for good is seen when Malory comments that Nyneve "wolde have been delyverde of hym, for she was aferde of hym for cause he was a devyl's son". (I, 126)

This is Malory's only reference to the birth of Merlin, and indeed he omits and compresses a great deal of Merlin's story, for he was writing the story of Arthur and for his purpose, Vortigern and all the events before Uther's passion for Igrayne were irrelevant. Malory also simplifies considerably the legends surrounding Merlin's involvement with Viviane, and omits completely an earlier episode in the French romance in which "Morgan le Fay, hearing of Merlin's ability at witchcraft, decided to learn his 'science d'ingromanchie et l'art'. She asks him to teach her his art and promises to give him anything he may ask in return. The promise is soon broken: when Merlin, who loves Morgan le Fay 'moult durement' has taught her as much as she wants to know she sends him away, for she loves another man, 'un moult biel homme et preu de son cors'" (Vinaver's summary, III, 1307) The omission of this episode, which closely parallels Merlin's encounter with Viviane, is in line with Malory's practice throughout his works: he commonly omits episodes which digress from the main line of his story or, as here, repeat incidents introduced elsewhere. Malory seems unwilling, too, to describe enchantments and the supernatural at any great length; for instance when Merlin tells Arthur about the Lady of the Lake, who will provide him with a sword, he describes her dwelling in the rock merely as a 'fayre paleyce ... richely besayne' (I, 52) omitting the enchantments with which the lady surrounds herself in his sources. (III, 1297, notes)

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These two factors, his tightening up of the story to avoid digressions and irrelevancies and his uneasiness with the supernatural, probably account for Malory's very bald account of Merlin's love for Viviane and his subsequent imprisonment; Malory omits the damsel's hatred for Merlin, gives no account of the 'many wondyrs' he shows her, and does not make it clear that 'hir subtile worchyng', by which she traps Merlin in the rock, is in fact learned from him. (I, 125-126)

Malory's Merlin, then, is even more closely involved with the destiny of Arthur than the earlier romances and chronicles suggested, his role in the founding of the Round Table and the history of the Grail is minimized and his supernatural powers are mainly concerned with shape-shifting. He is, too, the faithful friend and wise counsellor of the king, whose advice is often Christian in tone and who, once at least, identifies himself with the will of God. (I, 11)

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Notes

¹E. Vinaver, "Malory" A.L.M.A. p.541.

²All references to Malory's Morte Darthur are to The Works of Sir Thomas Malory ed. E. Vinaver, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1947).

³Caxton's Preface, Works, I, cxlii. For a discussion of Malory's major source for the Merlin material, the Suite Du Merlin, see III, 1265-1277.

⁴Thomas L. Wright, "The Tale of King Arthur, Beginnings and Foreshadowings" in Malory's Originality ed. R. M. Lumiansky (Baltimore, 1964).

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III

MERLIN IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

Malory's works, popular though they were, did not mark the beginning of a new surge of creative literary interest in romantic aspects of the Arthurian legends. The sixteenth century preoccupation with Arthur was largely political and historical, and this is mirrored in the treatment of Merlin from Caxton to Drayton. Caxton felt he had to defend himself against those "that holde oppynyon that there was no suche Arthur and that all suche bookes as been maad of hym ben but fayned and fables, by cause that some cronycles make of him no mencyon ne remembre hym noothynge, ne of his knyghtes".¹ The conflict implied here between the fabulous and the historical was to become the starting point of much that was written about Arthur and Merlin in the next hundred years. However the continuing popularity of Malory's work during this period is shown by its frequent reprinting: after the first edition of 1485, there were new issues in 1498, 1529, 1557, 1585, and 1634. Ascham's protest in The Scholemaster only serves to underline the kind of pleasure which the Elizabethans and their predecessors could derive from reading the old romances. Ascham censures the Morte Arthure as a produce of Papistical times and typical of "certaine bookes of Chevalrie, as they sayd, for pastime and pleasure, which, as some say, were made in Monasteries,

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by idle Monkes, or Wanton Chanons".² Ascham's arguments are mainly concerned with the immorality of the book and the possible harm it could do to impressionable young readers "that liveth welthelie and idellelie". At the same time another kind of censorship was being imposed by writers of chronicles on the Arthurian material. Sixteenth century chroniclers were, with some exceptions, concerned to root out the fantastic and supernatural and to present the history of Britain in a fashion acceptable to readers becoming used to the Renaissance ways of thinking, which required a closer attention to historical 'truth', as far as that could be ascertained from a careful reading of the earlier chronicles. The consequent elimination of many of the marvellous and magical elements from sixteenth century versions of the chronicles had, in fact, already been begun by the time Malory wrote; and even Malory, although he represents the culmination of the Arthurian romance in English, was uneasy with the fantastic episodes, as his handling of Merlin's romance with Viviane indicates.

A distrust of some of Geoffrey of Monmouth's more extravagant episodes appears in the Latin Chronicles as early as William of Newburgh (c 1198), who accused Geoffrey of inventing history on the basis of old fables,³ and Giraldus Cambrensis who, in his Itinerarium Cambriae (c 1191),⁴ recounts the story of Mellerius. (p.375) Meile-

rius was possessed by devils and thus endowed with the capacity of discovering any falsehood with which he was brought into contact; when St. John's Gospel was laid in his lap the devils all vanished but when Geoffrey's Historia was substituted they returned in greater numbers than ever. In spite of this Giraldus accepts and repeats many of Geoffrey's statements, including the story of the begetting of Merlin by an incubus and the removal of the Great Circle from Kildare to Salisbury Plain. (p.542, 78) Ralph Higden, in his Polychronicon (mid 14th century)⁴, frequently questions Geoffrey's account where it appears extravagant, and consequently he dismisses the story of Vortigern's tower, which is found, he says, only in "the British book"; he expresses doubts about the removal of the stones and discards the magical elements from Uter's love of Ygerne, turning it into a lawful marriage. At the end of Caxton's Chronicle (1498) Wynkyn de Worde printed a poem on Merlin, which is a translation from a Latin poem in the Polychronicon.⁵ This work, with its uncertainty about the possibility of a child being born to a woman and a devil, or an incubus, its trust in the lore of the clergy -

Clergie maketh mynde,

Deth sleeth no fendes kynde;

and the finality with which it dismisses the possibility of a demonic origin for Merlin -

But deth slewe Merlyn,

Merlyn was ergo no goblyn,

is typical of the scepticism with which the chroniclers were approaching the traditional material. It is, too, noteworthy that the premise from which this argument begins, that Merlin is dead and buried in the "lytell ylonde" of Bardsey, is a denial of the romance tradition of Merlin's imprisonment by Viviane and the suggestions of immortality for the wizard which are implicit in the various versions of the tale.⁶ The original Welsh legend, telling of Merlin's retirement to a Glass House on the Isle of Bardsey, implies a magically lengthened life for the bard, and this element of the Welsh tale is ignored by the translator of the Polychronicon.

John Fabyan's New Chronicles of England and France (c 1493; pub. 1516) was contemporary with Malory's works, and Fabyan, like Malory, translated the traditional material into English and added his own comments. In his attempt to make the narrative plausible he refers only very briefly to the story of Merlin and Vortigern's tower, he omits all suggestion of magic in the transportation of the stones and says, with reference to the story of Uter winning Igerne through Merlin's enchantments, that it "is not comely to any Cristen Relygyon to gyve to any suche fantastycall illusions any mynde or credence." Holinshed's reaction to the story of Vortigern's tower is very similar

to this, when he comments that it is "not of such credit as deserveth to be registered in anie sound historie".⁷

The story of Merlin, because of the numerous supernatural elements in it, inevitably became involved in the battle of the books, the war of the Chronicles, which was sparked by Polydore Vergil's attack on Geoffrey of Monmouth in his Anglicae Historiae Libr. (published 1534).⁸ Henry VII fostered the notion that his title to the throne did not depend solely on either his Lancastrian descent or his marriage to Elizabeth of York, but that he was also a direct descendent of Cadwallader, last of the British kings. He revived, too, the idea that Arthur was not dead but would return again and restore the glories of the British line; this fantasy, with its suggestions of the Tudor line as the incarnation of 'Arthurus redivivus', he attempted to strengthen by calling his oldest son Arthur. When in 1507 Henry asked Polydore to write a complete English history it was obviously with the expectation that the book would strengthen his historical claims to be the apotheosis of the British race. Unfortunately for Henry's purposes, however, Polydore as an Italian Catholic did not sympathize with the liberal movement in the English Church and in the earlier parts of the story his sympathies lay more with the Saxons than the British. He attempted to judge the truth impartially and the result was that he condemned much of Geoffrey of Monmouth's account of Arthur as

were fables and praised Gildas because "nether doth he feare in revealinge the troth though he were a Britton, to write of Brittons that thei nether weare stoute in battayle nor faithfull in peace". With his attack on the historicity of Arthur, Polydore was also attacking the popular conception of the British king and hero. As the story of Merlin in the Chronicles was so closely connected with that of Arthur, the consequent controversy in which writers and historians vehemently attacked, or as spiritedly defended, the old stories of Arthur, was concerned with the magician as well as the king.

Polydore's work was not published until after Henry VII's death, but Henry VIII, continuing his father's interest in history, appointed John Leland to recover the antiquities of England and his reply to Polydore, Assertio Incolytissimi Arthuri Regis, was published in 1544 and translated into English in 1582 by Richard Robinson. Leland defended the historicity of Arthur against the attacks of both Polydore and William of Newbury (Gulielmus Parvus). "Gulielmus Parvus of Bridelington, in his Prologue before his History thus thundereth out his errour, 'Galfridus hic dictus est, cognomen habens Arthuri, qui divinationum illarum nenas ex Britannica lingua trans- tulit, quibus et non frustra creditus, ex proprio figmento multa adiecit . . . But I will sing him a contrarie songe even for ever and a day Lette him cogge and foyste

sixe hundreth times, if hee will. Merlinus was in very deede a man even miraculously learned in knowledge of things naturall, and especially in the science mathematicall, for the which cause he was most acceptable and that deservingly unto the princes of his time, and a farre other manner of man, then that he woulde repute himselfe as one subject unto ye judgement of any cowed or loytering grosseheaded Moncke. But I will let pass Arthur and Merlin, the one more valiant, the other more learned, then they ought to regard either the prating or importunitie of the common people".⁹ This defence of Merlin as a scholar and advisor to the king ignores most of the magician's history. In spite of his defence of Geoffrey who had, according to Gulielmus, "translated ye Fabulous Dreames of those prophecies out of ye Brittain language", Leland shares with Polydore Vergil a carefully critical approach to history and admits that "too manie fables and vanities are dispersed throughout the whole history of Brittain". One can only assume that he was forced to the conclusion that while Merlin indeed existed, many of the popular legends about him were "fables and vanities".

Warner, Churchyard and Drayton did not share the antiquarian's scepticism and all dealt, in different ways, with the fulfillment of Merlin's prophecies. Albion's England (1586)¹⁰ is announced on its title page as a "Historicall map of the same Island ... with Historicall

intermixtures, invention and Varieties: Proffitably, briefly and pleasantly performed in verse and prose by William Warner." The history of England from Noah to Elizabeth is outlined, with an increasing number of 'Inventions and Varieties' in the later parts. Although Warner disregards the more marvelous parts of the Merlin legend, and "other wonders, tedious, if, not trothless to resight", (p.79) he does twice mention the prophet's origin; once he calls him "Feend-got" and the second occasion is in this passage which stresses Merlin's role in providing a link between the Arthurian age and the glories of the Tudors -

This King [i.e. Arthur] to intertaine discourse, and so to understand

What accedents in after-tymes should happen in this land,

He with the Brittish Prophet then of Sequelles fell in hand

Of .. long after Kings, the man, not born of Humaine seede

Did prophecie, and many things, that came to pass in deede. (p.80)

In 1587, with The Worthiness of Wales,¹¹ Thomas Churchyard entered the battle still raging around Polydore's attacks on Geoffrey and the historicity of Arthur. He makes the kind of connection between the ancient Welsh princes and the House of Tudor which Henry VII had been

hoping for from Polydore. In 'The Epistle Dedicatorie To the Queene's most Excellent Maiestie, Elizabeth' he announces, "I have undertaken to set forth a worke in the honour of Wales, where your highnes auncestors took name". (p.4) Conscious of the concern among historiographers for veracity and aware that "such discord did arise among writers in time past ... that they reproved one another by books", he prays "God shield me from such caveling, for I deliver but what I have seen and read: alledging for defense both auncient Authors, and good tryall of that is Written". (p.12) A marginal note to this passage reads "David Powel a late writer, yet excellently learned, made a sharp invective against William Parnus and Pollidor Virgill (and all their complices) accusing them of lying tongues, envyous detraction, malicious slanders, reproachful and venomous language, wilfull ignorance, dogged envie, and canckered mindes, for that thei spake unreverently of Arthur and many other thrise noble Princes". A similar emphasis on re-instating Arthur as a historical figure is seen during a lengthy digression from the history of Wales in which Churchyard discusses the deficiencies and merits of other writers on this topic. "Because" he says "many that favoured not Wales (partiall writers and historians) have written and set downe their owne opinions, as they pleased to publish of that Countrey: I therefore a little degresse from the orderly matter of the booke, and touch somewhat the workes and wordes of them that rashly have

written more than they knewe, or well could prove." (p.23)
 In this connection he mainly discusses Polydore, and, to
 learn the truth, refers his readers to native writers such
 as Bede and Gildas, and concludes

And though we count, but Robin Hood a Jest,
 And old wives tales, as tatling toys appeare;
 Yet Arthurs raigne, the world cannot denye,
 Such prooffe there is, the truth thereof to trye,
 That who so speakes, against so grave a thing,
 Shall blush to blpt, the fame of such a king. (p.27)

Alongside the lines on Arthur there is a marginal note,
 which says, cryptically, 'Merlinus Ambrosius, a man of
 hye knowledge and spirit'. This I take to mean that it is
 Merlin who supplies the 'prooffe' and evidence for Arthur's
 reign, and this is borne out by Churchyard's concluding
 list of "the true Authors of this whole Booke", which is
 made up of "Iohannes Badius Ascensiu, Merlinus Ambrosius,
 Gualterus Monemotensis, Giraldus Cambrensis, Iohannes Bale
 of Brutus, Ieffrey of Monmouth, Gildas Cambrius, a Poet of
 Britaine, and Sibilla." (p.46) This is perhaps the most
 startling use of Merlin in defense of the Tudor view of
 history; other writers, while glossing over the more
 fantastic episodes in the legendary life of the prophet,
 stressed the fulfillment of his prophecies in Tudor times,
 but it is only Churchyard who goes one stage further and
 cites Merlin as an authority of the same weight as his

creator, or, in the sixteenth century view, the preserver of his prophecies, Geoffrey of Monmouth.

Towards the end of Elizabeth's reign Robert Chester included in his Love's Martyr¹² the "true legend of famous King Arthur, the last of the nine worthies". In his address to the reader before he introduces the life of Arthur into the body of the poem, Chester shows himself as concerned as any of his contemporaries with the credibility of the legend of Arthur, and he makes reference to the literary arguments on the subject, "there have been some writers (as I thinke enemies of truth) that in their erroneous censures have thought no such man ever to be living; how fabulous that should seem to be I leave to the judgement of the best readers, who know for certain, that that never dead Prince of memory is more beholding to the French, the Romane, the Scot, the Italian, yea to the Greekes themselves, than to his own countrymen, who have fully and wholly set forth his fame and livelyhood: then how shamelesse is it for some of us to let slip the truth of this Monarch?"(p.35) However his proofs of the authenticity of Arthur are not literary but concrete and he cites the visible relics of Arthur, such as Gawin's skull, Cradock's mantle and of course the Round Table. The story of Arthur's "strange birth, honourable Coronation and most unhappie Death" is told in very pedestrian verse, and Merlin appears only in order to help Uter and provide for the infant Arthur. Chester adds one minor innovation to

the story when, after telling Uther that

The first faire sportive night that you shall have,
 Lying safely nuzled by faire Igerne's side,
 You shall beget a son whose very Name

In after-stealing Time his foes shall tame,

Merlin also announces that Uther must not leave Igerne's bed till Merlin arrives to tell him he may, but Chester gives no explanation of this strange request. (p.41)

During the sixteenth century, then, popular interest in Merlin was kept alive by repeated reprintings of Malory, the Life printed by Wynkyn de Worde, and by the chronicles and such works as Albion's England and The Worthiness of Wales most of which carefully suppressed the marvels exploited by the romancers. As I have shown, Geoffrey of Monmouth, rather than the English versions of the French prose Merlin or Malory, was the source for most of those sixteenth writers who mentioned Merlin. But as the century drew to a close romance elements once again appeared in English poetry; the influences of Ariosto and "heroic poetry" culminated, of course, in the romantic adventures of The Faerie Queene. Even before The Faerie Queen appeared there were signs, beside the continued reprinting of Malory, that interest in the old romances was not dead. The court seems to have enjoyed the tales of "those [that] be counted the noblest Knights", in spite of Ascham's warnings, and on the occasion of The Princely Pleasures at

the Courte of Kensalworthe in the year 1575 several characters who can probably be traced to Malory's influence were included in the entertainment. Merlin does not appear in person, but we learn that the Lady of the Lake has been confined by "Sir Bruse, sauns pittie, in revenge of his cosyn Merlyne the Prophet, whom for his inordinate lust she had inclosed in a rock".¹³ Spenser's Arthur owes little to Malory or Geoffrey of Monmouth, but "has been filtered and transmuted through Spenser's Italian sources;¹⁴ similarly in his Merlin one can find the influence of Ariosto, with elements from the traditional legends of the prophet, some fragmentary British history, and some episodes which Spenser apparently invented. Spenser's Merlin is, on the whole, the traditional wizard, protector of Arthur, and prophet of the future and while Spenser's conception of Arthur is new to English literature, in the references to the wizard it is really only in the descriptive details surrounding him that the conventional concept is modified. The conventional attributes of Merlin, his magical skills, marvellous contrivances and seer's powers, found a natural home in Spenser's fairy landscapes, and just as the purveyors of prophecies found his name to be a convenient and recognizable starting point for prophetic materials, so Spenser naturally turned to him for some of his episodes concerning wizardry and prophecy. That not all Elizabethan writers accepted Merlin as being worthy of

serious literary attention one can tell from Shakespeare's scattered references to him, (e.g. Lear, III,ii,80ff) and from Greene's slighting reference to "such impious instances of intollerable poetrie, such mad and scoffing poets, that have propheticall spirits as bred of Merlins race".¹⁵

The first reference to Merlin in The Faerie Queene is in the passage in which Arthur's armour is described, and the supernatural powers, with which the possession of the shield endued its owner, enumerated. Spenser assures the reader that there is no need to be sceptical about these powers

For he that made the same, was knowne right well
To have done much more admirable deeds,
It Merlin was, which whylome did excell
All living wightes in might of magicke spell:
Both shield, and sword and armour all he wrought
For this young Prince when first to armes he fell.

(I,vii,36)

The emphasis in Malory is on Excalibur but here the description of the sword is less important than the helmet and the shield. Arthur's armour in The Faerie Queene takes on a spiritual significance through the allegory, he has taken "upon him the whole armour of God that [he] may be able to withstand in the evil day", (Ephes.6,13), and the shield of faith and helmet of salvation are as

necessary for him as the magic powers of Excalibur and its scabbard were for the Arthur of romance. Spenser's statement that it was Merlin who provided the armour for the young prince, on one level describes his traditional role as Arthur's mentor and on another makes the wizard the agent of God's grace and the purveyor of all the gifts of salvation, and this second role for the wizard continues to be implied when Arthur later describes his upbringing to Una. He tells her how, while he lived in Timon's house

Thither the great magician Merlin came,

As was his use, oft times to visit me:

For he had charge my discipline to frame

And tutours nourriture to oversee. (I,iii,5)

Spenser makes Arthur completely ignorant of his parentage, and the reader is given no clue as to from "what loines and what lignage" he sprang, so that apart from the 'faery Knight' Timon and Merlin, the Prince lacks a heritage. Una makes an implicit judgment on Merlin's qualities when she comments that Arthur was a "Pupill fit for such a Tutours hand".

Merlin then disappears from the narrative until Britomart falls in love with Artegall at her first sight of him in the magic mirror. This mirror was the "glassy globe" which Merlin made and gave to King Ryence. In this "world of glas" the viewer could see everything in the world that appertained to his affairs and the activities of his friends and foes, and thus prepare to protect himself

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from invasions even before news of them reached him. Spenser comments that our amazement at this magical ball will be lessened if we remember that Ptolemy built a glass tower for Phao, through which "she might all men vew", but "none might her discoure". One remembers that the anonymous author of the Seven Sages had already attributed to Merlin the feat of building a magical pillar with mirrors which warned of incipient revolt in the Roman provinces. A few years after the publication of The Faerie Queene, in Christopher Middleton's Chinon of England,¹⁶ we find Sir Calor appealing to Merlin for help in finding Chinon, the young hero of the story who has been lost and imprisoned by a witch. Merlin shows the questing knights "in a speculative glass the manner of his departure out of England, the manie troubles he had endured in his journey" and Chinon's prison.

Glauce, Britomart's nurse, unable to help her charge overcome her anguished love for Artegall, finally

her avised, that he, which made

That mirrhour, ...

To weet, the learned Merlin, well could tell,

Under what coast of heaven the man did dwell.

(3,iii,6)

In a landscape whose forests and plains have all the indefiniteness of a dream, and where place names, when they are given, are usually frankly symbolic and romantic,

for instance Castle Joyeous, the Gardin of Adonis, and so on, it is a little startling to find that Merlin is sought by Glauce and Britomart in his eponymous home, Maridunum "that is now by chaunge of name Cayr-Merdin cald". The description of Merlin and his cave which follows seems to be partly Spenser's own invention and partly, like the name of Merlin's retreat, traditional material, ending with the prophecies of the future of the race which shall spring from the union of Britomart and Artegall. Spenser first assures the reader that if he "happen that same way to travel ... amongst the woodie hills of Dynevowre" he will be able to hear

such ghastly noise of yron chaines,
And brasen caudrons ...
Which thousand sprights with long enduring paines
Doe tosse, that it will stonne they feeble braines.

(3,111,8,9)

This excursion into the travelogue method, that is, naming a place and recounting the history connected with it, is, of course, what Warner and Drayton did much more extensively with British geography, history and legend, and it is not surprising to find that it is just this episode from The Faerie Queene which Drayton used. Spenser describes Merlin's attempt to build a brass wall around Cairmardin, which was interrupted by his imprisonment by the 'false Ladie', although the feends

doe toyle and travell day and night

Untill that brasen wall they up do reare,
because

So greatly his commandement they feare.

(3,111,11)

Spenser may be remembering Ariosto's account of Bradamante's visit to Merlin's tomb in Melissa's cave¹⁷ when he has Glauce and Britomart discover the prophet in his "hideous hollow cave", while the description of his powers in battle

Huge hostes of men he could alone dismay,

And hostes of men of meanest things

could frame,

When so him list his enimies to pay,

(3,111,12)

is reminiscent of his feats in Arthur's wars in Arthour and Merlin and the prose Merlin. The birth of the prophet is briefly described: Spenser contrives to minimize the evil usually surrounding Merlin's demonic father by referring to him as "a guilefull spright". His mother was a "faire Ladie Nonne, ... daughter to Pubidius ... and coosen unto king Ambrosius"; this version preserves the traditional outline of the story, while transferring Merlin's usual appellation, Ambrosius, to his mother's cousin. The wizard displays a sense of humour in his amusement at Glauce's attempts to disguise both their persons and their reasons for being there, and finally

The wizard could no longer beare her bord,

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But brusting forth in laughter
 admits that he knows who they are and why they have come.
 He proceeds to prophesy the future of the race, first
 assuring Britomart

It was not, Britomart, thy wandring eye,
 Glauncing unwares in charmed looking glas
 But the streight course of heavenly destiny,
 Led with eternall providence, that has
 Guided thy glaunce, to bring his will to pass:
 Ne is thy fate, ne is thy fortune ill,
 To love the prowest knight, that ever was.
 Therefore submit thy wayes unto his will,
 And do by all dew meanes thy destiny fulfill.

(3,111,24)

By making Merlin a conscious instrument of eternal
 Providence in the union of Britomart and Artegall, Spenser
 is giving the wizard the kind of role which Malory had
 given him as an agent of destiny, although in that case it
 was in bringing about Arthur's conception. There is a
 strange echo of Arthur's parentage in the account Merlin
 gives of Artegall's origins: Merlin says that

Ne other to himselfe is knowne this day
 But that he by an Elfe was gotten of a Fay.
 But sooth he is the sonne of Gorlois,
 And brother unto Cador Cornish King. (3,111,26,27)

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The Cornish duke, Gorlois, in many versions¹⁸ of the Arthurian legends, was of course the husband of Ygerne, whose place was usurped by Uther, resulting in the conception of Arthur. The use of this name is probably the outcome of Spenser's desire to provide an undeniably British heritage for Artegall, but it suggests, together with his close connection with Merlin, some allegorical parallels in Spenser's mind between Arthur and Artegall. The normal pattern for Tudor historiographers was to trace the Tudor line back to Arthur and ultimately to Brutus, and Spenser is recalling this myth of the glorious origins of the Tudor dynasty when he derives the family of Elizabeth from Artegall and Britomart, and also ultimately from Brutus. As William Nelson comments, Artegall is the equal of Arthur and "in a sense his alter ego since he fathers the line of British kings culminating in Arthur reborn as the Tudor dynasty".¹⁹ Artegall, was "by false Faries Stolne away, Whiles yet in infant cradle he did crall" (3,111,26) but the only place in English literature before Spenser where Arthur's birth is connected with the presence of fairies is in Layamon, (p.384 vs 14 - p.385 vs 3) where the infant is visited by benevolent fairies. Merlin's prophecies to Britomart are of the traditional kind, mixing straightforward historical narrative -

Proud Ethelred shall from the North arise
Serving th'ambitious will of Augustine (3,111,35)

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with allegory

There shall a Lyon from the sea-bord wood
Of Neustria come roring, with a crew
Of hungry whelpes, his battailous bold brood,
Whose clawes were newly dipt in cruddy blood.

(3,111,47)

Merlin is overcome by the prophetic 'fury' and falls into
'a suddein fit, and halfe extatick stoure', but Spenser's
last mention of him shows him with his equilibrium re-
stored,

to former hew

He turned again, and chearefull looks (as earst)
did show. (3,111,50)

Notes

¹Caxton's "Preface" to Morte Arthure.

²Ascham, Scholemaster, ed. D. C. Whimster (London, 1934) p.73-74.

³The relevant passages are given by E. K. Chambers, Arthur of Britain, p.274-275.

⁴Higden's treatment of the Arthurian stories is discussed by Fletcher in The Arthurian Material in the Chronicles, (1906) p.181 ff.

⁵Printed by Mead, E.E.T.S. O.S. 112, p.lxxii-lxxiii.

⁶There are several versions of the tale of Merlin's imprisonment.

- a) Native Welsh legends say that he departed with nine bards into the sea in a Glass House, or that he dwells in a Glass House in the Isle of Bardsey.
- b) The French romances generally agree that Merlin was tricked and imprisoned by his love. In the Vulgate Merlin Nimiane confines him in the Forest of Broceliande in walls of air; in the Vulgate Lancelot she seals him asleep in a cave. In the Prophecies the Lady of the Lake imprisons him in a tomb where his soul lives on for ever.
- c) Malory recounts that Nyneve imprisoned Merlin through magic, under a stone; the English Merlin, following the French, says that she placed him in a castle of air.
- d) The Didot Perceval states that Merlin retired to an 'esplumoir' and has not been seen since.
- e) The Suite de Merlin is outside the normal tradition, for in it Merlin's imprisonment in the tomb ends in death. L. Paton, Studies in the Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance (N.Y., 1903) passim. R. S. Loomis, Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance, 127-8.

⁷Fletcher, p.257, 269.

⁸Fletcher, 260 ff.

E. M. W. Tillyard, Shakespeare's History Plays, Peregrine Books, (London, 1962) 29-38.

Lily B. Campbell, "English History in the Sixteenth Century". Shakespeare's Histories: Mirrors of Elizabethan Policy (1947) 58-80.

⁹Leland, Assertio Incolytissimi Arthuri Regis Britanniæ, transl. R. Robinson (1582) ed. W. E. Mead as appendix to Chinon of England (E.E.S. OS.165.1925) 85-88.

¹⁰W. Warner, Albion's England (London, 1586)

¹¹Thomas Churchyard, The Worthines of Wales, re-printed from the original edition of 1587 for the Spenser Society, (Manchester, 1876).

¹²Robert Chester, Love's Martyr, (London, 1601) published by New Shakespere Society, Series VIII, Miscellanies No.2 (London, 1878). Chester's address to his readers echoes Caxton's "Preface".

¹³Quoted by W. Mead in his introduction to Christopher Middleton. The Famous Historie of Chynon of England, ed. W. E. Mead, E.E.T.S. O.S. 165 (London, 1925). The Princely Pleasures were edited by Gascoigne (1821) and Laneham describes them in his famous letter to Humphrey Martin, ed. F. J. Furnivall (Ballad Society, London, 1871).

¹⁴Graham Hough, A Preface to The Faerie Queene (London, 1962) p.20.

¹⁵Robert Greene, "Preface to the reader", (Perymedes), Works, ed. A. Grosart (New York, 1964), Vol. VII, p.8.

¹⁶Christopher Middleton Chynon of England, ed. W. E. Mead, E.E.T.S. O.S. 165 (London, 1925). This romance presents many well known characters, some from the Arthurian legends and some from fairy mythology, in marvellous situations. Much use is made of the supernatural and Merlin is given an opportunity to display his skill; however the effect of the 'speculative glass' is of a mechanical trick without any concomitant atmosphere of magic. Merlin, says Middleton, "then lived accounted as a Prophet in England, and (by his skill) could tell of secret things forepast, and hidden mysteries to come." p.64. His only other contribution to the story is to provide some supernatural aid to the searchers when he "hastening them forward on their journey, promised all the cunning he could afford for their speedie conveyance, which he effectually performed, so that in short time they were arrived in this perillous land". p.65.

¹⁷Ariosto, Orlando Furioso, III.

¹⁸E.g. Geoffrey of Monmouth, Wace, Layamon, Robert of Gloucester and later chronicles, although Malory refers to him only as 'the duke of Tintagel'.

¹⁹William Nelson, The Poetry of Edmund Spenser (Columbia paperback, 1965), p.257.

IV

DRAYTON AND SELDEN

With the accession of James I and the union of England and Scotland under one crown, the title of 'Britain' and the old British stories had an even more obvious contemporary significance than they had under the Tudors. As Selden pointed out, Merlin's prophecy that "the Isle shall again be named after Brute" was "now seene by a publique Edict, and in some of his Maiesties present coins and with more such."¹ Drayton's Poly-Olbion, to which Selden appended this note and many others, is announced in its title as "a Chorographical description of Tracts, Rivers, Mountains, Forests and other parts of this renowned isle of Great Britain, with intermixture of the most remarkable stories, antiquities, wonders, rarities, pleasures and commodoties of the same". This description of Poly-Olbion, the land of many blessings, is partly a record of Drayton's own travels in England and Wales, but much of it is dependent on literary sources, including books borrowed from the antiquarians Stow and Camden. The itinerary becomes overshadowed by the legends surrounding the various places mentioned, and most of the book is, in fact, concerned with Wales and the ancient Britains, and the life of Merlin and his Prophecies are frequently mentioned.

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Drayton had already used Merlin, while Elizabeth was still on the throne, in his familiar role of prognosticator of the glories of the Tudor line. In one of Drayton's Heroicall Epistles (1597) Owen Tudor informs Queen Katherine that he left the delights of Wales for England

by th'eternall Destinies consent
Whose uncompriſed wiſedomes did forſee
That you in marriage ſhould be linck'd to mee.
By one great Merlin was it not foretold
(amongſt his holy propheſies enrol'd)
When firſt he did of Tudors name devine,
That Kings and Queens ſhould follow in our
line.²

Drayton's treatment of Merlin is a curious mixture of elements from Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Chronicles with others from the romances. The Arthurian romance had, as I have shown, been largely abandoned by writers except Spenser during the Tudor period in favour of the historical and political aspects of the story of Arthur and the British line. As Greenlaw points out, the legends of the great Arthurian knights, which make up so much of the romances, were ignored; Malory was read but was without any apparent literary influence. Spenser, of course, revitalized the knights and their chivalrous adventures in The Faerie Queene, and, writing so soon after the public-

ation of The Faerie Queene, and influenced by Spenser's use of the Arthurian materials, Drayton was the first to combine an antiquarian's interests with those of a historiographer and writer of romance. The following passage shows the imagination of the poet working with a series of hints from earlier treatments of the legend:

the British are singing of the glories of their race,

And with courageous spirits thus boldly sang aloud;
How Merlin by his skill, and Magiques wondrous might,
From Ireland hither brought the Stonenidge in a night;
And for Carmarden's sake, would fain have brought to

passee

About it to have built a wall of solid brass;
And set his fiends to work upon the mightie frame;
Some to the Anvile: some, that still inforct the flame:
But whilst it was in hand, by louing of an Elfe
(For all his wondrous skill) was coosned by himselfe.
For walking with his fay, her to the Rocke hee brought,
In which hee oft before his Nigromancies wrought;
And going in thereat his Magiques to have shown
She stopt the Caverns mouth with an enchanted stone:
Whose cunning strongly crost, amaz'd whilst he did stand,
She captive him conveyed into the Fairie land.
Then, how the labouring spirits, to rocks by fetters

bound,

With bellows rumbling groanes, and hammers thundering
sound

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A fearefull horrid dinne still in the earth doe keepe,
 Their master to awake, supposed by them to sleepe,
 As at their work how still the grieved spirits repine,
 Tormented in the Fire, and tyred at the Mine. (Vol. II,

Song IV)

There are several unusual elements here. First we have the magician's career foreshortened, so that an event which, in earlier versions of the legend, occurred before the birth of Arthur is made to seem almost contemporary with Merlin's entombment by Viviane. Secondly, the whole episode of the brass wall and the fiends working on it deep in the earth at Merlin's command is an imaginative use of an episode which Drayton probably found in The Faerie Queene. The sixteenth century extollers of Arthur and everyone connected with him were, as I have shown, careful to exclude, as far as possible, all hints of Merlin's connections with the devil through his conception and birth and to stress primarily his prophetic powers. Merlin's reliability as a prophet of the future glories of the Tudor line would have been seriously weakened by too much stress on his demonic origins. Here we find Drayton following Spenser in reviving the romance story of Merlin's love for 'an Elfe'. The suggestion that Merlin was taken to Fairie land is his own addition and the fact that Merlin's necromancies included power over many captive 'fiends' and 'labouring spirits' depends on Spenser.

Drayton was, however, careful to point out to his readers that his use of the prophecies of Merlin must not always be taken completely seriously; he says in his remarks to the Reader, "in all, I believe him most, which freest from affection and hate (causes of corruption) might best know, and hath with most likely assertion delivered his report. Yet so, that, to explain the author, carrying himself in this part an historical, as in the other a choro-graphical poet. I infer oft, out of the British story, what I importune you not to credit. Of that kind are those prophecies out of Merlin sometimes interwoven; I discharge myself; nor impute you to me any serious respect of them." Drayton may perhaps have wished these reservations to apply also to the romantic elements of the wizard's story, although it was left to Selden to express these doubts critically. Selden's note on the passage quoted above preserves the tradition, first formulated by Giraldus Cambrensis, that there were in fact two Merlins, "one of Scotland commonly called Sylvester, or Caledonius living under Arthur; the other Ambrosius borne of a Nunne ... in Caermardhin; begotten, as the vulgar by an Incubus." Selden goes on to display the kind of scepticism about the prophet which is common to the Tudor and Stuart historians. "For his buriall (in supposition as uncertaine as his birth, actions and all of those too fabulously mixt stories) and his Lady of the Lake it is by liberty of profession

laid in France by that Italian Ariosto: which perhaps is as credible as some more of his attributes, seeing no perswading authority in any of them, rectifies the uncertainty." Ariosto, too, had his Selden in the person of Sir John Harington who provided scholarly annotations to his translation of Orlando Furioso (1591). At the end of Book III in which Merlin's grave in France is mentioned he gives a long commentary on Merlin, and deals with his birth, life and death. Concerning his birth Harington agrees with "the great clerk Bellarmine, that such birth is either impossible, or peculiar to the great Antichrist when he shall come. But concerning his life, that there was such a man, a great counsellor to King Arthur, I hold it certaine." As for the stories of his death, says Harington, they are so numerous that "a man may be bolder to say that all of them are false, then that any of them be true." He comments on Ariosto's account of Merlin's tomb in France, which he assumes to depend on the stories of the Lady of the Lake in which she lures him into the tomb prepared for himself and his wife and imprisons him there by his own magic arts. Harington's reason for repeating this story is not the demands of scholarship alone, for, he says "this I thought good to set downe for expounding the II. Staffe of this booke the plainer, not that any matter herein is worth the noting, without it be to warne men not to telle such dangerous secrets to women, except they will take occasion to imitate the wisdom of

Cato in repenting it after. And thus much for Merlin."³

Drayton's other references to Merlin and Selden's comments on them follow the pattern of the first one: Drayton elaborates on the legendary material, Selden questions it. This is apparent in the passage in which the poet discusses the conception of Merlin through the agency of one of the fallen angels, who wish to revenge themselves on mankind and, "to seduce the spirit, oft prompt the frailer blood." (Song V) But Selden accepts Nennius' statement that Ambrose's father was a Roman Consul, and suggests that Merlin's mother, in self-defence, "palliated the fact under the name of a spirit". The practical Selden rejects the possibility of generation by a spirit, except through an evil application of the principles of artificial insemination, "I shall not believe that other than true bodies on bodies can generate, except by swiftnes of motion in conveying of stolne seed some uncleanse spirit might arrogat the improper name of generation." Again, Selden will not abuse the intelligence of his readers by endeavouring to "perswade (their) beleefe to conceit of a true foreknowledge in" Merlin. This occurs as a commentary on the passage in which Drayton describes Merlin's prophesies to Vortigern, (Song X) and is prefaced by this explanation of Selden's position; "learned men account him but a professor of uniuertifiable Magique, and ... all Prophecies either fall true, or else are among the affecters of such vanity perpetually expected."

The differences in Drayton's and Selden's attitudes to Merlin can be conveniently summed up in Selden's phrase "a professor of uniusufiable Magique" and Drayton's enconium

Of Merlin and his skille what Region doth not heare?
The world shall still be full of Merlin everie where.
A thousand lingering years his prophecies have runne,
And scarcely shall have end till time itself be done.

(Song V)

Here the 'battle of the books' is waged within the covers of one book, between annotator and poet, and remembering Drayton's prefatory disclaimer, the reader realizes that the poet himself is not unaffected by the conflict but prefers to ban it from the body of his book.

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Notes

¹Drayton, Poly-Olbion, (London, 1612) illustrations to the Xth Song.

²Quoted in Edwin Greenlaw, Studies in Spenser's Historical Allegory (Baltimore, 1932).

³I am indebted to Professor M. H. M. MacKinnon, who drew my attention to this note, and to other references to Merlin in Ariosto.

MERLIN AS PROPHET

Some writers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries seemed to be largely unaffected by either the political or historical implications with which their contemporaries were concerned when re-telling the Arthurian legends. These were the men who continued to satisfy the popular taste for prophecy, and two of them presented the prophetic materials within the familiar and unquestioned framework of Merlin's life, while many others produced pamphlets or chapbooks containing prophecies of the wizard which appealed to his name alone to prove their veracity. Both the complete lives of the prophet and the pamphlets continue the tradition begun by Geoffrey of Monmouth, which continued uninterrupted through the centuries. From the earlier fifteenth century, for instance, survives The Prophecy of the Six Kings to follow King John,¹ which depends on Geoffrey's Prophetiae Merlini, and whose popularity is attested to by the fact that it survives in Latin, Anglo-French and English versions. The invention of printing, by allowing a wider circulation of the prophecies, helped to ensure their continued popularity. In 1510 Wynkyn de Worde printed A Lytel Tretys of the Byrth and Prophecyes of Merlin.² The author promises

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I shall tell you here afore
 How Merlyn was gotten and bor
 And of his dedes also
 And of other mervaylles many mo.

After recounting the death of King Constantin, the battles of his heir Moyn with Angus, King of Denmark, the murder of Moyn by powerful friends of Constantin's steward, Vortiger, and Vortiger's subsequent acquisition of the throne, the author describes how Vortiger attempted to build a strong castle on Salisbury Plain which would shelter him from his potential enemies, among whom the most dangerous were Uter and Pendragon, the sons of Constantin. Then the child Merlin is introduced and the story of his birth recounted. The version given here, in its account of the council of devils which plots mankind's downfall, depends ultimately on Robert de Borron's expansion of Geoffrey, and the story of the trickery and beguilement of the father, mother and three sisters is in the tradition which had already appeared in English literature in Arthour and Merlin. The horrific situation in which Merlin's mother found herself just before she herself, while lying in a drunken stupor, was ravished by a fiend and conceived Merlin is very different from the approach taken to the events surrounding Merlin's birth by the sceptical chroniclers of the early sixteenth century. The anonymous author of the little treatise tells us

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Than was the youngest daughter wo
 That nye her herte braste a two
 For the fendes slew her brother ywys
 And her fader dyed amys
 And her moder hanged herself
 And her syster was bydelfe
 And her other syster an hore is
 And accompanied with harlottes ywys.

The story continues in this melodramatic vein, and gives a
 detailed account of Merlin's mother's appearance before
 the judge and her defence by Blasy, who, when the child
 was born

bare hym home with mylde mode
 And baptysed him in the flode
 And called hym to his crysten name
 Marlyn to hyght in goddes name.

It is interesting to note that here Blasy plays a similar
 protective role for mother and child to the one which
 Merlin himself plays for Ygerne and the infant Arthur in
 other versions of the story. The Lytle Tretys ends with
 the battle in which Pendragon is killed and Uther becomes
 King, but before this the poet recounts Merlin's encounter
 with Vortiger and the prophet's explanation of the red
 and white dragons. In this part of the story is included
 Merlin's mysterious laughter, at the man with new shoes
 who is about to die and at the funeral party at which the

dead child is actually the priest's son. Merlin's ability to penetrate the disguise of the Queen's Chamberlain and to expose the Queen's involvement first in the attempted seduction of "him" and then in the trumped up charges leading to "his" condemnation to death, is detailed as are his numerous disguises and his prophecies of the future of the kingdom: all these are traditional elements³ of the story and are presented completely uncritically.

A century and a half later we find the same uncritical and completely traditional approach in Thomas Heywood's work Merlin's Prophecies and Predictions ... with the life of Merlin⁴, which is a free adaptation of The Prophecy of the Six Kings. Heywood used the prophecies of Merlin as a convenient framework for his rather tedious recital of the history of England or, in his own words, for "a true catalogue of all the kings of this Island". Like "Alanus de Insulis", to whom he was indebted for his attitude to the prophet, Heywood is concerned to show that "Merlinus, though he lived in the time of profane paganism, was a professed Christian and therefore his auguries the better to be approved and allowed". (Preface to the Reader)

The first chapter of the book shows Heywood to be well within the tradition of those writers who, since the twelfth century, had been concerned to establish the probity of Merlin's character so that the veracity of the prophecies attributed to him, and the chronicles dependent

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on these prophecies, might be unquestioned. At the same time, of course, more politically conscious writers, concerned with Merlin in his relationship to Arthur, and with Arthur as the glorious ancestor of the Tudors and Stuarts, had been taking a critical look at the legends surrounding the wizard and discarding the grossly unlikely elements from it for the sake of the historical truths which they wished to present. Heywood is in many ways an anachronism; he had neither the questioning and critical habits of mind of the Renaissance historiographer nor the patriotic desire to honour King and country by showing a glorious pattern emerging from the historical events; his desire to establish Merlin as a blameless Christian is based on the wholly traditional concern that the prophet shall be acceptable and therefore believable. Heywood discusses at some length the problem of Merlin's birth, "his mother being certain, but his father doubtfull", Following Selden's example he thinks it "most probable" that Merlin's mother told her story "to conceale the person of her sweetheart by disclosing of whose name she had undoubtedly exposed him to imminent danger, and this is most probable." (p.2) But Heywood seems to be unwilling to abandon completely the possibility of a more shadowy father and discusses the nature and activities of incubi. The next question which he considers is "whether he were a Christian or a Gentile:" and he comes to the triumphant

conclusion that "It is not to be doubted but he was a Christian as being of the British nation," and he goes on to comment that God "in every nation and Language, pickt out some choice persons, by whose mouthes hee would have uttered things which should futurely happen to posterity, according to his divine will, and pleasure, and amongst these was our Merlin." He gives examples of these divine mouth-pieces - Job, the Sibyls, who prophesied the incarnation, Virgil and Balaam, who was, unfortunately, shown to be no better "than a Soothsayer or a wizard". Heywood continues "These former examples may beget an hesitation or doubt, by which of the two spirits, the good or the bad, our Countryman Merlin uttered his predictions" (p.4) but one must remember, he says, that Alanus de Insulis vouches for Merlin and, he concludes, "In all his prophecies I find nothing dissonant, incongruous or absurd; not any thing foreigne or averse from truth: And those who shall live in ages to come, shall find those his predictions as constantly to happen in their dayes (according to the limit of time) as we have hitherto found them certaine and infallible even to the age in which we now live." (p.8)

Having satisfactorily established the Christian character of Merlin, Heywood could go on to relate his prognostications to the history of England, which he carries as far as the funeral of James I and the coronation of Charles. Only the first few chapters are really relevant to a study

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of the figure of Merlin in English literature, while the main part of the work is a good example of one of the major uses of Merlin in literature, that is, as a mouthpiece for prophecy. Thus the two traditions which Zumthor describes, "la fable de Merlin" and "le thème du Prophete", are both present in Heywood's work.

Heywood takes a chapter to describe "In whose reign Merlin was borne. How the state of Brittain stood in those days, with divers necessary occurrences, pertinent to the story." This covers the story of Vortiger and the Saxons, Hengist and Horsa, who helped Vortiger maintain his throne. It is interesting to notice that by the seventeenth century a chronicler found it necessary to embellish the tale of bloodshed and treason by the introduction of a 'love interest'. Thus we find that Hengist brought with him his daughter, Rowen, with whom Vortiger fell in love and, after casting off his wife, married. Thus when the British interests, in the person of Vortimer, banished Vortiger and fought the intruding Saxons, Vortiger was restored to the throne only when Rowen murdered her stepson. The third chapter relates how Vortiger attempted unsuccessfully to build the castle of Geron in Wales, and here, of course, Merlin is introduced. Vortiger's wizards, who "concluded in the end to save their credits and to excuse their ignorance, to put the King off with an impossibilitie", told the King that

the stones must be cemented with "the bloud of a man-childe, who was borne of a mother but had no man to his father." (p.20) Heywood's explanation of the wizards' conduct, that they told this impossible story to save their own reputations, shows clearly that he is not going to allow any suggestion of a demonic origin for Merlin to interfere with the heroic and virtuous figure he wants his prophet to be. When Vortiger meets Merlin, Heywood gives us one of the very few physical descriptions of the prophet to be found in literature before the nineteenth century. Vortiger "began to apprehend strange promising things in his aspect, as having a quick and piercing eye, an ingenious and gracious countenance, and in his youthful face a kind of austeritie and supercilious gravity, which took in him such a deep impression that he thought his bloud too noble to be mingled with the dust and rubbish of the earth." (p.21) Not only is this Merlin of blameless origin, he has none of the puckish delight in trickery which appears in the earlier literature. Even the act of prophecy is for him a saddening occasion, for he has an emotional sympathy with the people whose downfall he foretells; when Vortiger asks Merlin what the battle of the red and white dragons portends, Merlin "fetching a great sigh, and teares in abundance issuing from his eyes, with a propheticall spirit, made him the following answer." The answer, in pedestrian rhyming pentameters, concludes with Merlin "casting a sad

look upon the King, as reading his fate in his forehead."
(p.24)

Heywood does seem to have been attracted, however, by the more cheerful attributes of Merlin, particularly those which led him to employ his magical arts to hood-wink the King, and the fourth chapter deals with "Sundry prestigious Acts done by him to delight the King." Here again Heywood rearranges the traditional elements to show Merlin in a favourable light. First he hints that these 'prestigious Acts' may be purely a literary invention, which he will recount but not be responsible for: he explains "As Merlin was plentifully indued with the spirit of divination, so by some authors it is affirmed of him that hee was skilfull in darke and hidden arts, as Magick, Necromancy and the like, and relate of him, that when King Vortiger lived solitary in his late erected Castle forsaken by the greatest part of his followers and friends, and quite sequestered from all Kingly honours, he grew into a deepe and dumpish melancholy" (p.28) which was alleviated by Merlin's sports. Merlin's tricks were not, of course, traditionally performed to amuse the King, but rather to confuse him, and the tricks here are parlour tricks rather than mysterious meetings on a heath with an ancient, uncannily knowledgeable and mysterious man. Merlin provides for Vortiger music with no visible source, aerial hunts and, as a finale, a Lillipution archery combat on the table

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in the King's summer Parlour. "The King heartily laughed" more at the discomfiture of his servant, than at the combat itself; the servant being called upon to decide the victor, stooped to look and was shot through the nose for "he had something a big nose." Of Merlin's more spectacular feats, Heywood notes in passing that Aurelius Ambrose with the "helpe of Merlin caused the great stones which stand till this day on the plaine of Salisbury to be brought in a whirlwind one night out of Ireland."

Heywood's interest in love as a motivating factor, already mentioned in connection with Rowen and Vortiger, is shown again in his handling of Uther's love for Igera. However, he treats Uther's passion with a crudity which largely destroys the sense of restraint and frustration in Uther which gives dramatic tension to the traditional tale, and finally provides a grotesque parallel with Richard of Gloucester courting Anne over the bier of her husband, for Uther, after embalming Gothlois' body, "acquainted Igera by letters with the former passages, how they stood, and how much hee had hazarded his person for the fruition of her love [and] hee invited her to her Lord's Funerall, at which the King and shee both mourned, but after the celebration thereof ended, he the second time courted her, and in a few days made her his Queene of a Duchesse." (p.35) All the emotions of the lovelorn Uther are recounted melodramatically, so that at first Uther "could not restrain

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or bridle his extraordinary affection but must needs court and kisse her openly in the presence of her husband"; and when finally he asks Merlin's advice, he does so "aggravating the perplexity of his minde, with much palenesse in his face, many deep suspires, and extraordinary passion." The union of Uther and Igera, Heywood tells us, resulted in the birth of Arthur and Anna, and by this "match the fame of Merlin spread farre abroad". For the remainder of the book Heywood abandons "la fable de Merlin" and concentrates on "le thème du Prophete"; he recounts Merlin's prophecies and shows how they were fulfilled in historical events, and occasionally pauses to remind the reader of Merlin's reliability: "you see how hitherto Merlin hath predicted nothing which the successe and event have not made good; wee will yet examine him further, and prove if hee hath been as faithful in the future as the former." (p.76)

The popularity of the prophetic materials and the credulity with which they were received by most Englishmen, as well the political ends which they could be made to serve, are all mirrored in The Complaynt of Scotland, (1549).⁵ During a discussion of the causes of the national decline and ruin the author describes some of the peculiar weapons which the English were employing against Scotland. One of these was "ane poetical buik oratourly dytit" whose purpose was to show that Scotland had originally been

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a colony of England, and that it was again essential to unite the two under one prince as the "Isle of Britain", as it was when the Trojan Brutus conquered it from the giants. A second literary weapon complained of was certain prophecies of Merlin which in "rusty ryme" foretold the same union. The author comments, with some asperity, that the English may find these pretended prophecies, like the ancient ambiguous answers of the oracles, fulfilled in unexpected ways and he expresses his own belief that England would soon be ruled by a Scottish prince. The belief of the English in these prophecies is discussed in Chapter X of the book, "The Actor declaris quon the Englishmen gifis vane credens to the propheies of Merlyne;" "... and also the inglismen gifis ferme credit to diverse prophane propheseis of Merlyne, and til vthir ald corruptit vaticinaris to quhais ymaginet verkis thai syue mair faitht nor to the prophesie of Ysaye, Ezechiel, Ieremie or to the evangel: the quhilkis prophane prophets and vaticinaris affermit in there rusty ryme, that Scotland and Ingland sal be under ane prince." It was, of course, the concern of most of those English writers who represented Merlin in his prophetic role to establish his impeccable standing as either the direct or implied mouth-piece of God, and anything but a "prophane Prophet", and Alanus de Insulis and Heywood show this concern in an obvious way by "proving" that Merlin was a Christian. It

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is interesting to note that the comment of a nineteenth century critic on Heywood's work shows the same impatience with works of prophecy and those who believed them, that the anonymous author of the Complaynt displays. M. W. Macallum remarked that Heywood treated the entire history of England "as the fulfillment of the wizards vaticinations, in a strange book This was doubtless the craze of an eccentric, and Heywood, we may hope, was read only by such people as would nowadays believe in the Great Cryptogram, or the Israelitish origin of the English."⁶

Notes

¹Taylor, Political Prophecy, pp.48-51, 157-164.

²A Lytel Tretys of the Byrth and Prophecye of Marlyn (1510) S.T.C. 1784. Quotations from this work appear with the permission of The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.

³See Vita Merlini; legends about the demon Ashmedai; Robert de Boron; Arthur and Merlin; Prose Merlin.

⁴Thomas Heywood, Merlin's Prophecies (London, 1651).

⁵The Complaynt of Scotland (1549) ed. J. A. H. Murray (London, 1872).

⁶M. W. Macallum, Tennyson's Idylls of the King and Arthurian Story from the Sixteenth Century (Glasgow, 1894), p.140.

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VI

PROPHECIES AND ALMANACS

As I have already mentioned in connection with Drayton, the union of Scotland and England under James I was seen as the fulfillment of Merlin's prophecy in Geoffrey of Monmouth: "Then shall break forth the fountains of Armorica, and they shall be crowned with the diadem of Brutus. Cambria shall be filled with joy and the oaks of Cornwall shall flourish. The island shall be called by the name of Brutus: and the name given it by foreigners shall be abolished." Miss Brinkley quotes Bacon's comment that "The vulgar conceived that there was now an end given and a consummation to superstitious prophecies (the belief of fools, but the talk sometimes of wise men), and to the tacit expectation which had by tradition been infused and inveterated into men's minds."¹ But the fact that the ancient prophecies were now, by some at least, thought to be consummated did not preclude an ever increasing popular interest in prophecy. As might be expected, at the time at which Merlin's prophecies could be used for political capital to underline the desirability of the new regime, two new editions of his prophecies with "Alanus de Insulis" commentaries were produced (1603, 1608). In 1603 and 1615

there were also editions of The Whole Prophecies of Scotland, England, France and Denmark, Prophecied by marvellous Merlin.

Speed, in his History of Great Britain (1611) points out that in spite of superstitious uses of Merlin's prophecies "Truth bids us acknowledge" that in James is found the consummation of the prophecy that "the British Empire after the Saxons and Normans should returne againe to her ancient stocke and Name."² Miss Brinkley quotes from the Masque performed at Lord Hay's marriage to show that James was not only considered as the fulfillment of the prophecy, but even as the returned Arthur himself:

Merlin, the great king Arthur being slain
Fortould that he should come to life again,
And long time after wield Great Britaine's
State,

More powerfull ten-fould and more fortunate.
Prophet, 'tis true, and well we find the same,
Save only that thou didst mistake the name.³

The seventeenth century attitudes to the Arthurian legends in many ways were a repetition of those of the previous century. Just as the accession of the Tudors had been seen as the culmination of the glories of Britain, a Britain whose originator was the Trojan Brutus and whose ancestry could be traced in an unbroken line from Arthur to Henry VII, so too, under James the golden age of Britain

seemed to have returned. The Trojan-British origin of the monarch was still stressed and the interest that had been shown in a specifically Welsh ancestry for the Tudors was revived, with a slightly different emphasis, when Prince Henry was made Prince of Wales. And just as the Tudors had found the whole foundation of their history brought into question by the work of Polydore Vergil and the historiographers who followed him, so too a new wave of study of Geoffrey of Monmouth and of the British origins of the race originated during James' reign. As the first popularity of James waned with his increasing insistence on the Divine Right of Kings, there was a new upsurge of interest in the historical sources of English law. The revival of Anglo-Saxon studies not only substantiated the Saxon origins of English law, but the results of the researchers revealed "through custom, thought and language that the British derivation, with all the romance of Uther's son was a hollow myth and the Saxon original was the only trustworthy source for the race."⁴ Thus the veracity and reliability of Geoffrey of Monmouth continued to be the centre of controversy. As we have seen, Drayton although not completely accepting Geoffrey, at any rate uses the Historia as one of his sources for the Poly-Olbion, although Selden, in his notes discredits Merlin. William Slatyer in his Palae-Albion, a work extensively influenced by Drayton, recounted all the British legends as serious

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historic truth. Spenser had his imitators too, and in A Supplement of the Faery Queene (1635), which purported to be Books VII, VIII and IX of the Faerie Queene, Robert Jegan introduced Merlin, who tells his story and then prophesies that a royal hero (James) will unite the land and bring peace. In The Faerie King, Samuel Shepherd imitated Spenser in order to embody allegorically the chief events of the reign of Charles I and to show the glory of the King. Merlin's history is briefly summarized, and he is depicted as an enchanter suffering torture in hell for his magic.⁵

In a great many works of the seventeenth century the figure of Merlin has become divorced both from his connection with the rest of the Arthurian legends and also from the specifically national and political prophecies with which his name had earlier been associated. We find from about 1640 until well into the nineteenth century that, as Mead says, "nothing was more natural than to take advantage of [Merlin's] celebrity in order to help the sale of catchpenny pamphlets of a prophetic character."⁶ Very occasionally the writers of these prophetic works used Geoffrey of Monmouth directly; the prolific William Lilly, who published numerous volumes under the names Merlinus Anglicus or Merlinus Junior, did so in one book, and The World's Catastrophe or Europes many mutations until 1666 contains a translation by Elias Ashmole of Book VII

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of the Historia.⁷ This, he says, is "A Prophecie of Ambrose Merline, a Britaine, From the Translation of Geoffrey of Monmouth. Aenigmatically therein delivering the Fate, and Period of the English Monarchy." But many of the almanacs and predictions are local in their application and quite unhistorical in their approach, often smacking strongly of quackery.

Head quotes the following long series⁸ of predictions attributed to Merlin, and this could be further increased by including the numerous works of William Lilly: a typical production from his pen was the almanac Merlinus Anglicus Junior, The English Merlin reviv'd, "or a Mathematicall prediction upon the affairs of the British Commonwealth" (1644). The first edition of this was sold out in a week, and a second was published in the same year. As can be seen from the following titles Merlin's name could be used to cover astrological observations, almanac information or almost any kind of prognostication, with either local or national interest.

1. A Prophecie (of Merlin) concerning Hull in Yorkshire, 1642.

2. The Lord Merlin's Prophecy concerning the King of Scots, foretelling the strange and wonderful things that shall befall him in England. As also the time and manner of a dismal and fatall Battel (London, August 22, 1651).

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This was an old prophecy originally presented to Queen Elizabeth in 1582.

3. The Mad-merry Merlin; or the Black Almanack: comprising strange observations, and monthly prognostications in the ensuing year, 1654.⁹

4. Merlin Reviv'd, or an old Prophecy found in a Manuscript in Pontefract Castle in Yorkshire. (London 1681).

5. The mystery of Ambros Merlins, Standard-bearer, Wolf and last Boar of Cornwall, with sundry other misterious prophecys ... unfolded in the following treatise on the signification ... of that prodigious comet seen ... anno 1680, with the blazing star, 1682 ... written by a lover of his country's peace. (London 1683).

6. Catastrophe Mundi, or Merlin reviv'd, in a Discourse of Prophecies and Predictions, and their remarkable accomplishment; with Mr. Lilly's Hieroglyphics exactly cut. By a Learned Person (London 1683).

7. Merlin reviv'd, in a Discourse of Prophecies and Predictions, and their Remarkable accomplishment, with Mr. Lilly's Hieroglyphics, also a collection of all the Ancient Prophecies, touching the Grand Revolution like to happen in these latter Ages. (London 1683).

8. Merlini Anglici Ephemeris; or Astrological Judgments for the year 1685.

9. A famous Prediction of Merlin, the British wizard. Written above a thousand years ago, and relating to the year

1709. With explanatory notes by T. Philomath (1709).

(This, of course, was Swift's satirical attack on Partridge.)

10. Merlinus Liberatus. An Almanack for the year of our blessed Saviour's Incarnation, 1723, by John Partridge.¹⁰

11. Merlinus Liberatus. (London, 1753, 1761).

12. Merlin's Life and Prophecies ... His predictions relating to the late contest about ... Richmond Park. With some other events relating thereto, not yet come to pass, etc. (London, 1755).

13.. A Prophecy of Ill (This was a political satire) (London, 1762).

14. A Prophecy of Merlin, An heroic poem concerning the wonderful success of a project, now on foot, to make the River from the Severn to Stroud navigable. Translated from the original Latin, annexed with notes explanatory (London, 1776).

15. Merlinus Liberatus. An Almanack. By John Partridge [pseud.] (London 1819-1864).

16. The Philosophical Merlin: being the translation of a valuable manuscript, formerly in the possession of Napoleon Buonaparte ... enabling the reader to case the Nativity of himself ... without the aid of Tables ... or calculations. Part I (the second apparently never appeared) (London, 1822).

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17, Urania: or the Astrologer's Chronicle and Mystical Magazine. Edited by Merlinus Anglicus, jun. [R.C. Smith] (London, 1825).

In literature proper, as distinct from these pamphlets, the debasement of Merlin, in the popular mind at least, to nothing more than a useful name to attach to all kinds of prophetic quackery, can be clearly seen. For instance, Defoe, in A Journal of the Plague Year, describes the hysteria which surrounded the outbreak of the plague and comments that "The apprehensions of the people were likewise strangely increased by the error of the times; in which ... the people ... were more addicted to prophecies, and astrological conjurations, dreams, and old wives' tales, than ever they were before or since. Whether this unhappy temper was originally raised by the follies of some people who got money by it, that is to say, by printing predictions and prognostications, I know not; but certain it is, books frightened them terribly; such as Lilly's Almanack ... and the like,

"One mischief always introduces another. These terrors and apprehensions of the people led them into a thousand weak, foolish, and wicked things, which there wanted not a sort of people, really wicked, to encourage them to; and this was running about to fortune-tellers, cunning men and astrologers, ... to have their fortunes told them, their nativities calculated, and the like, and


this folly presently made the town swarm with a wicked generation of Pretenders to Magic, to the Black Art ... and this trade grew so open, and so generally practised, that it became common to have signs and inscriptions set up at doors; -- 'Here lives a Fortune-teller'; -- 'Here lives an Astrologer', -- 'Here you may have your Nativity calculated', -- and the like; and Friar Bacon's Brazen Head which was the usual sign of these people's dwellings, was to be seen in almost every street, or else the sign of Mother Shipton, or of Merlin's head, and the like.

"With what blind, absurd and ridiculous stuff, these Oracles of the Devil pleased and satisfied the people, I really know not."¹¹

I have quoted Defoe at some length as this passage shows very clearly that the noble Christian wizard whose gifts of historical prophecy Heywood had lauded only twenty-five years before the Great Plague, was, by the time Defoe wrote the Journal (1722), and obviously for some time before, most readily thought of in a context of trickery, and as a name representative of the misuse of magical arts to gull the uneducated and foolish. The same kind of suppositions about Merlin's role are suggested by a speech in Sir Aston Cockain's The Obstinate Lady, in which one character tells another who Merlin was; "He was an intricate prognosticator of firmamental eclipses, and vaticinated future occurents by the mysterious influences

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prophetic pamphlet form as a satirical weapon in a political dispute with an adversary who happened to be particularly prolific in that form, but now he was parodying political prophecies in general. The Famous Prediction was, said Swift, a sixteenth century translation of an "Original [which] is said to be of the famous Merlin, who lived about a thousand years ago", The 'translation' was printed in black-letter and an added air of credibility provided by the explanatory notes. After the prophecy and explanations Swift added some remarks which in themselves form a parody of contemporary attitudes and an ironical comment on the most common abuses which arose from the popular reliance on prophecies: the manipulation of obscure vaticinations to make them fit specific events, the unthinking adulation of the prophet and his art and the automatic acceptance of the printed word, just because it is of a certain antiquity. He says, "some of these Predictions are already fulfilled; and it is highly probable the rest may be in due time: And, I think, I have not forced the words, by my Explication into any other Sense than what they will naturally bear. If this be granted, I am sure it must also be allowed, that the Author, (whoever he were) was a Person of extraordinary Sagacity and that Astrology brought to such Perfection as this, is, by no Means, an Art to be despised; whatever Mr. Bickerstaff or other Merry Gentlemen are pleased to think. As to the Tradition of these Lines, having been writ in the



original by Merlin, I confess, I lay not much weight upon it. But it is enough to justify their Authority, that the Book from whence I have transcribed them, was printed 170 years ago, as appears by the Title-Page."¹⁸

Notes

¹R. F. Brinkley, Arthurian Legend in the Seventeenth Century, (Baltimore, 1932), p. 7.

²Brinkley, p.9.

³Campion, Masque at Lord Hays Marriage (1606).

⁴Brinkley, p.53.

⁵Miss Brinkley discussed these works in her chapters on the "Trojan and Saxon elements".

⁶Prose Merlin, ed. Mead, p.lxxvii.

⁷Ernest Jones, Geoffrey of Monmouth, 1640-1800, University of California Publications in English, Vol. V, No. 3, pp.357-441 (Berkeley, 1944), p.404.

⁸Mead, p.lxxviii ff.

⁹No reference to this in Mead, but see Brinkley, p.78.

¹⁰For descriptions of earlier numbers of Partridge's almanac, starting in 1680, see Edward Maynardier, The Arthur of the English Poets (Boston, 1907).

¹¹Daniel Defoe, A Journal of the Plague Year, The Bestseller Library, (London, 1959), pp.25, 30.

¹²Brinkley, p.79.

¹³J. Swift, Collected Works, Vol.II, ed. Herbert Davis (Oxford, 1957). For a discussion of the Partridge-Bickerstaff controversy see Davis's introduction to the Bickerstaff Papers.

¹⁴"Predictions for the Year, 1708", Swift, Works, Vol.II, pp.141-150.

¹⁵"The Accomplishment of the first of Mr. Bickerstaff's Predictions, Being an account of the death of Mr. Partridge the Almanack-maker", *ibid*, pp.153-155.

¹⁶"A Vindication of Isaac Bickerstaff, Esq.", *ibid*, pp.159-164.

¹⁷"A Famous Prediction of Merlin the British Wizard", *ibid*, pp.168-170.

¹⁸Prediction, p.150.

VII

THE WIZARD AS A DRAMATIC CHARACTER

1. Ben Jonson: "Speeches at Prince Henries Barriers"

A study of the use of Merlin in seventeenth and eighteenth century drama shows a degradation from his position as wizard, with all the romantic and political connotations gained from his relationship with Arthur, to little more than a buffoon in burlesque situations. While there is an obvious debasement in the kind of character who becomes known as Merlin there is also an increasing freedom in the way in which the character is employed. A completely comic figure of Merlin was perhaps only possible after the discrediting of Geoffrey and of the British myth during and after James' reign, although as we have seen there were already the seeds of comedy in Geoffrey's Merlin and in some of his later manifestations.

Just as the pamphleteers and almanac writers felt free to use the wizard's name without first establishing his credentials as the mentor of Arthur and infallible seer, so too the dramatists became increasingly unconcerned with the traditional paraphernalia of the Arthurian legend and used whichever appealed to them of the basic facets of the prophet's life and character, and embroidered freely on these, sometimes with delightful results, as in Rowley's play. However, the first, and rather minor, appearance of

Merlin in a dramatic presentation was as part of the early Stuart movement to connect the monarch with the glories of the British heritage. It was almost inevitable that Prince Henry should be connected with the Arthurian legends, for not only was he Prince of Wales, but he was conscious of himself in the role of young and chivalrous knight, and himself chose an Arthurian context for his exploits. We are told by Sir Charles Cornwallis, treasurer of the household, in The Life and Death of our late most incomparable and heroioue Prince Henry. Prince of Wales, that at sixteen "his Highnesse not onely for his own recreation but that the world might know, what a brave Prince they were likely to enjoy, under the name of Meliades, Lord of the Isles, (an ancient title due to the first borne of Scotland) did in his Name, by some appointed for the same of purpose, strangely attired, accompanied with Drummes and Trumpets in the Chamber of Presence, before the King and Queene, and in the presence of the whole Court, deliver a challenge to all Knights of Great Britaine".¹

Inigo Jones was paid £400 to superintend the arrangements at the tilting and Ben Jonson received £40 for his Speeches at Prince Henries Barriers.² As Cornwallis tells us, Henry had chosen the name Meliadus for himself from chivalrous romances. In the romances Meliadus is portrayed as the lover of the Lady of the Lake, and, as her favoured lover, he had access to the imprisoned Merlin,

who used him as a messenger to convey his prophetic messages. Jonson uses this traditional material and in the course of the speeches is able to compliment the Prince, and the King and Queen, recount the history of England and prophesy a prosperous future, and also, of course, provide a dramatic framework for the main business of the day, the tilt. As the speeches open "the Lady of the Lake (is) first discovered". She identifies herself:

Lest any yet should doubt, or might mistake
 What Nymph I am, behold the ample Lake
 Of which I am stild; and neere it Merlin's
 tomb,

Grave of his cunning, as of mine the wombe.(4-7)
 She continues with praise of the monarch who "aequall good and Great, wise, temperate, just and stout claimes Arthur's seat." And here, of course, Jonson is following the early Stuart tradition which saw James as in some way a re-incarnation of the glories of Arthur. The lady continues to praise the beauties and virtues of the court, and then mentions the one deficiency which she sees, which Jonson uses as a dramatic device to introduce Arthur, Merlin and Meliadus. The flaw in the fabric is that

... the house of Chivalrie ... decay'd

Or rather ruin'd seems. (31-34)

Arthur is "discovered as a Starre above" and, after inevitably remarking that

the times are now devolv'd

That Merlin's misticke propheties are absolv'd;

In Brittain's name, the union of this Ile, (74-76)

he tells the Lady of the Lake to bring forth the Knight
(Meliadus) that

he may restore

These ruin'd seats of vertue, and build more.(85)

Arthur also gives to the Lady a shield for Meliadus
"wherein is wrought the truth that he must follow". This
does not seem to be an echo of Merlin providing the young
Arthur with marvellous armour, as he does, for instance,
in Malory and Spenser but rather to be modelled on the
shield which Vulcan made for Aeneas, and which had inscribed
on it the triumphs of Italy and the Romans, just as the
history of Britain is written in Arthur's shield. But the
shield alone cannot provide Meliadus with all the wisdom
necessary for a young knight in his position and so Arthur
bids the Lady:

And for the other mysteries, here, awake
The learned Merlin; when thou shutst there,
Thou buriedst valure too, for letters reare
The deeds of honour high, and make them live.
If then thou seeke to restore prowess, give
His spirit freedome. (101-106)

and so she calls on Merlin to arise and begs forgiveness
for her deeds. Jonson is here the first to make use of

what might seem to be an obvious extension of the story. A fairy enchantment, resulting in a living but unnaturally prolonged sleep for the victim, is a common enough situation in folklore. And common, too, is the belief that at the right moment and with the right combination of propitious circumstances, the sleeper may be awakened. Arthur himself, it was believed, would return from Avalon, but more relevant in this context are the legends which place the sleeping Arthur in the Otherworld, usually in a cave or a hollow hill with an entrance accessible from this world. Both Loomis and E. K. Chambers describe several of these legends, and show that the expectation of Arthur's re-awakening has survived into the twentieth century.³ Most of the authors dealing with Merlin's enchantment had stressed his immortality and even allowed him to communicate with the outside world as a kind of disembodied voice from the tomb, but none, before Jonson, had taken the further step of arousing the wizard in the hour of his country's need.⁴ The pamphleteers had hinted at a resurrection of the prophet with the very common almanac titles 'Merlinus Liberatus' or 'Merlin Reviv'd'. Jarman and Glennie⁵ both describe Merlin's traditional burial place at Dummelzier, near the confluence of the brook Pausayl with the river Tweed, and they quote the old rhyme foretelling that

When Tweed and Pausayl join at Merlin's grave,
Scotland and England shall one monarch have.

This is said to have occurred at the accession of James VI of Scotland as James I of England. There is however apparently no popular expectation of Merlin's return.

Jonson uses the resurrected Merlin as a mouthpiece for compliments about Meliadus and to deliver a long speech in which he tells the young knight how he should

governe and give lawes

To peace no lesse than armes. His fate here draws
An empire with it, and describes each state

Preceding there, that he should imitate. (175-178)

Merlin then recounts to Meliadus, from the shield, the history of Britain ending with praise of "royal and mightie James".

Jonson had still to get to the real business of the day, which was the combat to which Meliadus had challenged all the knights. While Merlin was the obvious character to dwell on past glories and disseminate wisdom it was equally obvious that Chivalry, whose ruined house the Lady of the Lake had already lamented, should be aroused to call the Knights to the list. Accordingly Merlin announces that he will call on Chevalrie, in the name of Meliadus: Chevalrie, like Merlin, had been "Possess'd with sleepe, dead as a lethargie" in a cave, but he awakes and finally summons the knights. (383-385)

While Jonson's original treatment of the Merlin legend has some interest in a study of the history of that

legend, the probable reaction of the spectators at the Barriers in January 1610 has been suggested by Jonson's editors: "Merlin's long summary of English history has more solidity than grace, and can have done little to conciliate the attention of spectators impatient for the Tilt." (Works, II, 284) They comment also that "the purely Arthurian parts are imperfectly vitalized", and this may reflect Jonson's attitude to Merlin and the Arthurian knights: when commissioned to compliment "Meliadus" and his father the Arthurian legends might seem an unavoidable medium, but in his Execration upon Vulcan we find among things to be consigned to the fire

The whole summe
Of errant Knight-hood, with their Dames, and
Dwarfes,
Their charmed Boates, and their enchanted Wharfes,
The Tristrams, Lanc'lots, Turpins and the Peers,
All the madde Rolands, and sweet Oliveers;
To Merlins marvailles, and his Caballs losse
With the Chimaera of the Rosie-Crosse. (VIII, 205,
vs 66-72)

In The New Inn Arthur and his knights are mentioned only to be condemned as

publique Nothings
Abortives of the fabulous, darke Cloyster,
Sent out to poison courts, and infest manners.
(I, vi, 125-127)

Jonson, then, in his use of Merlin is representative of early seventeenth century attitudes: he sees the obvious pseudo-historical connection between Arthur and James and will use it when necessary, but by 1629, the date of The New Inn, shared his more sceptical contemporaries' distrust of the productions of the "fabulous, darke cloyster".

2. William Rowley: "The Birth of Merlin"

The first full length drama with Merlin as a central character was The Birth of Merlin. or. The Child Hath found his Father.⁶ The date of composition of this play is not known with any certainty, but it was probably about 1620. On the title page of the first, and only, edition (1662) it is ascribed to William Shakespeare and William Rowley. I cannot now go into the fascinating question of the authorship of this play, nor of the problems of editing it presents.⁷ The play is however worthy of a fairly detailed examination both on its own merits and, of course, for its place in the development of the figure of Merlin in English literature. A preliminary survey of the dramatis personae will give some indications of how the main lines of the plot are going to develop. The noble characters are predominantly British; there are two Kings, Aurelius and Vortiger, and Aurelius' brother, the Prince, Uter Pendragon. The Earls of Chester, Gloster and Cornwall, and two noblemen, Tocllo and Oswald, also support the

British cause against the Saxons. The Saxon army is represented only by Ostorius, the general, and Octa, a nobleman, and two nameless Saxon lords. Each side has some help from supernatural powers: The British have Anselme, the hermit, and the Saxons, Proximus, a magician. But the drama is not concerned only with the struggle for the domination of Britain by the Saxon or British forces. One sub-plot follows the love-affairs of Constantia and Modestia, Donobert's daughters, and these affairs will be complicated by Modestia's extreme reluctance to wed and by Aurelius' infatuation for Artesia, the Saxon general's sister. The main comic interest is supplied by the search of Joan Goe-too't, the mother of Merlin, for a father for her child. She is aided in her quest by her brother the clown. Merlin and his father, the Devil, with Lucina, Queen of the Shades, and a little Antick Spirit complete the main characters and will represent between them a wide range of magical acts from crude practical jokes to elevated prophecy.

The drama is however of more subtlety, the plots considerably more complicated and the characters more carefully drawn than a cursory inspection of the names and affiliations of the characters might suggest. The play opens with the betrothal of Constantia and Cadoc, the Earl of Cornwall. The Duke of Gloster also makes suit to Donobert for the hand of Donobert's other daughter, Modestia, for his son, Edwyn. Modestia resists his advances and later,

when she and Edwyn are left alone, tells him of her resolution to live as a virgin and lead a life dedicated to religion:

here's something tells me that these best of
 creatures,
 These models of the world, weak man and woman,
 Should have their souls, their making, life
 and being
 To some more excellent use.⁸

Modestia's name and behaviour suggest immediately an ironical contrast with Joan Goe-too't; where the noble woman is concerned with the preservation of her virginity and honour, Joan's name suggests a free acceptance of promiscuity, and her willingness to accept anyone as the father of her child implies that she has quite a different concept of honour. The contrast is not only between Joan and Modestia as the norm of virtue, but also between mother and child. The dignity and wisdom of the infant Merlin again contrasts strongly with, and is emphasized by, the bawdy, burlesque scenes in which his mother is involved.

In the first scene of the play while Modestia is arguing with Edwyn, the entrance of another character who will act as a foil for Merlin is prepared for. Toelio announces that the enemy desire a parley and also that "a man of rare esteem for holyness, a reverent Hermit, that by miracle not only saved our army, but without aid of man o'er threw the Pagan Host" has arrived at court. This

hermit, Anselme, is thus showing the qualities in battle against the Saxons with which Merlin is usually endowed; he shares, too, Merlin's gift of prophecy, as we learn when Teolio wishes that the hermit's power could find for them the Prince who has been lost in the forest. Until the birth of Merlin in Act III it is, in fact, the Hermit who demonstrates his magic arts in competition with the Saxon Wizard, prophesies doom for Aurelius if he persists in his determination to marry Artesia and acts as a counsellor for Modestia: after Merlin's birth, however, the Hermit disappears and Merlin takes his traditional place at the ruins of Vortiger's castle, and continues to display his gifts of magic and prophecy until the end of the play.

One of the themes developed during the early scenes of the play is the folly of trusting in fair promises from the enemy. At Aurelius' first entrance we find him asking for tidings of his brother and also reading a message from the hermit, which, while confirming the miraculous victory over the Saxons, is also a warning, "As you respect your safety, limit not that only power that hath protected you, trust not an open enemy too far;

He's yet a looser, and knows you have won,

Mischiefs not ended are but then begun.

Anselme the Hermit." Donobert and Gloster also warn Aurelius against trusting the word of the Saxons, as the Saxon ambassadors are announced and Artesia enters with the Saxon

lords. Artesia sues for peace on behalf of her brother, Ostorius, and Aurelius, going immediately beyond any mere trust in the Saxons, falls helplessly in love with her. The King announces his intention to marry Artesia and make peace with the Saxons.

"Most fair Artesia" he says:

Send the East Angles King this happy news,
That thou with me hast made a league forever,
And added to his state a friend and brother.

The British nobles advise the King to go no further with this match, and the Hermit enters and speaks even more strongly:

Idolaters, get hence; fond King, let go,
Thou hug'st thy ruine, and thy Countries woe.

After some prophesies of disaster for the King if he marries Artesia, the act ends with Modestia unfolding to the Hermit her desire to lead a holy, virtuous life and renounce earthly joys. Thus the whole first act passes without any mention of the ostensible subject of the play, the birth of Merlin and his meeting with his father. The characters of Modestia and the Hermit are, however, in some way a preparation for Joan and Merlin, the one because of the ironic contrasts established and the other because of the similarity of his role to that of Merlin. The mention of the lost Prince, Uther Pendragon, is the first hint of the link that will be established in Act II between the

'low', comic characters and the court, and will be developed throughout the play until the closing scenes when the future of Uther's line is prophesied by Joan's son.

Act II opens with the entry of the "Clown, and his sister great with child," She is searching for the father of her child and tells her brother, "Alas, I know not the gentleman's name brother, I met him in these woods, the last great hunting. He was so kind and proffered me so much, as I had not the heart to ask him more ... He had most rich attire, a fair hat and feather, a gilt sword and most excellent hangers." The Clown's reply "A pox on his hangers, would he had been gelt for his labour" is typical of the bawdy humour in which he and Joan indulge before the birth of the child, but she gains noticeably in dignity after contact with her son. Rowley has made some obvious changes in the legend of Merlin's conception: he has abandoned the innocent maiden duped by an incubus in favour of a cheerfully debauched girl who will give her favours to any well-dressed and generous young man. Rowley increases the comic effect of Joan's hunt for the child's father by making her completely unaware of the true, devilish nature of her lover. Parallels can be established here between Aurelius's blind infatuation for Artesia and Joan's affair with the devil: Aurelius could no more suspect the treachery of the Saxon lady than Joan could see the horns and hooves which are immediately visible to the audience when

the devil first enters "in man's habit, richly attir'd,
his feet and his head horrid." That Joan can mistake,
however wilfully, the nobles for her devil-lover is a
comment not only on her stupidity and promiscuity, but also
perhaps on the qualities of the nobles; perhaps their
fair appearance should be as suspect as the devil's?
These elements seem to be a further exploration of the
theme already commented on in Act I, that is, the problem
of distinguishing appearance from reality, of recognizing
the wolf in sheep's clothing and being, at least, prepared
to admit that the sheepskin may contain a wolf.

After Joan has described her lover, the clown
reluctantly agrees to help her search for him. As they
wander through the forest they come across the lost prince,
Uter, and overhear his lovesick musings about the unknown
beauty:

Oh my thoughts are lost for ever in amazement,
Could I but meet a man to tell her beauties,
These trees would bend their tops to kiss the air,
That from my lips should give her praises up.

The clown takes advantage of this declaration to claim Uter
as the first in the series of supposed fathers for Joan's
child. "Give me thy hand sister. The child has found his
father. This is he sure as I am a man, had I been a woman
these kind words would have won me," and he advances on
Uter, commanding, "most honest and fleshly minded Gentleman,

give me your hand, sir." The prince, of course, is angry at being accosted in this way and denies all knowledge of Joan and the child. Then in a scene of farcical violence Uthar beats Joan. In the middle of her screams of protest, Tocllo and Oswald enter, at last finding their prince, but before they can lead him away, they in their turn become embroiled with Joan, who tries unsuccessfully to make each of them admit fathering the child. As the nobles and the prince leave to return to the court, Joan follows Tocllo with a comic declaration of despair and hope.

The action then returns to the court and until the beginning of Act III once more focusses on the affairs of Aurelius. First, to the accompaniment of loud music the marriage of Artesia and Aurelius is suggested in dumb show. The stage direction reads "enter two with the sword and mace, Cador, Edwin, Two Bishops, Aurelius, Ostorius leading Artesia crowned, Constantia, Modestia, Proximus a Magician, Donobert, Gloster, Oswald, Tocllo, all pass over the stage." The union of Saxon and British symbolized by this procession, and the consequent uneasiness of the British, forms the subject of the rest of the act. Donobert and Gloster declare their distress at the marriage, and Edoll, the King's general, warns of the terrible consequences and swears that he will fight, if necessary, "gainst all the devils in hell to guard my country." The irony of this remark becomes evident later when the devil does become involved in the

struggle; his position is, however, ambivalent, for at one point he foretells the role of his son in the wars against the Saxons, which seems to suggest that the 'devils in hell' are undeclared allies rather than enemies of the British. But later, in his familiar role of mankind's arch enemy, he is banished by Merlin.

After the general's oath Aurelius returns with Artesia and calls upon everyone to drink a pledge to his new queen. The hermit refuses and a discussion develops about his part in the last battle. Here again the hermit seems to share the qualities of the as yet unborn Merlin, and the arguments presented about the origins of his powers would be equally relevant if applied to Merlin. The Saxon view, expressed by Octa, is that "'Twas magick, hell bred magick, did it Sir," and Aurelius counters with "Sure you are deceived, it was the hand of heaven, that in his virtue gave us a victory." In an attempt to demonstrate the powers of the hermit a contest in the magic arts is arranged between him and Proximus, the Saxon magician. Proximus conjures Hector and Achilles and a battle between spirit armies; the stage direction continues "and after some charges, the Hermit steps between them, at which seeming, amaz's the spirits, and tremble," and they are forced to retire.

At this point Tocllo enters to announce that Aurelius's brother is still living. The first climax of

the play occurs when Uther sees Artesia, and declares that she is the woman for whose love he had been languishing in the forest. Aurelius presents his bride to his brother and retires with her. Rowley returns to his pervasive theme of a beautiful appearance concealing a suspect reality in the final incident of this act. Uther, left alone, is convincing himself that he must give up all thoughts of Artesia when a gentlewoman enters bearing a jewel in the shape of a crab, which comes to the prince from Artesia. Uther interprets the gift as an invitation and immediately questions the new queen's motives,

I will confer with her, and if I finde
Lust hath given life to envy in her minde,
I may prevent the danger.

He fears that "it may be a practice 'twixt themselves [i.e. the Saxons], to expel the Brittaines and ensure the state through our destruction," and on this ominous note the second act ends.

The third act alternates comic and serious scenes and culminates in the birth of Merlin, on which occasion a whole range of moods from farce to high seriousness is briefly introduced and mingled with no sense of incongruity. The act opens with the clown and his sister, who, in their pursuit of Toellic, have arrived at the court and are still seeking her lover. They overhear Donobert, Cador, Edwyn and Toellic discussing the marriages of Constantia and

Hodestia, and we learn that Donobert is still determined that Hodestia shall marry Edwyn. The nobles go, leaving Edwyn with the clown, who tries hopefully but with a complete lack of success to enlist Edwyn as the father of the child.

Clown. "What do you think of my sister?"

Edwyn. "Why, I think if she ne're had a husband,
she's a whore, and thou a fool, farewell."

Exit Edwyn

This cold rebuff has no effect on the thick-skinned clown, who plans to go to the 'Great Wedding' to look for a husband for Joan. But before he can get to the marriage celebrations the clown is involved in an episode which combines the stock situation of the simpleton being gulled by a courtier of superior sophistication with a parody of the chivalrous code. The clown tells his troubles to Sir Nicodemus Nothing, a courtier, who immediately promises help, "I am bound by mine orders to help distressed Ladies, and can there be a greater injury to a woman with child, than to lack a father for it?" The clown, however, finds himself tricked out of a 'legal fee' and abandoned by the helpful courtier.

Then, unexpectedly, the search is over -- "Enter the Devil in man's habit, richly attir'd, his feet and his head horrid." Joan's immediate recognition of the devil as the father of her child provides a fine comic climax to

the quest. It pricks all the clown's pretensions to a noble husband for his sister and underlines the fact that Joan would give herself to anyone, even the devil, if he is sufficiently rich and attractive, without recognizing, or even questioning, his true nature. An added element of farcical bewilderment is produced by the clown's obvious inability to see the creature to whom his sister is talking. After Joan's first cry "Ha, 'tis he, stay brother, dear brother stay," the clown's initial mystification increases, while his sister listens to prophetic words of comfort from the devil,

But be of comfort,

Whilst men do breathe, and Britain's name be known
The fatal fruit thou bear'st within thy womb
Shall here be famous till the day of doom.

Joan runs out after the devil, determined not to lose this elusive lover now she has found him, and the clown follows her.

As an immediate contrast to the promiscuity of Joan and her obvious fruitfulness, the next scene shows Modestia making vows before the hermit binding her to a life of holy virginity. Edwyn continues his unsuccessful attempts to change her intentions, and music, heralding the marriage procession of Constantia and Cadon, is heard. Once again Modestia finds herself being persuaded to marry, this time by her sister and the rest of the wedding party.

An unexpected twist in the action is introduced when Constantia too, won over by Modestia's arguments, expresses with dignity and composure her final rejection of the unnecessary trappings of our transitory lives,

I have no father, friend, no husband now,
 All are but borrowed robes, in which we masque
 To waste and spend the time, when all our life
 Is but one good between two Ague-days,
 Which from the first, e'er we have time to praise,
 A second fever takes us.

Rowley has now presented in close dramatic juxtaposition, three states possible to women: a completely amoral approach to promiscuity and fertility is presented in the farcical scenes in which Joan Goe-too't seeks a father for her child; the sexual relationship sanctified by the marriage vows is exemplified by Constantia's original intentions; and finally Modestia presents the opposite extreme to Joan in her adherence to holy virginity, and in this allegiance she is joined by Constantia. The names of the three women present symbolically their various attitudes, and it is a central comic paradox of this play that neither constancy nor modesty are involved in the birth of Merlin. By the end of Act V Merlin is the dominant character, and his powers are derived from very unpromising parentage, the devil and Joan Goe-too't, and also, as we shall see, from his god-mother, who is no good fairy, but Lucina,

Queen of the Shades. Once again the expectations set up by superficial appearances are reversed by reality, however this time Rowley has presented the other face of the coin: instead of beauty masking corruption, we now see good emerging from evil. This deeply paradoxical core of the play is not, I think, explicitly expressed during the development of the various strands of the plot, but can nevertheless be seen as a meaningful approach to Rowley's use of Merlin.

After Constantia's statement that she is going to cut herself off from all human relationships, Donobert once again sends for the hermit to seek his advice, and the marriage procession and the determined virgins depart, leaving the stage free for the devil and the climactic moment of Merlin's birth. The devil calls on Lucina and the three Fates for their assistance,

Rise, rise to aid this birth prodigious
Thanks Hecate, hail sister to the gods,
There lies your way, haste with the Fates,
and help,

Give quick dispatch unto her labouring throws,
To bring this mixture of infernal seed,
To humane being, (exit Fates)
And to beguile her pains, till back you come
Anticks shall dance, and Musick fill the room.

Rowley's use of the devil as Merlin's father is traditional,⁹ but as we have seen, his treatment of the mother is his own, as is his introduction of Hecate. He equates Hecate with Lucina, the Roman goddess of child-birth, and in the list of dramatis personae she appears as 'Lucina, Queen of the Shades'. Lucina's speech at the birth is appropriate to her multiple role of witch, guardian of child-birth and over-seer of demons; this child, of course, will have none of his father's demonic qualities and Lucina prophesies his future greatness,

In honour of this childe, the Fates shall bring
 All their assisting powers of knowledge, Arts,
 Learning, wisdom, all the hidden part
 Of all-admiring Prophecy, to fore-see
 The events of times to come. His Art shall stand
 A wall of brass to guard the Brittain land,
 Even from this minute, all his Arts appears
 Manlike in Judgement, Person, State and years,
 Upon his brest the Fates have fixt his name,
 And since his birthplace was this forrest here
 They now have nam'd him Merlin Silvester.

Devil And Merlin's name in Brittain shall live
 Whilst men inhabit here, or Fates can give
 Power to amazing wonder, envy shall weep,
 And mischief sit and shake her ebbone wings
 Whilst all the world of Merlin's magic sings.

The powers ascribed to Merlin and the permanence of his fame are completely traditional. It is interesting to note that the wall of brass of The Faerie Queen and Poly-Olbion, has now become a metaphorical equivalent for all the wizard's art and that Rowley has been able, without any incongruity, to work the old name, Merlin Silvester, into his new handling of the myth. The child's amazing precocity, "Even from this minute ... manlike in judgement, person, state and years" is also traditional; this Rowley could use to combine a visually comic effect with the serious and dignified speeches of Merlin at his first appearance. The audience has been prepared for the return of the newly delivered mother and for a first sight of her child, but unless they have grasped all the implications of Lucina's speech they will be as amazed as the clown at the sight of Joan, accompanied by a man-child deep in a book. Merlin explains to Joan that he must read to

sound the depth of Arts, of Learning, Wisdom, Knowledge.

Joan, Oh my dear, dear son, those studies fits thee
when thou art a man.

Merlin, Why mother, I can be but half a man at best
And that is your mortality, the rest
In me is spirit. 'Tis not meat, nor time,
That gives this growth and bigness, no, my years
Shall be more strange than yet my birth appears.

This consciousness of his own powers and solemn acceptance

of them had been hinted at in the behaviour of Merlin at Aurelius's court in Layamon's Brut, and in passages in Arthur and Merlin and Malory.¹⁰ In the latter works are early attempts at a rounded characterization of Merlin, but Rowley is the first English author to present the wizard as a convincing dramatic character of some depth. We find for instance that this precocious child is not only concerned to acquire knowledge and wisdom as fast as possible, but is also able to converse with the clown in terms that he will understand.

The clown's first reaction to his nephew provides the first of many shifts of tone in the scenes in which Merlin appears: he, of course, can see no further than the physical peculiarities of this "baby", and describes them with his usual vulgarity, "This is worse than Tom Thumb, that let a fart in his mother's belly, a child to speak, eat and go the first hour of his birth. Nay, such a baby as had need of a barber before he was born too; why, sister, this is monstrous and shames all our kindred." Joan, however, seems to have lost much of her old vulgarity, even after such a short exposure to her son, and defends him in a manner which will have become completely her own by the end of the play;

That thus 'gainst nature and our common births,
He comes thus furnish't to salute the world,
Is power of Fates, and gift of his great father,

Clown. Why, of what profession is your father Sir?

Merlin. He keeps a Hot-house 'ith' Low Countries;
will you see him, Sir?

Clown. See him? Why sister, has the child found his
father?

Merlin. Yes, and I'll fetch him, Uncle. Exit.

When Merlin returns with the devil, the clown does not realize with whom he is dealing, and there is another comic scene depending for its effect, as did the earlier one with the 'invisible' devil, on the clown's ignorance and stupidity and the incongruity of his reactions when facing the devil, who would be expected to inspire in him a horrified and superstitious fear. Then Rowley again turns his attention to the wonders of Merlin and away from the clown's discomfiture, and the devil outlines what is to be the child's immediate role in British history,

No matter whence we do derive our name,
All Brittany shall ring of Merlin's fame,
And wonder at his acts. Go hence to Wales
There live a while; there Vortiger the King
Builds castles and strongholds, which cannot
stand

Unless supported by young Merlin's hand.
There shall thy fame begin, wars are a-breeding,
The Saxons practice treason, yet unseen,
Which shortly shall break out; Fair love,
farewell,

Dear son and brother, here must I leave you all

Yet still I will be near at Merlin's call. Exit.

From this point on, Rowley interweaves the traditional legends of Merlin's relationships with Vortiger, Aurelius and Uther, with the comic sub-plot involving the clown, and with the more serious history of the treason of the Saxons and the affairs of Modestia, Constantia and the British nobles.

As a farcical anti-climax to the devil's prophecies about his son, the clown finally, and triumphantly, realizes his 'brother's' identity; "Well, I do most horribly begin to suspect my kindred, this brother in law of mine is the Devil sure, and though he hide his horns with his hat and feather, I spi'd his cloven foot for all his cunning." Rowley then returns to the theme of treason and we find Ostorius, Octa and Proximus plotting to overthrow the "Brittains." Uther's earlier doubts of Artesia's integrity are seen to be quite justified in the scene which follows. Artesia attempts to force Prince Uther into a situation in which she could call Aurelius and announce that he has been betrayed by his brother. Finally he trusts her, embraces her and she calls "Treason"; Ostorius and Octa enter and attack Uther, and are followed almost immediately by Aurelius and the British nobles. Artesia's accusations of Uther, and her manipulation of the British, finally result in Aurelius declaring his support for the Saxons and leaving with them.

The British, led by Edwyn, then decide to march to Wales and defeat Vortiger, before he too can join forces with the Saxons. After the devil's advice to Merlin that he should go to Vortiger in Wales and Edwyn's decision, it is now becoming clear where and how the two main plots will be combined.

Act IV opens with a scene of delightful slap-stick comedy, in which once again the clown is the butt of the humour as Merlin and 'a little antick spirit' tease and torment him with tricks which include the magical removal of all the coins from his pockets. As we have seen Merlin has already been directed by the devil to go to Vortiger in Wales, but a fuller exposition of the situation seems to be necessary, and this Merlin himself gives, on the pretext that he knows that the clown, "in hope of gain", wants him to join all the druids, wizards and magicians who have been summoned,

To calculate the strange and fear'd event
Of his prodigious castle now in building,
Where all the labors of the painful day,
Are ruin'd still i' th' night;

And to this place you would have me go.

And he goes on to explain the dangers to himself, were he to go: "Nay, Uncle, you overslip my dangers; the Prophecies and all the cunning wizards, have certified the King, that this his castle can never stand, till the Foundation's

laid with mortar temper'd with the fatal blood of such a child, whose father was no mortal." This account re-tells the well established legend of Vortiger's castle, and Rowley continues the dramatization of traditional material with the entry of two gentlemen, seeking "the fiend begotten child". From this point until the end of the play Rowley gradually abandons his own invented plot and characters (although these, too, of course, have their roots in the chronicle accounts of the struggles between treacherous Saxons and valorous British), in favour of a much closer adherence to the traditional story of Merlin, Vortigern and Merlin's prophecies, with some interesting additions or deviations of his own.

When the two gentlemen find Merlin, the clown, alarmed, goes to fetch Joan. Meanwhile Vortiger himself arrives; he is unaware of Aurelius's new allegiance and is awaiting the aid of the Saxons, Ostorius and Oota, in the battle he expects with Uter and Aurelius, but meanwhile he is frustrated and hindered by his failure to erect his castle. Joan and Merlin are brought before him, and he questions Joan. Merlin's mother's defence and explanation of her actions is first found in English literature in Layamon, where the child's mother is fetched from 'ane hays munstre' to appear before Vortigern, and she tells him that she saw in her sleep

tha faeirest thing that was iboren

Swulc it weore a muchel cniht

Al of golde idiht. (11, p. 234, 3-6)

Joan tells Vortigern that "a seeming fair young man appear'd unto me", and Rowley's stress on "seeming" marks his introduction of a greater subtlety into the story, for he is relating the seduction of Joan once more to his theme of the unreliability of outward appearances. The tradition of the mother's appearance before the King was continued after Layamon by the chroniclers, for instance Robert of Gloucester, but in Arthur and Merlin,¹¹ the prose Merlin¹² and A Lytel Tretys¹³ she appears before a Justice. Selden in his notes to Poly-Olbion does not explicitly accept either tradition, but quotes an "antique passage of him", which describes the messengers from Vortigern who find the child and are told that

is moder an Kings doughter was of thulke lond

And woned at S. Petres in a nonnerie there.

Selden continues "His mother (a Nun, daughter of Pubidius K. of Mathraual, and cald Matilda, as by Poetical authority onely I finde justifiable) and he being brought to the King she colours it in these words:

-- 'whanne ich ofte was

In chambre mid mine fellowes, there come to me bicas

A swithe vair man mid alle, and hi clupt me wel

softe,

And semblance made vair ynou, and cust me wel ofte,'

And tells on the story which should follow so kind a preface. But enough of this." (Illustrations to Song V) This version, so impatiently dismissed by Selden, is a return to the earlier tradition of the mother's appearance before Vortigern, rather than before a judge, and must have been known to Rowley either in some such version as Selden quotes, or through oral tradition. Heywood, writing after Rowley, also tells how the child and his mother are brought before the King, where she tells of the "beautiful young man [who] had many times appeared unto her, seeming to court her with no common affection." (p.20) Rowley's subtle amplification of the old material can best be demonstrated by quoting Joan's speech to Vortigern, after Merlin has advised her to speak freely,

In pride of blood and beauty I did live,
 My glass the altar was, my face the idol ...
 In midst of this most leaprous disease
 A seeming fair young man appear'd unto me
 In all things suiting my aspiring pride,
 And with him brought along a conquering power,
 To which my frailty yielded,
 From whose embrace this issue came,
 What more he is, I know not.

Joan has now become a penitent, recognizing in her "pride of blood and beauty" a "leaprous disease", which blinded her to the true nature of the "seeming fair young man."

Her earlier unthinking acceptance of the gentleman, who "was so kinde,... [and] had most rich attire" is now reconsidered in light of her new self-knowledge, and she understands that his attractions were precisely those which would tempt her "aspiring pride" and so ensure her downfall. If there seem to be inconsistencies between the new Joan and the clown's companion in the first acts, these can perhaps be explained by Rowley's attempt to show the ennobling effect of Merlin's presence and as a further exploration of the theme of "seeming fair": Joan's false standards provide at least a partial explanation of how evil can be so blindly accepted as good.

After Joan's explanations to Vortiger, Proximus, the Saxon wizard, explains that it was at his instigation that Vortiger sought Merlin. Proximus has been humiliated once by the hermit but his final downfall and the defeat of the Saxon magic comes at the hands of Merlin, who says to him,

Hast thou such leisure to enquire my Fate,
And let thine own hang careless over thee?
Knows't thou what pendelous mischief rooves
thy head,

How fatal and how sudden? ...
There's not a minutes time 'twixt thee and
thy death."

S.D. A stone falls and kills Proximus.

This incident appears to be Rowley's own addition to the story, but it is reminiscent of the many occasions in earlier versions in which Merlin foretells the death of various people, often, as here, remarking on the irony of their preoccupation with other affairs when their own deaths are so close.¹⁴

Merlin then turns his attention to Vortiger and promises that

Merlin will show the fatal cause that keeps
Your fatal castle down and hinders your
proceedings,
Stand there, and by an apparition see
The labour and end of all your destiny.

The following stage direction for the "apparition" reads "Thunder and lightning, 2 Dragons appear, a white and a red, they fight awhile and pause ... fight agen, and the white dragon drives off the red." Rowley has omitted, probably as being too tedious for dramatic presentation, the excavations which reveal the pool, the vases and the two sleeping dragons, but he does, of course, include Merlin's explanation of the tokens. "The Vanquisht Red, is Sir, your dreadful Emblem," and the white represents the Saxons, who, brought in by Vortiger, now plan "to wound your bosom, not embrace it, and with an utter extirpation to rout the Brittains out, and plant the English." Merlin warns also that Uter is coming to avenge the death of Constantine, his

brother. The next few scenes follow the typical pattern of battle sequences in the work of Shakespeare and his contemporaries: Edol and Uter refuse to parley with Uter, then "Alarum, Enter Edol driving all Vortiger's force before him", and "Enter Prince Uter pursuing Vortiger." Various fights ensue, and then a Blazing Star appears. "Flourish Tromp. Enter Prince Uter, Edol, Cador, Edwin etc. and Soldiers." This blazing star, as the Prince describes it, is the traditional portent of the earlier legends;

Prince. Look Edol,

Still this fiery exhalation shoots
His frightful torpors on the amazed world,
See in the beam that 'bout his flaming ring
A dragon's head appears, from out whose mouth
Two flaming flakes of fire, stretch East and West.

Edol. And see from forth the body of the star,
Seven smaller blazing streams directly point
On this affrighted kingdom.

Merlin is asked to explain this wonderful sight and he tells of the "fiery fall of Vortiger" and that Aurelius has been poisoned at Winchester by the Saxons; this latter incident adds to the growing number of examples in the play of a misplaced trust. Merlin further explains that the dragon's head represents Uter, and the two fires to east and west, his son and daughter. The speech which follows, in which

Merlin prophesies to Uter the glories of his son, both in battle and at the court, is a model of compression, and suggests in a short space most of the major exploits of Arthur. Howley is here trying to present in dramatic form the materials of the prophetic histories of Britain, and in fact after the appearance of the portents there was very little more he could do to dramatize the material without writing an extremely long and tedious history play. Merlin's speech would not be out of place in many of the chronicles which he mentions,

But of your son, thus Fate and Merlin tells,
All after times shall fill their chronicles
With fame of his renown, whose warlike sword
Shall pass through fertile France and Germany,
Nor shall his conjuring foot be forc'd to stand
Till Rome's Imperial wreath hath crown'd his fame,
With Monarch of the West, from whose seven hills
With conquest and contributory Kings,
He back returns to enlarge the Brittain bounds,
His heraldry adorned with thirteen crowns...
He to the world shall add another worthy
And as a loadstone for his prowess, draw
A train of Marshal lovers to his court:
It shall be then the best of Knight-hood's honour
At Winchester to fill his castle hall
And at his Royal Table sit and feast

In warlike orders, all their arms round hurl'd,
As if they meant to circumscribe the world.

The act concludes with Merlin vowing allegiance to Uther, "My service shall be faithful to your person, and all my studies for my Countries safety." After this rather static conclusion to the fourth act and its heavy reliance on the traditional materials, Rowley turns his attention again to the trio of devil, Joan and Merlin, and works up to an unexpected and very satisfying climax which is entirely his own.

The act opens with the entry of Joan, who is terrified and attempting to resist the importunities of the devil. He points out to her that her connection with him should not be a cause of fear and shame, for,

There is a pride which thou hast won by me
The mother of a fame shall never die.
Kings shall have need of written chronicles
To keep their names alive, but Merlin none.
Age to ages shall like Sabalists
Report the wonders of his name and glory
While there are tongues to tell his story.

However, this faith in the undying glory of his son and recognition of his qualities will soon prove ironically inadequate in the face of that son's avenging fury. For the time being however the devil appears to have the upper hand; he calls on a spirit to remove Joan from Britain

but when her cry for help is answered by Merlin, the spirit hastily departs. The ensuing dialogue suggests that the reality of Merlin's presence is more than the devil had bargained for,

Devil. Ha! What's he?

Merlin. The child hath found his father, do you not know me?

Devil. Merlin!

There follows one of the most carefully thought out statements in literature of Merlin's paradoxical relationship with the Devil:

Joan. Oh, help me gentle son.

Merlin. Fear not, they shall not hurt you.

Devil. Reliev's't thou her to disobey thy father?

Merlin. Obedience is no lesson in your school,
Nature and kind, to her commands my duty,
The part that you begot was against kind,
So all I owe to you is to be unkind.

The devil threatens Merlin "Ile blast thee, slave, to death and on this rock stick thee an eternal monument," but Merlin's power is greater: good must overcome and evil be vanquished. In Merlin's speech the devil is not only a fair seeming young man with evil purposes, but all the horror surrounding the incubus in medieval and Elizabethan literature is introduced. He becomes, too, the serpent of the Old Testament through whose beguilement mankind fell,

and a denizen of the fires of hell;

Ha, ha, thy power's too weak. What art thou devil
 But an inferior lustful incubus,
 Taking advantage of the wanton flesh,
 Wherewith thou dost beguile the ignorant?
 Put off the form of thy humanity
 And crawl upon thy speckled belly, serpent
 Or I'll unclasp the jaws of Acharon,
 And fix thee ever in the local fire.

The punishment which Merlin inflicts on the devil is to enclose him in the rock, symbolically suggesting perhaps the impotence of evil in the face of good. I am not certain whether Rowley meant his audience to remember that it was ultimately Merlin's fate to be enclosed in a rock by a woman who had learnt her magical powers from him, just as he derived his supernatural qualities from his parentage. Whatever the author's intention, for those who know the complete legend the ironical echoes are inescapably present. In deciding the fate of Merlin's mother, Rowley again gives a new and unexpected twist to another common element of the Merlin legends. The wizard tells his mother that he must go to aid Pendragon and that she should retire to a solitary place

call'd Merlin's Bower

There shall you dwell with solitary sighs,
 With groans and passions your companions,

To weep away this flesh you have offended with
 And leave all bare unto your aierial soul,
 And when you die I will erect a Monument
 Upon the verdant plains of Salisbury.
 No king shall have so high a sepulchre
 With pendulous stones that I will hang by art,
 Where neither lime nor mortar shalbe used
 A dark enigma to thy memory,
 For none shall have the power to number them
 A place that I will hallow for your rest,
 Where no night-hag shall walk, nor ware-wolf tread
 Where Merlin's mother shall be sepulcher'd.

The penitential purging of the sins of the flesh which
 Merlin here suggests for his mother is reminiscent of her
 retirement to a nunnery in earlier versions of the story;
 here however her life is to be solitary and in Merlin's
 Bower, which does not suggest a specifically Christian
 setting. The greatest change however comes when he announces
 that Stonehenge will be raised as both sepulchre and monu-
 ment for his mother. Stonehenge had previously been
 explained as the giant's ring, brought from Ireland by
 Merlin's magic and set up on Salisbury plain as a monument
 to the men who fell by Hengests' treachery.¹⁵ Rowley does
 not suggest that the stones will be brought from abroad;
 he is more concerned with the fact that this, as 'a dark
 enigma', a vast work made of pendulous stones in whose

construction 'neither lime nor mortar shall be used,' will be a fitting monument from the hands of the greatest wizard. Merlin's mother, because she is his mother and because before her death she will be purged of all evil, will be worthy of nothing less than this hallowed resting place, where no manifestation of evil or black-magic can intrude. Here Rowley completes the cycle of Joan's transformation from bawdy unselfconscious wanderer in the woods and blind partner of the devil's lust to a penitent recluse. But the central paradox is still maintained, that it was from her moment of greatest abandonment to evil that Merlin, the strongest power of good in the play, resulted. And, of course, it is through Merlin's intervention in her life that this transformation can take place. She has now ceased to be a foil for Modestia and Constantia and has joined them in rejecting the world.

Rowley makes the comparison with Modestia and Constantia fairly explicit in the next scene, which serves to tie up the loose ends of the plot and prepare for Merlin's triumphant prophecies about Uther. We hear first from Edwyn that both Constantia and Modestia have entered "the Monastery, secluded from the world and men for ever." There is, however, better news from the new King: the Saxon King Ostorius is dead, Octa has fled, Artesia is imprisoned, and Uther Pendragon is marching in triumph to his coronation.

The concluding scenes of the play concentrate on the future of Britain, and once again the methods used are "apparitions" which must be interpreted by the wizard. Uther enters with his shield and standard with the red dragon blazoned on them, and in his first speech expresses his trust in Merlin:

Set up our shield and standard, noble soldiers,
We have firm hope that though our dragon sleep,
Merlin will us and our fair kingdom keep.

After Artesia's punishment has been discussed and she is led off to prison, thus symbolically ridding the kingdom of the treachery that has plagued it, the Prince asks Merlin to prophesy the future. It is not surprising to find that Howley, influenced by contemporary history, does not extol the future glories of the British line, other than Arthur himself, but rather stresses that Fate decrees the rise of Saxon power,

Long happiness attend Pendragon's reign,
What Heaven decrees, fate hath no power to alter:
The Saxons, sir, will keep the ground they have,
And by supplying numbers still increase,
Till Britain be no more. So please your Grace,
I will in visible apparitions present you
prophecies

Which shall concern
Succeeding Princes, which my Art shall raise,

Till men shall call these times the Latter
days.

The "apparitions", in the form of a dumb-show, follow;
"Merlin strikes Hoeboys. Enter a King in armour, his
shield quartered with thirteen crowns. At the other door
enter divers Princes who present their crowns to him at
his feet and do him homage, Then enters Death and strikes
him, he growing sick, crowns Constantine. Exeunt."
Merlin explains that this represents the history of Uter's
son, who will win great victories, receive homage from
many nations but will soon be seized by death. The play
ends with Uter's fatalistic awareness of the future and a
concluding compliment to Merlin and Arthur:

Thanks to our Prophet for this so wished for
satisfaction

And hereby now we learn that always Fate
Must be observed, whatever that decree.
All future times shall still record this story
Of Merlin's learned worth, and Arthur's glory.

This message about the necessity of accepting Fate's decrees
has not, however, been made explicit until the closing
passage and, in fact, the stress given to the British vict-
ories might suggest a rather different conclusion: in the
main, as I have tried to suggest, Rowley has used the
struggles of Saxon and British and the story of the birth

of Merlin to explore other themes, and the conventional ending of the play is an acknowledgement of contemporary English thought about Arthur and the role of the Saxons in history.

3. Davenant: "Brittania Triumphans"

The next dramatic appearance of Merlin was in Davenant's masque Brittania Triumphans.¹⁶ This masque was presented at White Hall "by the King's Majestie and his Lords, on the Sunday after Twelfth Night, 1637." Inigo Jones, who by this time was 'Surveyor of his Majesties Workes' was responsible for the masque machinery as he had been for Jonson's Speeches. Davenant tells us that "The inventions, ornaments, scenes and apparitions, with the descriptions, were made by Inigo Jones, Surveyer General of his Majesty's works; what was spoken or sung, by William D'Avenant, his Majesty's servant." (p.251) The masque can be compared with The Speeches at Prince Henry's Barriers. There is some originality in the concept of Merlin, but it is subordinated to the main object of the masque, just as Merlin's role in the Speeches was largely dictated by the necessity to compliment the young prince and provide a dramatic framework for the tilt.

The fact that the King himself took part in the masque ensured that the virtues and triumphs of "Britannia" would be its main theme, and Merlin's function is

to demonstrate the follies of the past and the glories of the present. Davenant sets out in a preface the subject of the masque; "Britanocles, the glory of the western world hath by his own wisdom, valour and piety, not only vindicated his own but far distant seas, infested with pirates, and reduc'd the land by his example, to a real knowledge of all good acts and sciences. These eminent acts, Bellerophon, in a wise pity, willingly would preserve from devouring time, and therefore to make them last to our posterity gives a command to Fame, who hath already spread them abroad that she should now at home, if there can be any maliciously insensible awake them from their pretended sleep, that even they with the large yet still increasing number of the good and loyal may mutually admire and rejoice in our happiness." (p.256) The theme of the masque is, then, how and why the fame of human actions and works can be preserved from generation to generation, and Merlin is used in the development of this theme. The opening debate is between Imposture and Action, who try to establish which of them is more important in the "manage and support of human works." Imposture is convinced that

That universally shall take which most
Doth please, not what pretends at profit and
Imaginary good. (p.269)

Action tries to persuade him that there are some good and upright men, to which Imposture arrogantly replies

... these mighty lords

Of reason have but a few followers,

And those go ragged too: the prosperous, brave

Increasing multitude pursue my steps. (p.272)

And at this point he calls up Merlin to help him prove his thesis. Davenant's attitude to Merlin, as it is revealed as the masque progresses, is ambivalent. From the first the fact that he is summoned to the aid of Imposture makes him a suspect figure. Imposture announces

The great devourer of mysterious books

Is come! Merlin, whose deep prophetic art

Foretold that at this particle of time

He would forsake's unbodied friends below

And waste one usual circuit of the moon

On earth, to try how nature's face is chang'd

Since his decease. (p.272)

Davenant is completely traditional in his stress on Merlin's learning and prophetic skill and he echoes Jonson in his suggestion that the wizard would return to the earth. The phrase "unbodied friends below" suggests that Davenant sees Merlin as an inhabitant of hell, or the underworld, rather than condemned to isolation in a cave or under a rock.

The description of the wizard as he first enters is immediately recognizable as the forerunner of all the stage wizards and even of Disney's Merlin; he wears a garment which as early as the seventeenth century would be

recognizable as belonging to a departed world of romance and magic, an age which we should label as "medieval". The stage direction reads "Merlin the prophetic magician enters apparel'd in a gown of light purple down to his ankles, slackly girt, with wide sleeves turned up with powdered ermines and a roll on his head of the same, with a tippet hanging down behind; in his hand a silvered rod." (p.272)

Action realizes that Merlin has been summoned specifically as an ally for Imposture;

Your eyes encounter him

As you would make great use of 's visit here.

Imposture replies,

With reason, Sir, for he hath power to wake
Those that have many ages slept, such as
When busy in their flesh were my disciples.
Hail thou most ancient prophet of this Isle!
I that have practised superstitious rites
Unto thy memory, beg thy immortal aid
To raise their figures that, in times forgot,
Were in the world predominant: Help to
Confute this righteous fool, that boasts his small
Neglected stock of wisdom comes from Heaven,
and show

How little it prevailed on earth, since all
The mighty here are of my sect. (pp.272-273)

Merlin here seems to be explicitly equated with dubious and fraudulent science and learning: Imposture has "practised superstitious rites unto [Merlin's] memory," as if to a patron saint, and claims the wizard's aid in confuting "this righteous fool." The masque, with its dependence on spectacle and sudden changes of scene, was a natural setting for the conjuror's power and in this masque Merlin is used to introduce the transformation scenes, or, as Imposture says "To wake those that have many ages slept." Merlin's answer to Imposture stresses this function and also suggests that his powers may still be used for good, rather than evil, purposes;

Tis long

Since this my magic rod hath struck the air,
 Yet loss of practice can no art impair
 That soars above the reach of nature's might.
 Thus then I charm the spirits of the night,
 And unto hell conjure their wings to steer,
 And straight collect from dismal corners there
 The great seducers of this Isle, that by
 Their baits of pleasure strove to multiply
 Those sad inhabitants, who curse that truth below
 Which, here on earth, they took no pains to know.
 Appear! Appear! Nimble obey my will
 T'express I did t'increase my magic skill.(p.273)

Merlin's attitude seems to be fundamentally in opposition

to Imposture's when he recognizes that the 'great seducers of this Isle' woo men away from the truth which is available to them: although he acknowledges and calls up many followers of Imposture, the use of such phrases as 'great seducers', 'baits of pleasure' and 'sad inhabitants' is an implicit condemnation of them. This ambiguity in the presentation of Merlin, our uncertainty as to whether he is allied with good or evil, is probably due less to a conscious and subtle attempt on Davenant's part to suggest the legendary blending of good and evil in Merlin, the Devil's child (although one cannot deny the possibility of this) than to the exigencies of the masque form, which demands that the intellectual content be clearly and briefly presented, and usually depends more on spectacle than on characterization.

In response to Merlin's command "the whole scene was transformed into a horrid hell, the further part terminating in a flaming precipice, and the nearer parts expressing the suburbs, from whence enter the several Anti-masques", and then Bellerophon appears riding on Pegasus. (p.274) His function is obviously to act as a parallel to Merlin, for Action welcomes him

Thou com'st to help me to despise and scorn

These airy mimic apparitions,

and Bellerophon admits he is there

as aid to show ...

How dull the impious were to be so sillily
 Misled, and how the good did ever need
 But little care, and less of brain, to scape
 Th'apparent baits of such gross fools. (p.275)

Davenant seems to be making a comment on the questionable value of medieval romance and legend in comparison with classical literature by giving Action as his mentor a character from the latter, while Imposture is still relying on Merlin, to whom he says

Assist me once more with thy charming rod,
 To shew this strict corrector of delights,
 What ladies were of yore and what their knights,
 Although their shapes and manners now grow
 strange,

Make him admire what he would strive to change.

(p.276)

And so once more Merlin conjures and the "hell suddenly vanisheth, and there appears a vast forest, in which stood part of an old castle kept by a giant, proper for the scene of the mock Romanza which followed." (p.278) The mock Romanza is in rhyming couplets which, beside the blank verse of the earlier part of the masque, is meant to suggest the essential triviality of the romance form. The characters are the stock romance figures, a dwarf, a damsel in distress, a knight, a squire and a giant, and just as the knight is about to fight the giant, Merlin inter-

venes in this mock heroic combat and deflates it even further:

Merlin. My art will turn this combat to delight,

They shall, unto fantastic music, fight.

S.D. They fall into a dance and depart.

Bellerophon comments

How trivial and lost thy visions are!

Did thy prophetic science take such care,

When thou went mortal, with unlawful power

To recollect thy ashes 'gainst this hour,

And all for such import? (p.282)

Merlin is now seen as divorced from the romance literature in which he had so often appeared with the knights, squires and dwarves. Davenant dismisses all the trappings of courtly romance; they are products of Imposture, one of the 'baits of pleasure' which seduced earlier generations but are not worthy to be preserved by Fame for posterity. Merlin himself, however, is still the master of 'prophetic science', and has one more significant function attributed to him at the end of the Masque. All this suggests a devaluation of the romance; only twenty years before, Jonson's compliments to Prince Henry and James I had been clothed in the symbolism of Arthurian romance, but the trappings of this masque are classical in origin, and Britanocles, Galatea and Bellerophon are as important as Merlin. This was, in fact, a period of distrust of the

British legends, of Geoffrey of Monmouth and of the romances, and Davenant mirrors this distrust, while preserving the figure of Merlin which, paradoxically, had its origins in all these things.

After his scornful judgment of the romanza, Bellerophon dismisses Merlin:

Away! Fame, still obedient unto fate,
This happy hour is call'd to celebrate
Britanocles, and those that in this Isle
The old with modern victories reconcile,
Away! Fame's universal voice I hear
'Tis fit you vanish quite when they appear.

[Exeunt Merlin, Imposture.](p.283)

The remainder of the masque provides various settings for lavish praise of Britanocles. A "richly adorn'd palace", the Palace of Fame, appears with Fame, Arms and Science, a chorus of Poets sings, the gates open and Britanocles is revealed. The palace sinks, the Masquers dance and a song by the Chorus and Fame honours Britanocles. Then the scene becomes Britain and a "new chorus of our own modern poets raised by Merlin, in rich habits differing from the rest, with laurels on their heads gilt, make their address to the Queen." (pp.283-287) This final mention of the wizard only serves to point up Davenant's ambivalent attitude towards him: Bellerophon dismisses Merlin because his visions were "trivial and lost", and symbolic of past decadence, yet it

is he who raises the modern poets in their golden laurel wreaths.

Davenant's attitude to the romance materials and the ancient legends is a dramatic equivalent of Selden's scepticism, and directly mirrors the prevailing opinions of his contemporaries. The romances were widely read, but equally widely abused, and the opinion of the canon in Don Quixote perhaps sums up seventeenth century critical opinion, "they are uncouth in style, their adventures are incredible, their amours licentious, their compliments absurd, their battles boring, their speeches doltish, their travels ridiculous, and, finally, they are devoid of all art and intelligence and therefore deserve to be expelled from a Christian republic as a useless race."¹⁷

4. John Dryden: "King Arthur, or the British Worth"

Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia was the source for the historical material in Dryden's King Arthur, or the British Worth (1691)¹⁸ but this 'dramatic opera' can be compared with Rowley's play in the use made of the sources; in both works we find the Saxon-British struggle providing the structural background against which are worked out love intrigues and clashes between good and evil magical powers. The operatic framework of Dryden's work ensures, too, that a great deal of emphasis will be given to song, dance and spectacle, and here, as in the masque, the powers

of conjurors and magicians provide the dramatist with many opportunities for dramatic effects. Dryden had originally considered an Arthurian epic, but, like Milton, abandoned the idea. The first plan of his King Arthur which he described as "a tragedy mixed with opera" was that it should have a definite political purpose and be produced to strengthen the power of Charles II; however the production was delayed so long that it was not finally staged until William and Mary's reign and consequently extensive revisions were needed, and the opera as we have it has considerably more fantasy and less history than was originally planned.

The opera is set in Kent at the period at which Arthur is about to fight his decisive battle against the Saxons to ensure his possession of the British throne. His arch enemy and rival in love is Oswald, the Saxon King; both men are determined to win Emmeline, the blind daughter of Conon, duke of Cornwall. Dryden, unlike Rowley, introduces Merlin from the first moments of his play; Arthur, on his first entry is reading a letter from Merlin promising magical aid in the battle;

Go on, Auspicious Prince, the stars are kind;
 Unfold thy banners to the willing wind;
 While I, with Aery legions, help thy Arms:
 Confronting Art with Art, and Charms with
 Charms. (I,1,p.143)

The confrontation of the Saxon and British magical arts provides a great deal of the material of the play, and much of the spectacle. Most of the first act is taken up with the Saxons' pagan rites: Oswald, with the aid of Osmond, a heathen Saxon magician and Grimbald "a fierce, earthy Spirit" is shown worshipping Thor, Freya and Woden, with musical offerings from Priests and Singers. A noise of battle is heard off stage and a song of victory is sung by the Britons: Merlin's arts and charms are more potent than heathen sacrifices. (I,11,pp.147-151)

The next act exploits more of the dramatic possibilities in the conflict between British and Saxon magic. A new character, Philidel, is introduced to allow complications of the plot, which comes to resemble nothing more than a modern story of secret agents and double-agents. Philidel is meant to be aiding Oswald and Osmond, but he is shown as a very sensitive and soft-hearted spirit who is mourning the dead in battle. The stage direction announces that "Merlin, with Spirits, descends to Philidel, on a chariot drawn by dragons," and the Wizard commands Philidel to tell who he is,

Speak, I conjure thee,

'Tis Merlin bids thee, at whose awful wand,

The pale Ghost quivers, and the grim fiend

gasps. (II,1,p.152)

From this moment, the first entrance of the wizard, Dryden

takes for granted Merlin's powers over the natural and the supernatural and his role as Arthur's guide in battle. Most of the wizard's activities in the play are centred on this traditional concept of his function, and are varied with incidents which show Merlin's intervention in Arthur's love affair. There is nothing about Merlin's birth or early history, nor anything about Arthur's origins or his marriage to Guinevere. Only the Saxon-British conflict is taken from Geoffrey of Monmouth and the figures of Arthur and Merlin from well established tradition, the rest of the pseudo-historical and legendary material is ignored in favour of the spectacular presentation of the supernatural.

Merlin is able to enlist Philidel's aid on the side of right and assures him that to continue to support the Saxons would be to challenge the inevitability of fate:

Thou know'st, in spite of valiant Oswald's arms
Or Osmond's powerful spells, the field is ours.

(II, i, p. 153)

In an opera of this kind there is no real suspense: the interest lies in the incidentals of song, dance and spectacle. Merlin gives Philidel the task of warning the victorious Britons of bogs and other dangers which might ensnare them as they follow the defeated and fleeing Saxons. Meanwhile, Grimbald, disguised as a shepherd is supposedly leading Arthur in the path taken by Oswald. The spirits

of Grimbald and Philidel contend, in a song, for Arthur and finally Grimbald is vanquished, and Arthur makes clear the assumption that the Saxons are aided by the forces of the devil, while the Britons have the powers of heaven massed on their side;

Atlast the cheat is plain;

The cloven-footed fiend is vanished from us,

Good angels be our guides and bring us back.

(II,1,pp.153-156)

Emmeline, awaiting the victorious Arthur, is entertained by songs and dances of Shepherds and Shepherdesses and is then dramatically seized and carried off by Oswald, who has somehow strayed into the British ranks. Arthur and Oswald then meet for a parley. Oswald refuses Arthur's offer that, in return for the restoration of Emmeline, he should receive half the kingdom, and a battle is planned for the next day. (II,11,pp.157-164)

The third act opens with the realization of the Britons that Osmond has prepared traps and unnatural horrors for them. Arthur is resolved to face them single-handed, if necessary:

Now I perceive a danger worthy me;

'Tis Osmond's work, a band of hell-hired slaves,

Be mine the hazard, mine shall be the Fame.

(III,1,p.165)

But Merlin enters and persuades the impetuous young King

to wait until he can discover how to "dissolve these charms". He also promises the restoration of Emmeline's sight and Arthur expresses his complete faith in the wizard's powers:

Oh might I hope (and what's impossible
To Merlin's Art) to be myself the bearer,
That with the light of heaven she may discern
Her lover first. (III,1,pp.165-166)

Merlin, in return, prophesies the happy outcome of the adventure,

'Tis wondrous hazardous,
Yet I forsee th'Event, 'tis fortunate,
I'll bear ye safe and bring ye back unharm'd,
and he bears Arthur away. The next scene shows Philidel,
deep in a wood, setting spells to trap the fiends and
seeking Emmeline. He is recaptured by Grimbald and acts
the part of the wily double-agent, as he 'confesses' to
Grimbald,

Aye, then I was seduc'd by Merlin's Art,
And half persuaded by his soothing Tales,
To hope for Heaven; as if eternal doom
Cou'd be reversed and undecreed for me.
But I am now set right.
... I fled from Merlin, free as air that bore me,
T'unfold to Osmond all his deep designs,

(III,11,pp.167-168)

and he continues to protest that he will now follow Grim-
bald, who, of course, becomes ensnared by the spells that
Philidel has already prepared. Merlin enters and praises
Philidel for his work, and gives to him the phial contain-
ing the magic liquid which will restore Emmeline's sight.
The Spirit sprinkles her eyes, her sight is restored and
she rapturizes over the sight of her companion Matilda, over her
own face which she sees in a mirror, and finally over
Arthur, who tells her that the war is not yet over and
that he came there

By Merlin's Art to snatch a short lived bliss
To feed my famish'd love upon your eyes
One moment and depart. (III,11,pp.168-173)

Philidel presents "airy spirits in the shapes of men and
women" who sing, praising the joys of sight. Merlin puts
a temporary end to the triumph when he enters to warn them
to beware of Osmond and to remind them that, although
Emmeline's sight is restored, they cannot take her with
them, for she is still within the power of the enchanted
grove,

She's held by Charms too strong
Which, with th' enchanted grove must be
destroyed
Till when, my Art is vain. But fear not,
Emmeline,

Th' Enchanter has no power on innocence.

(III,11,pp.173-175)

Dryden does not stress this unexpected failure of Merlin's powers; it would seem to be dictated by dramatic expediency, there are still two more acts to be filled in and the happy, final reunion of the lovers should, for maximum effect, be delayed to the fifth act. So for the time being Arthur and Merlin are forced to abandon Emmeline and when Osmond enters, and realizes that her sight has been restored, the love which he too had harboured for her, is even more inflamed. He has tricked Oswald into a drunken stupor and imprisoned him, and Emmeline is frozen with horror by his advances. This proves to be a dramatic device to introduce a song and dance sequence, for Osmond says that he will show her the power of love to thaw anything and he "strikes the ground with his wand: the scene changes to a prospect of winter in frozen countries." (III,11,pp.175-177) Cupid arouses the Genius of the place, and singers and dancers musically present the proposition that "'Tis love that has warmed us." After this interlude Osmond tries to overpower Emmeline, but is interrupted by Grimbald's cries for aid, from within. Osmond goes to release him, and Emmeline, as the act closes, is given a short respite. (III,11,pp.177-180)

However, Act Four opens with Osmond still determined to "take my full gust". But once again he is distracted

when Grimbald enters to warn him that Arthur is at hand and that Merlin has counterworked his spells. (IV,1,p.181) Osmond and Grimbald leave and are replaced by Arthur and Merlin, and we discover that Merlin's powers are still circumscribed, allowing further opportunities for the clash of conflicting magical arts.

Merlin. Thus far it is permitted me to go,
But all beyond this spot is fenced with charms,
I may no more, but only with advice.

Arthur. My sword shall do the rest.

Merlin. Remember well, that all is but illusion.

(IV,1,p.182)

Merlin leaves his wand with Philidel for Arthur's protection, and describes its potency,

The touch of which, no earthy fiend can bear,
In whate'er shape transformed, but must lay down
His borrowed figure and confess the devil.

Arthur goes on alone, surrounded by the illusions of this enchanted place. Syrens, rising from the water, tempt him to turn aside; Nymphs and Sylvens' exhort him to enjoy the pleasures of love. Arthur commands the "false joys" to begone and strikes the tree which seems to be "Queen of all the Grove". Blood spouts from the tree, and a terrible groan and shriek is heard, and "Emmeline breaks out of the tree, shewing her arm bloody." She

declares that she can only live as long as the tree stands. Arthur, aware of the dangers of the place, is besieged by indecision, which grows even worse when she offers herself to him. Despairingly he declares his confusion.

O love! O Merlin! whom should I believe?

(IV,1,p.187)

He is just deciding to cast off reason and embrace love, when Philidel runs in, strikes "Emmeline" with Merlin's wand and reveals that she, too, is an illusion and is, in fact, Grimbald. Arthur destroys the tree, Philidel drags Grimbald out, and at last the pass is free for the British army. (IV,1,pp.187-188) In this act Dryden shows very clearly that he is subordinating the development of heroic character to spectacle. Merlin is shown as impotent in the face of heathen magic and Arthur as irrational and helpless in spite of his proud boasts. But the possible implications of this reversal of the traditional character of both king and wizard are not stressed and in the fifth and final act both Arthur and Merlin take part in the victorious climax of the play.

The last act opens as battle is about to commence; Oswald challenges Arthur to single combat and is accepted. The stage direction describes the ensuing action, "They fight with sponges in their hands dipt in blood; after some equal passes and closing, they appear both wounded. Arthur stumbles among the trees, Oswald falls over him,

they both rise, Arthur wounds him again, then Oswald retreats. Enter Osmond from among the trees, and with his wand, strikes Arthur's sword out of his hand, and Exit. Oswald pursues Arthur, Merlin enters and gives Arthur his sword, and Exit. They close, and Arthur in the fall disarms Oswald," and Arthur is victorious. (V,1,pp.189-191) Oswald will be given safe conduct home with the Saxon force, and finally Arthur and Emmeline are reunited. Merlin declares Osmond's doom:

Take hence that monster of ingratitude
Him, who betrayed his master, bear him hence,
And in that loathsome dungeon plunge him deep
Where he plung'd noble Oswald. (V,1,p.193)

The play ends, like Jonson's Speeches, Rowley's play and Davenant's masque, with Merlin fulfilling his prophetic function and preparing for a spectacular conclusion which will in some way emphasize the glories of Britain. The rather ineffectual Arthur who has been portrayed in the opera is abandoned for the heroic Arthur of tradition as Merlin speaks to him:

For this day's plan, and for thy former acts,
Thy Britain freed and foreign force expelled
Thou, Arthur, hast acquired a future fame,
And of three Christian worthies art the first,
And now at once, to treat thy sight and soul,
Behold what rouling ages shall produce;

The wealth, the loves, the glories of our isle ...
 (to Oswald) Nor thou, brave Saxon Prince, disdain our
 triumph

Britains and Saxons shall be once one people
 One common tongue, one common faith shall bind
 Our jarring bands in a perpetual peace. (V,1,p.193)

Dryden was, I believe, the first to stress, in a dramatic work, the fact of the blending of the British and Saxon races rather than the earlier and historically more questionable theory of the replacement of one by the other and the ultimate restoration of the British line. This more critical attitude towards received historical tradition and the presence of William of Orange on the throne of England probably explains why not Oswald, the Saxon King, but Osmond, his heathen magician, is the real villain of the piece.

The play closes with the spectacle providing a visual commentary on the points being made in the final songs and speeches. "Merlin waves his wand, the scene changes and discovers the British Ocean in Storm. Aeolus in clouds above, Four Winds hanging etc." and as the spectacle continues the sea becomes calm, Brittannia, Fishermen, Pan and the Nereids appear, and finally Venus, who sings several songs, one of which "Fairrest Isle, all Isles exolling" is the only part of this play generally remembered. Then "after the dialogue, a warlike consort: The scene

opens above, and discovers the order of the Garter. Enter Honour, attended by Heroes" (V,11,pp.193-198) Merlin explains this:

These who last enter'd, are our valiant Britains,
Who shall by land and sea repel our foes.
Now look above, and in Heav'ns high abyss,
Behold what fame attends those future hero's.
Honour, who leads 'em to that steepy height
In her immortal song, shall tell the rest.

And, obediently, Honour sings and there is a final offering from the chorus, "after which the Grand Dance." Arthur's concluding speech to Merlin is like that in Rowley's play, in that in both there is recognition that Fate will not always be favourable to the British, and here also one can detect a definite anxiety about the future, which perhaps mirrors Dryden's uneasiness about the contemporary status quo. Arthur comments on the Wizard's revelations in this way:

Wisely you have, whate'er will please, reveal'd.
What wou'd displease, as wisely have conceal'd.
Triumphs of war and Peace, at full ye show,
But swiftly turn the pages of our wo.
Rest we contented with our present state,
'Tis anxious to enquire of future fate;
That race of Hero's is enough alone
For all unseen disasters to atone.

Let us make haste betimes to reap our share,
 And not resign them all the praise of war.
 But set th' example, and their souls inflame,
 To copy out their great forefather's fame. (V, i, p. 199)

Dryden, like Rowley, had re-drawn the traditional figure of Merlin, but unlike Rowley he did not succeed in producing a memorable dramatic figure; his Merlin is one dimensional, and even the apparent failure of his powers passes without comment.

5. Aaron Hill: "Merlin in Love"

The seventeenth century taste for spectacle, comedy and music in the drama can be seen clearly in those few dramas in which Merlin appears, and the culmination of these popular preferences in a dramatic form which combines them all can also be illustrated in the eighteenth century pantomime opera Merlin in Love, or, Youth against Magic.¹⁹ We are told in the Preface that Mr. Hill left this work in manuscript and that it "seems calculated to please an English audience." The pantomime provides all the scenic attractions of the masque which had already been brought to the English opera by, for instance, Dryden. Aaron Hill recognized the necessity for impressive effects, and, in commenting on the deficiencies of Italian opera, noted that "wanting the machines and decorations, which bestow so great beauty on their appearance, they have been heard and seen to very considerable disadvantage."²⁰ Indeed the

libretto he wrote for Handel's Rinaldo is full of opportunities for "machines and decorations". As well as writing opera Hill tried his hand at Shakespearian adaptation, but not very successfully, and in his Preface to his Henry V tried to explain one reason for its failure, "There is a kind of dumb drama, a new and wonderful discovery! that places the wit in the heels! and the experience of both our theatres might have taught any writer but so dull a one as I am, that the Harlequins are gentlemen of better interest than the Harrys."²¹

The exploits of Harlequin had been familiar to London theatre-goers since the Restoration when a company of Italians had visited the London stage, and soon after pantomime in the Italian manner was being produced at Drury Lane. Generally the English pantomimes combined a serious mythological theme with the burlesque activities of Harlequin and Columbine. As Fielding ironically described "That most exquisite entertainment", it "consisted of two parts, which the inventor distinguished by the names of the serious and the comic. The Serious exhibited a certain number of heathen gods and heroes, who were certainly the worst and dullest company into which an audience was ever introduced, and (which was a secret known to few) were actually intended so to be, in order to contrast the comic part of the entertainment, and to display the tricks of Harlequin to the better advantage."²²

A similar but more sympathetic account of John Rich's achievements in pantomime is given by Thomas Davies in his life of Garrick; "By the help of gay scenes, fine habits, grand dances, appropriate music and other decorations, he exhibited a story from Ovid's Metamorphoses, or some other fabulous writer. Between the pauses or acts of this serious representation, he interwove a comic fable consisting chiefly of the courtship of Harlequin and Columbine, with a variety of surprising adventures and tricks, which were produced by the magic wand of Harlequin; such as the sudden transformation of palaces and temples to huts and cottages; of men and women into wheel-barrow and joint-stools; of trees ... to houses; colonades to beds of tulips; and mechanics' shops into serpents and ostriches".²³

Hill included in Merlin in Love both the "dumb drama" and characters from the Harlequinade which he saw that popular taste demanded, as well as the "machines and decorations" which added to the appeal of opera. He did not, however, follow in all its aspects the pattern for English pantomime laid down by Weaver and Rich, for he has ignored what Fielding called the "dullest" part, that is the serious, mythological elements and the whole play is concerned with the courtship of Columbine and Harlequin. The figure of Merlin perhaps replaces the "heathen gods and goddesses"; he can be seen as a legendary character with all the weight of the serious tradition behind him.

But Hill does not treat Merlin seriously; he uses him to provide the complication in the courtship of Harlequin and Columbine, to play the buffoon throughout and in a final metamorphosis "the conjurer proves but an ass." (p.342) There are several possible explanations for this complete debasement of the British wizard, which occurred again in Fielding's Tom Thumb.

As we have seen, popular astrological and prophetic pamphlets and almanacs were often attributed to Merlin, and as Ernest Jones comments, "it was perhaps this use of Merlin by quacks that accounts for the complete falling off of his reputation in the eighteenth century: the sage and wizard became a charlatan and buffoon."²⁴ At the same time Geoffrey of Monmouth's reputation as a historian, and with it the whole history of Arthur, was sinking rapidly into disrepute; Arthur and Merlin were no longer felt to have their roots in a respectable historical tradition with contemporary political significance, as had been the case in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and writers felt free to divorce them from that tradition and use them in any way they pleased. Merlin was useful to Hill because he was a wizard and with his conventional trappings of wand and conjuring tricks could prove an appropriate foil for Harlequin and his wand, as well as being the obvious person to conjure up spectacles as he had in Davenant's Masque, Jonson's Speeches and Rowley's play.

The pantomime opens with Harlequin and the Doctor's daughter, Columbine, who present "in silent action" the "gradual advancement of a courtship". They are interrupted by the Doctor and Merlin, who is "dressed like a conjurer, with his wand, long beard and trailing robe." The Doctor foolishly exclaims that all he has is Merlin's, and the wizard accordingly claims Columbine. He is, however, completely unsuccessful in his attempts to win her affections so he conjures up Cupid, who woos on his behalf in song, but he too is unsuccessful. Fortune, Wisdom, Honour and Power, whom the wizard then calls up in succession to aid him, have as little effect on the lady. During the dance and song "Merlin's dumb action expresses hope, love, desire, respect. The Doctor's wonder and delight at Merlin's skill; but anger at his daughter's obstinacy. Harlequin, terrified, despairing, hoping, appears lively and dejected by turns, with all the wanton variety of air, look and action adopted to his character." (pp.321-325) The point is already being made that in spite of his apparent skill the wizard is inept and impotent, and Columbine underlines this impression when she sings, rejecting the "vain, deluded Pow'rs" which Merlin had conjured. The Doctor tries to cheer the dejected Merlin with a bottle, and meanwhile Harlequin steals Merlin's wand and he and Columbine make their escape in "a triumphal chariot, drawn by two doves, whose reins are held by a Cupid" and "as they ascend,

it thunders and lightens." (p.326) Merlin is overcome by anguish, but recovers enough to conjure up a new wand, and "taking a book out of his pocket, describes a circle with it on the stage". The Doctor's interpretation of the ritual is seen in his exclamation "You've business with the devil!" (p.327) but Hill does not even dignify Merlin's magical powers by developing the suggestion that they are ultimately connected with the fountain head of evil: Merlin's powers are here neither heavenly nor demonic, but merely mumbo-jumbo. The continuation of the conjuring epitomizes the wizard's skill as presented in the pantomime, "Merlin mutters in his book the following incantation, in Recitative ...

Swingswang hopandthumpo lethale farcificando!!
Grande tastexalto, quadrill et Ombretimorno!
Tossalong stradlingo, beautilosto masculinando!

(p.327)

(And indeed all the masculine beauty and strength of, for instance, Rowley or Malory's presentation of Merlin is completely lost in this pantomine debasement of the traditional figure.) The charm is successful, and with his new wand the wizard conjures up the four winds and charges them to return the lovers to him.

As Act II opens the scene is "a wild, rocky, prospect, with an opening in front that descends to Merlin's Cave, an old hollow tree growing close by its entrance." (p.329)

In the eighteenth century the cave had become as closely associated with Merlin in the popular imagination as his wand, and Hill makes use of the cave in Acts II and III. The spirit of one of the winds brings news to Merlin and is placed in the hollow tree, as the chariot with the lovers returns. They are happy to have escaped from Merlin but the ground begins to rise under their feet and Harlequin hides Columbine in the tree. The action is interrupted by one of the "decorations" Hill was so fond of, as a huge mushroom arises and fairies and a fairy Blackamore page appear. The fairies, played by children, go into a song and dance routine on top of the mushroom before it disappears and Harlequin and Columbine take refuge in the cave. (pp.330-332)

Act III shows the inside of Merlin's cave. It is furnished with a moss-bed, table, books and on one side a large easy chair. It is not surprising to find the conjurer who gets his courage from a bottle making use of a large easy chair, but these very human comforts had no place in the earlier legends of the wizard; Hill, like so many of his contemporaries, humanizes and demythologizes the traditional materials. As Act III opens Harlequin and Columbine enter. Columbine is very weary and lies down on the bed, "and he offers to lie by her side, which occasions a whimsical dumb scene of entreaty on his part, and refusal

on hers." (p.333) Harlequin retreats to the chair, which imprisons him and he is so startled that he drops Merlin's wand. The stage direction describes how "the easy chair rises, slowly, into the figure of a man (the back part falling down to form the tail of his robe) and appears to be Merlin." (p.334) Once again one can compare Merlin's disguises and transformations in earlier literature with this, which, although not particularly incongruous in its context, is a completely new conception of the wizard. As the action proceeds, Harlequin is in Merlin's power. Columbine pleads for her lover and the wizard allows him to leave, then "Merlin leads off Columbine: Harlequin in sad and dismal airs goes off on the other side. They look back, step by step, and at last, burst away in agony at the opposite doors, in mimic imitation of distress'd lovers in tragedy." (p.335)

In Act IV Hill introduces new characters and some complications to the plot, but the methods of presentation, in dumb-show, song, dance and spectacle, remain the same. The opening scene is a wheat-field, in which a reaper and a woman binder are discovered at dinner. Harlequin appears and "in dumb courtship appears suddenly fond of the woman, who expresses contempt, and throws cheese-parings at him." (p.336) The Clown-reaper attempts to resist Harlequin but is overcome by the powers of his wand. Harlequin continues his attempts to win the girl, this time by making the

sheaves dance, but he only succeeds in arousing her anger. (p.337) The parallels between this act and Merlin's wooing of Columbine in Act I show clearly how very limited were the plots available for this kind of dramatic presentation, and in any case, the plots were subordinate to the other, more spectacular, elements of the play. Harlequin brings his unsuccessful wooing to an end by waving his wand again, but the only result is the sudden reappearance of Merlin and Columbine, and the latter naturally reproaches him for his inconstancy. Merlin regains possession of Harlequin's wand and "at the end of the songs it thunders again, and the scene is changed, in a moment, into the prospect of a rolling sea, surrounded with cliffs, steep rocks and precipices at sight whereof Harlequin runs off the stage." Furies with tridents pursue him, he is caught by one of them, and "Harlequin sticking on the points of his trident" is plunged into the sea. (p.338) Act V opens with a continuation of the sea scene and with Columbine pleading on Harlequin's behalf. Merlin allows her to conjure up Neptune, who will restore Harlequin, and Columbine promises that she will

once, upbraid him - bid him live,

And never see him more. (p.339)

She sings an incantation, during which "there arises out of the sea a huge whale, that covers the whole flat of the stage. In the mouth of the whale sits Harlequin with a

lanthorn in his hand" and the scene expands until the whale forms the roof to a marine palace, with the sea below, and a coral rock on which sits Neptune, surrounded by Tritons and Mermaids. Neptune sings, approving Columbine's wish, and Harlequin is restored to her by two Cupids. (pp.340-341) Columbine then sings to Merlin, who believes himself secure as her plighted lover,

Turn, turn away your face,
Lest this last favour,
This final act of grace,
This leave you gave her,
Shou'd bring your mistress woe
By your repenting:
And you should jealous grow,
And curse consenting.

Merlin obediently turns away his face and "Columbine after winking upon Harlequin strikes Merlin with the wand, and changes him into an ass, with an halter about his neck: after which she dresses Harlequin in his rival's robe and puts the wand into his hand; with which he struts and dances about in ecstasy, and at length mounting on the ass's back, is led off in triumph by Columbine." (p.342) In this final transfiguration Hill comes closest to the traditional legend of Merlin, as well as most widely departing from it. The presentation of Merlin as an ass is well outside the conventional versions of the wizard's fate, but the story

of Merlin tricked by a woman he loves, who uses his own magic to trap him, is as old as the story of the scheming Viviane. However, the song which Columbine sings as she leads off her lover seated on the ass, shows quite clearly that Hill is still concerned with the triumph of love and the defeat of forces which threaten love, rather than with a more detailed examination of the story of Merlin. Columbine concludes the pantomime with this triumphant cliché,

The wise may take warning, as well as they can
Still thus, will it come to pass!
Let a young woman loose at an old cunning man,
The conjurer proves but an ass. (p.342)

6. "The Royal Chace"

Dryden's opera was produced in 1735 with a new Prologue and Epilogue, but otherwise his text was unaltered in this version, which was reprinted in 1736 with the title Merlin, or the British Inchanter and King Arthur, the British Worthy. With this was published an entertainment given at Covent Garden, The Royal Chace, or Merlin's Hermitage and Cave.²⁵ Queen Caroline's additions to the gardens of the royal estates at Richmond included a hermitage and a subterranean grotto, "adorned with Astronomical Figures and Characters", which was known as Merlin's cave. An engraving of this cave serves as a frontispiece to The

Royal Chace, and the entertainment opens on a "a view of the Hermitage in the Royal Gardens at Richmond," (p.7) The use of this setting, with the presence of "A Royal Huntress, in the character of Diana" as one of the main characters suggests that this pantomime may have been intended as a compliment to the Queen, and this impression is confirmed by details of the presentation. The title page announces that this "new dramatic entertainment ... with several new Comic Scenes of action [is] introduced into the Grotesque Pantomime of Jupiter and Europa ... the words in the scenes of the Hermitage and Merlin's Cave by Mr. Phillips." The comic scenes are indicated, but not described, in the printed version of the entertainment. The royal hunt provides a semi-serious framework for what were probably scenes of mime and burlesque in the pantomime tradition, for the cast list includes, besides Jupiter in the character of Harlequin, Pluto, Neptune and Pan in the characters of Punch, Pantaloon and Scaramouch. (p.6) Merlin is introduced in his Cave, in Scene IV, and he praises the delights of his solitary existence:

O Solitude! O pleasing Solitude!
 Here contemplation holds her Sacred seat;
 And to her studious sons the knowledge deep,
 Of nature's laws unfolds! Here with content
 And converse sweet with sages of old time,
 Merlin hath many a creeping winter past

With joys to luxury and power unknown:
 Till wisdom pleas'd, at length has crown'd his
 toil

With sweet prophetick strain. (p.16)

This Merlin, with his dedication to contemplation and the 'sweet prophetick strain' is a surprising reversal to the more dignified wizards of earlier literature, particularly after the use already made of him in pantomime by Hill. But the desire to compliment the Queen seems to guide Phillips towards an overt identification of Merlin's cave as presented in the play with Caroline of Anspach's grotto, so that both its inhabitant and the cave itself are seen as providing a fit welcome for royalty. Merlin's peace and solitude are broken by the sound of French horns and the entry of Diana, the royal huntress. The wizard welcomes her graciously

O Virgin Goddess of these shades, accept
 After the toilsome pastime of the chase,
 Refreshment from an old but honest heart,
 And with thy presence grace my humble cell. (p.18)

Phillips, following the dramatically useful convention of Merlin's power to conjure, makes Merlin wave his wand to produce 'pleasing shapes' and an 'Antick vision', in the form of a dance performed by the Graces, the Hour, Cupid, Zephyrs and Psyche. (p.19) Diana thanks Merlin for the delights produced by his art and the wizard's reply provides

the focal point of royal compliment in the play

This courtesy, this honour done my cell,
 With pleasure I acknowledge. Ne're before
 Cou'd this my humble roof the presence boast
 Of such divinity, nor ever shall,
 'Till Pallas, like a British Queen, descend
 And her great mind from toils of empire here
 unbend. (p.20)

This identification of Athene, goddess of wisdom, with a British queen and her presence in Merlin's cave completes Merlin's role in the entertainment. Merlin is given an unusually conventional and sedate part in this pantomime, and as had so often happened in the past, it seems to be the desire to mirror contemporary political affairs and compliment a ruling monarch which decides his role.

7. Henry Fielding: "The Tragedy of Tragedies"

The main interest of Tragedy of Tragedies, or the Life and Death of Tom Thumb the Great (1731),²⁶ lies, of course, in its very successful burlesquing of heroic tragedy. The satire extends to the pedantic learning which Fielding's contemporaries were so fond of displaying in foot-note and commentary and he provides for his tragedy "the annotations of H. Scriblerus Secundus". The Arthurian legends do not escape the satirical attack of Fielding; the dramatis personae include two Arthurian

figures who even in this brief, prefatory description are stripped of any pretensions to dignity or mystery:

King Arthur, a passionate sort of King, husband to Queen Dollalolla, of whom he stands a little in fear; father of Huncamunca, whom he is very fond of; and in love with Glumdalca

Merlin, a conjurer and in some sort father to Tom Thumb.

(p.171)

Merlin appears only briefly in the drama, but nevertheless Fielding manages to parody his traditional attributes of magical arts and prophetic power. Fielding uses him primarily in his explanation of the origin of the hero, Tom Thumb. True to heroic tradition the birth of the hero is veiled in mystery and his progenitors are suspected to be more than human. In the opening scene of the play Noodle and Doodle, two courtiers, are discussing the exploits of mighty Tom Thumb

Noodle: They tell me it is whispered in the books
Of all our sages, that this mighty hero,
By Merlin's art begot, hath not a bone
Within his skin, but is a lump of gristle.

Doodle: Then 'tis a gristle of no mortal kind,
Some god, my Noodle, stept into the place
of Gaffer Thumb, and more than half begot
This mighty Tom. (I,i,p.174)

Later in the play Merlin himself appears, during a wild

storm which rages as a great and terrible battle is waged on April 1st between Grizzle, who is thwarted of the love of Huncamunca, and Tom Thumb, the latter's new husband.

The conjurer explains Tom Thumb's origins to him:

Hear then the mystic getting of Tom Thumb--

His father was a ploughman plain,

His mother milked the cow.

And yet the way to get a son

This couple knew not how.

Until such time the good old man

To learned Merlin goes,

And there to him, in great distress,

In secret manner shows,

How in his heart he wished to have

A child, in time to come,

To be his heir, though it might be

No bigger than his thumb:

Of which old Merlin was foretold,

That he his wish should have,

And so a son of stature small,

The charmer to him gave. (III, viii, p. 205)

Fielding burlesques the powers of magicians in general and of Merlin in particular by having him consulted by the good old man who does not know how he should go about producing a child. From the king needing magical help in battle, to an old man visiting a quack's fertility clinic

is a long step, and Fielding is here unconsciously completing the process of deflation and debasement which began perhaps with Merlin the thwarted husband in the Vita, continued through the parlour games of Heywood's Life and here perhaps finds its final statement. Merlin's part is not, of course, complete without some display of his prophetic powers, so Fielding ends Merlin's speech with the announcement

Thou'st heard the past, look up and see the
future.

Thumb: Lost in amazement's gulf my senses sink;
See there Glumdalca, see another me!

Glum: O sight of horror! see you are devoured

By the expanded jaws of a red cow. (III,viii,p.205)

Blazing portents in the sky, dragons with menacing aspect, kings with quartered shields are all replaced by the expanded jaws of the red cow, and in this brief moment the whole convention of prophetic visions is parodied. Merlin continues

Let not these sights deter thy noble mind,
For lo! a sight more glorious courts thy eyes,
See from afar a theatre arise,
There ages yet unborn shall tribute pay
To the heroic action of this day:
Then buskin tragedy at length shall choose
Thy name the best supporter of her muse. (III,viii,
p.205)

Thumb's reply to this final prophecy is one of the high points of the mock heroic bombast

Enough, let every warlike music sound

We fall contented, if we fall renowned. (III,
viii, p.205)

By promising a "buskin tragedy" which will immortalize the fame of the hero, Fielding is parodying the convention by which the prophet foretold the praise of future ages for the hero's fame, as well as further burlesquing the heroic tragedies with his claim that this play, Tom Thumb, will prove the epitome of the art which Melpomene claims as her own. A footnote is provided at the conclusion of Merlin's speech: "The character of Merlin is wonderful throughout, but most so in this prophetic part. We find several of these prophecies in the tragic authors, who frequently take this opportunity to pay a compliment to their country, and sometimes to their Prince. None but our author (who seems to have detested the least appearance of flattery) would have passed by such an opportunity of being a political prophet." (p.205) A footnote to this footnote would be superfluous; Fielding's purpose is obvious and his remarks appropriate.

Notes

¹Ben Jonson, Collected Works, ed Herford and Simpson (Oxford, 1952) X, p.509.

²Jonson, Works, VII, p.323 ff.

³R. S. Loomis, "The Legend of Arthur's Survival," A.L.M.A., 64-71. E. K. Chambers, Arthur of Britain (New York, 1964) 217-227.

⁴C. S. Lewis used this theme in his novel That Hideous Strength.

⁵Jarman, The Legend of Merlin, p.27. J. S. Stuart Glennie, "The Arthurian Localities" in Merlin, ed. Wheatley, part III, E.E.T.S. 36.

⁶W. Rowley, The Birth of Merlin, ed. J. S. Farmer, Tudor Facsimile Texts, Vol.105 (London, 1910).

⁷Even a superficial examination of the play from a textual point of view reveals speeches attributed wrongly, blank verse printed as prose, incomplete lines, etc.

⁸No pagination or scene divisions in the text; detailed references cannot therefore be given.

⁹Robert de Boron was the first to explore in any detail the demonic aspect of Merlin's parentage, with his introduction of the council of devils and the resulting seduction of Merlin's mother by an incubus.

¹⁰Layamon Brut, 17,000 ff; Arthour and Merlin, 1,117 ff; Malory, I, 44.

¹¹Arthour and Merlin, 1090.

¹²Prose Merlin ed. Wheatley, E.E.T.S. 10, 21, pp. 16-21.

¹³In the Lytel Tretys Merlin's mother defends her action on the grounds that no man lay with her, but a fiend; to which the Judge's reply is that twelve women will be asked to decide if a child can be conceived without a man's aid.

in his comment "Merlin caused the great stones which stand till this day on the plaine of Salisbury to be brought in a whirlwind one night out of Ireland." (Life, p.31).

¹⁶William Davenant, Brittania Triumphans: A Masque (London, 1637) in Dramatic Works of William Davenant, Vol. II, (New York, 1964).

¹⁷Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, Don Quixote, trans. W. Starkie, Signet Classics (New York, 1964), p.478.

¹⁸John Dryden, King Arthur or the British Worthly, ed. Scott and Saintsbury (Edinburgh, 1884) Works, Vol. VIII, pp.140-201.

¹⁹Aaron Hill, Merlin in Love, Dramatic works, Vol. I (London, 1760).

²⁰Hill's "Dedication to the Queen" in his libretto for Rinaldo, in Dorothy Brewster, Aaron Hill, Columbia University Studies in English and Comparative Literature (New York, 1913) p.90.

²¹Hill's "Preface" to his Henry V, Brewster, p.110.

²²Henry Fielding, Tom Jones, Signet Classic Edⁿ (New York, 1963) pp.177-178.

²³Brewster, p.112 ff.

²⁴Ernest Jones, Geoffrey of Monmouth 1640-1800, University of California Publications in English, Vol.V, No.3 (University of California Press, 1944) p.404.

²⁵A new Dramatic Entertainment called the Royal Chace (London, 1736).

²⁶Henry Fielding The Tragedy of Tragedies in Eighteenth Century Plays, ed. John Hampden (Everyman, 1928).

VIII

MERLIN IN SEVENTEENTH AND EIGHTEENTH CENTURY POETRY

The quest for Merlin in seventeenth and eighteenth century drama led to masque, pantomime, opera and a pseudo-Shakespearian play: poetry of the same age does not prove to be such a fruitful source of reference.

The Arthurian legends as inspiration for poetry only recovered from the disfavour into which they fell for more than two centuries after Spenser and Drayton's works, when Tennyson drew on Malory and presented, in The Idylls of the King, yet another interpretation of the matter of Britain. In the interim, however, the history of Arthur, the British worthy, was several times considered by authors planning an epic poem, for, as Drayton had suggested,

For some abundant brain, oh, there had been a story
Beyond the blind man's might to have enchanced our
glory.

Spenser, Milton and Dryden all considered writing epic poems on Arthurian themes but only Richard Blackmore actually produced not one, but two, epics with Arthur as their central character. It is impossible to tell from The Faerie Queene, as we have it, what would have been Spenser's final treatment of Arthur. The outline of Arthur's

career that he gives in his letter to Raleigh combines the traditional materials with his own allegorical addition of Arthur's vision of the Faery Queen and his subsequent quest. He imagines Arthur, he says, "after his long education by Timon, to whom he was by Merlin delivered to be brought up, so soone as he was borne of the Lady Igrayne, to have seene in a dream or vision the Faery Queen, with whose excellent beauty ravished, he awaking resolved to seeke her out, and so being by Merlin armed, and by Timon throughly instructed, he went to seek her forth in Faerye land."¹ As we have seen, Spenser used Merlin as the provider of armour for Arthur and at several other points in the story, notably in connection with Chastity and Justice, that is with Britomart and Arthegal, but Spenser never describes Merlin's role at Arthur's birth, nor is his status in relationship to Arthur ever clearly defined.

From an unfinished Arthurian epic we can turn to an unwritten one in which Merlin might, if Milton had fulfilled his intentions, have been given a less admirable role than he has in Spenser. He announced in Epitaphium Damonis his intention to "sing of Brennus and Arviragus, captains, and of ancient Belinus, too, and of the settlers from Armorica subject at last to Briton's laws. Next I shall sing of Igraine, mother-to-be, through fateful trickery, of Arthur, I shall sing of lying features, of

the taking of the arms of Gorlois, all through guile of Merlin. O, if only life shall endure for me, you, my Pan's pipe, will hang far away on aged pine, utterly forgot by me, or else, transmuted, you will, with the aid of native Muses, sound forth a truly British strain."²

Milton mentions Merlin again in his History of Britain (1655), first in connection with Vortiger who "retir'd into Wales and built him there a strong castle in Radnorshire by the advice of Ambrosius a young prophet, whom others called Merlin." (Works, Vol.X, p.119) A few pages later he attempts to unravel the complications surrounding the identification of Ambrose with Merlin, ignoring the more fabulous elements of the legend in an attempt to arrive at the historical truth. (Vol.X, p.122) In his discussion of the historicity of Arthur he reveals clearly his distrust of the legendary material; Arthur, he says, is not mentioned by the monk of Malmesbury, and only briefly by Nennius, "a very trivial writer yet extant", and by Geoffrey of Monmouth, so that his history was "utterly unknown to the world, till more than 600 years after the days of Arthur, of whom (so Sigebert in his chronicle confesses) all other histories were silent, both foren and domestic, except only that fabulous book. Others of later time have sought to assert him by old legends and cathedra regesta. But he who can accept of legends for good story, may quickly swell a volume with trash, and had need

to be furnished with two only necessities, leasure and belief, where it be the writer or he that shall read." (Vol.X, p.128) By this time Milton was not only sceptical about the Arthurian legend itself, but had, as we might expect in the light of his support of Parliament and its ancient rights founded in Saxon law, little sympathy with the British cause. His intention to write an *Arthuriad* had been most strongly expressed in *Mansus* (1638) where he reveals his desire to "bring back to my songs the kings of my native land, and Arthur, who set wars in train even 'neath the earth, or shall tell of the high-hearted heroes bound together as comrades at that peerless table and ... I shall break to pieces Saxon phalanxes under the might of Britons' warring." (Vol.I, p.293) Tillyard has traced the collapse of Milton's intentions to write an epic on this topic and its relationship to his involvement in the political upheavals of the next decades.³

As Scott sadly comments, Arthur "was doomed, in the seventeenth century, to be reluctantly abandoned by Milton and Dryden, and to be celebrated by the pen of Blackmore,"⁴ William III's physician in ordinary, in two ten-book *Arthuriads*.⁵ These he modestly described as "an innocent amusement to entertain me in such leisure hours which were usually past away before in conversation and unprofitable hearing and telling of news." Blackmore follows Geoffrey of Monmouth for the outlines of Arthur's

wars and makes of them a political allegory of the acquisition of the British throne by William of Orange. The religious allegory, which also forms an important part of the work, is closely related to the political framework of the book: God and Arthur are victorious against Lucifer and the Saxons, just as the first task of William on his accession to the throne was to restore Protestantism and oust Catholicism. In spite of an apparently close adherence to the story as told in Geoffrey, Blackmore's Arthurian characters bear very little resemblance to their legendary counterparts and his treatment of Merlin in Prince Arthur is particularly unconventional. Merlin does not appear until Book VII, when the reader learns with some surprise that the British wizard is utilizing his evil magic on behalf of the Saxons. Before this Blackmore has described occasions in which, traditionally, Arthur would have looked to Merlin for aid and Blackmore ingeniously fills the wizard's place with other characters. For instance, Merlin's prophetic function is on one occasion usurped by the angel Gabriel, who, after Uther's death, visits Arthur and prophesies doom for the Saxons and advises the prince on his course of action. (Bk.IV, p.115) Similarly it is Raphael who purifies the air of disease after Asmodai and the demons bring the spirit of "riot and debauch" to Arthur's camp. (Bk.VI, p.108 ff) The prophetic vision of the future of the British line, without

which no history of Arthur would be complete and which is normally provided by Merlin, is given to Arthur in a dream by the spirit of Uther. The prince is told that he will marry a Saxon princess and that he will become King, and then he sees in his vision the future heroes and Kings of Britain. The exploits of the Saxon Kings are shown, including the learning of Alfred and the founding of Oxford University; the history covers the Danish invasions, the conquest of William I and continues to the Tudors and Stuarts and as the end of the seventeenth century is reached Arthur, conveniently, awakes. (Bk.V, p.143 ff)

Merlin is first introduced as the supporter not of Arthur, but of the Saxon King, Octa. The Saxons are preparing an attack on Arthur, who has been promised victory and the aid of the Almighty by Raphael; they are, however, perturbed by 'ill boding auguries' and a battle seen in the clouds which seem to portend their defeat. Octa determines to defy the auguries and announces that

At a small village now unknown by name
There dwelt a sorcerer of wondrous fame.
The pagan Briton Merlin, that of late
For his dire art, driv'n from the British
State,

Did with the pagan Saxons safely dwell
And kept his correspondence up with Hell. (Bk.VII,
p.202)

The insistence that Merlin is a pagan is unusual, although his connection with Hell was often hinted at. The description of Merlin continues to stress activities which in folklore and legend are associated primarily with witches and black-magic; he is depicted as gathering herbs for spells and as flying to 'rich nocturnal feasts' on his 'Magick Wand'. The wizard is brought to Octa, who asks him to use his arts to aid the Saxon army and to curse the British, for

Your curse and that of Fate is deem'd the same.

(p.203)

This is a new treatment of the traditional view, suggested in Malory and Spenser, that Merlin's power was for good and could be seen as an expression of the will of God. In aiding Octa, of course, Merlin would also be avenging himself and so he agrees to observe the 'infernal rites' on their behalf. Once again he is seen as the typical purveyor of the black arts,

Then with his potent wand, he walks around
And with dire circles, marks th' enchanted ground,
and as he conjures, wolves howl and storms rage around him,
and

Spectres and ghosts break from their hollow tomb
And glaring round the necromancer come.
All Hell was mov'd, the powers drawn from their seat
Arise, while Merlin his dire words repeats. (p.204)

Blackmore's theme requires for its full development that the powers of Heaven shall be victorious even against the most intractable foes, and in the light of this we perhaps are not much surprised to read that, as Merlin prepared to launch his curse against the British,

the magician's breast an unknown fire,
Laps'd from above, did suddenly inspire.
A warmth divine his spirits did invade,
And once a Sorcerer, a prophet made,
The Heavenly fury Merlin did constrain
To bless, whom he to curse design'd in vain.

(p.205)

Octa, understandably furious at this perversion of his intentions, commands Merlin to repeat his charms, which he does and

All Hell within shook the magician's breast,
But by a power divine straight dispossess.

Merlin realizes that

In vain with divination we assail
The Christian arms, where all enchantments
fail, (p.206)

and he returns to his usual role as he foretells the inevitable victory of the British, before disappearing from the epic, pursued by the fury of Octa.

It seems most likely that the anomalies in Blackmore's treatment of Merlin can best be explained in terms

of the historical allegory which forms the framework of his poem. The obvious correspondences have frequently been pointed out: Arthur is William; his enemies, Octa the Saxon and Clotar the Frank, can be identified with James II and Louis XIV; he marries Etheline, the Saxon princess who corresponds to Mary, the daughter of James II and Anne Hyde. But Blackmore probably carried his historical parallels further to include some of his minor characters, and in Merlin I believe we have a portrait of Sunderland, the apostate and time-server who ensured his position of power under James II by becoming reconciled with Rome, but when he realized that James was going too far and that revolution was imminent reversed his position once more and entered into secret correspondence with William. James became suspicious of his activities and he was dismissed from his office in October, 1688, just before the invasion of William and his army in November. Blackmore's allegorical portrait of Merlin stresses particularly the changing affiliations of the wizard, from British to Saxon, and the miraculous reconversion to the British side. He is paying one of his many compliments to William, I think, by suggesting that heavenly influences and the inescapable rectitude and virtue of the British cause were what won back the wizard, rather than the much more selfish and Machiavellian reasons which actually motivated Sunderland.⁶

Notes

¹Spenser, "Letter ... to Sir Walter Raleigh",
Poems, ed. de Selincourt (Oxford, 1959).

²Milton, "Epitaphium Damonis" Works, ed. Frank A. Patterson et al., (New York, 1931-40) Vol.I, Part I, p.313
v 162 ff. vs 166-8 in the original read
Tum gravidum Arturo fatali fraude Jögernen
Mendaces vultus, assumptaue Gorlois arma
Merlini dolus.

³E. M. W. Tillyard, Milton, Revised ed. (London, 1966), pp.79, 93, et passim.

⁴"Scott's Preface to King Arthur", Dryden Works,
Vol.VIII, p.126.

⁵William Blackmore, Prince Arthur (London, 1695)

⁶For a discussion of Sunderland's role in the reign
of James II see G. M. Trevelyan, The English Revolution,
1688-1689 (London, 1938).

IX

CONCLUSION

Maynardier's summation of the fate of the Arthurian legends in the early eighteenth century is just: "In this capital burlesque of Fielding's [i.e. Tom Thumb], in Partridge's Merlinus Liberatus, and in Blackmore's epics, we see perfectly the attitude of this age of prose and reason towards the Arthurian stories. It could make them the subject of a satiric travesty, or it could treat them seriously with the dullness of Blackmore or the pretentiousness of Partridge. The former's clumsy, unpoetic narratives, with their scarcely recognizable Arthurian characters, show the only dignified treatment of the stories that was possible. When an Arthurian character still appeared true to his old self, he had to sink as low as Merlin in the company of vulgar almanac-makers and fortune-tellers."¹ The search for eighteenth century interest in the Arthurian legend generally and in Merlin particularly can however extend beyond the purely literary evidence. For instance, Thomas Hearne the historian and antiquarian prepared, in 1724, editions of Robert of Gloucester's Chronicle and of Robert Mannyng of Brunne's translation of Peter Langtoft's French Chronicle.² He explained

in his preface to the latter that he was not printing the first part of Robert Mannyng's work, that is, up to the death of Cadwalader, for it is only a third hand translation of Geoffrey of Monmouth, whereas the second part contains many original insertions. But he did, however, chose to print from the first part the account of Stonehenge, guessing that contemporary historians might be interested in it, and "for the sake of those who shall undertake to write about Stonehenge, which our old English historians unanimously affirm to have been a British work." But Hearne's view of Geoffrey of Monmouth was generally sceptical; in his Ductor Historicus (1704) he had briefly summarized the Historia and concluded that "this Author has but a slender credit in the world ... the general vote has always gone against his story of Brute, as also that his history of Arthur is too romantick, and that of Merlyn totally erroneous."³ In fact, much of the non-literary eighteenth century interest in Arthur is of this rather negative kind; historians were concerned to expose the erroneous accounts of the origins of the nation preserved in Geoffrey and the early chroniclers, and "the widespread view that the 'monkish chronicles' were deliberately designed to mislead, that they were but one more example of the wiles of priestcraft, also prevented historians from taking them seriously."⁴ Late in the century William Hayley pointed out the contrast between good and bad monkish historians,

and incidentally revealed his attitude to the old tales of Arthur and Merlin:

If British Geoffrey fill'd his motley page
With Merlin's spells, and Uther's amorous rage;
With fables from the field of magic glean'd
Giant and Dragon, Incubus and Fiend
Yet life's great drama and the deeds of men,
Sage Monk of Malm'sbury! engaged thy pen.⁵

Caroline of Anspach's grotto and Merlin's cave were complimented by Phillips in The Royal Chace, but the Tory opposition made it the butt of heavy satire, and a crop of parodies of Merlin's prophecies appeared in the opposition journal, The Craftsman. A writer to another Tory paper, Fog's Journal, noted that Guinevere was so called "as Geoffrey of Monmouth informs us, from her inordinate love of Guineas ... We have no authentick account of the birth and family of Merlin, only that being born a Welchman, it is to be supposed he was a Gentleman."⁶

The decline of Merlin in literature, historiography, satire and popular prophecy had, then, reached its lowest point in the first half of the eighteenth century. The wizard regained some of his former status with the upsurge of interest in the medieval in the work of Warton, Warburton, Ritson and Percy and the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have seen a renaissance of the Arthurian

legends in literature from Scott⁷ to Charles Williams, and most recently a new bastardization of it in Camelot. The fortunes of Merlin in these works is outside the scope of this study, which has been an attempt to survey the major changes in the treatment of Merlin from Geoffrey of Monmouth to Fielding.

Writers found in the legendary figure of the wizard two main functions which could be exploited in many different ways. These functions centred, firstly, on Merlin's role as prophet and seer, with its close relationship to his traditional connection with Arthur, and, secondly, on his magical powers. The use of the first of these functions led, as I have tried to demonstrate, to a political and quasi-historical role for Merlin in both verse and drama. It also gave rise to a series of pamphlets and almanacs whose only connection with the seer of literature is a common origin in Geoffrey of Monmouth's Prophecies. Paul Zumthor's useful distinction is particularly relevant to Merlin's prophetic persona. The relationship of the wizard to Arthur is usually closely allied to his role as seer; when Arthur plays a leading part in a work Merlin is often of secondary importance, and his function is to foretell the glories of Britain and compliment Arthur. In Tudor and early Stuart times particularly, when Arthur could be used as a meaningful symbol of the contemporary situation, we find Merlin being

used to underline, through his prophecies, Arthur's political significance.

The treatment of Merlin's magical powers seems to reflect the changing attitudes of generations of writers towards the supernatural. We see in the romances the freest acceptance of the role of the irrational in human affairs, but almost immediately, particularly in the chronicles, a more sceptical spirit seems to take over and finally with the 'age of reason' we see the wizard become a conjurer, completely isolated from his original connections with the Grail, the Round Table and the birth of Arthur, performing tricks with the aid of his magic wand and the effect aimed at is often comic rather than serious. Because Merlin was a peripheral, although important, figure in the Arthurian legends it was easier to detach him from his traditional role and impose new functions upon him, but always, of course, the innovations depend ultimately upon the wide recognition of Merlin as prophet and wizard. These attributes remain as constants while the variables are introduced by the political, historical or literary prejudices of particular authors and ages.

Notes

¹Edward Maynardier, The Arthur of the English Poets (Boston, 1907), p.313.

²Robert of Gloucester, Chronicle; Robert Mannyng of Brunne, Chronicle, ed. Thomas Hearne, Oxford, 1724 (printed London, 1810).

³Quoted in Jones, Geoffrey of Monmouth 1640-1800, p.379.

⁴Ibid, p.378.

⁵Ibid, p.383.

⁶Ibid, p.405.

⁷Merlin occurs in the Bridal of Triermain (1813); Tennyson's Vivien; Robert Buchanan's poem Merlin and the White Death; Mark Twain's burlesque A Yankee at the Court of King Arthur; Thomas Love Peacock's romance, The Misfortunes of Elphin; T.H. White, The Once and Future King; C. S. Lewis, That Hideous Strength; Charles Williams, Arthurian Torso.

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The following abbreviations have been used:

E.E.T.S. Early English Text Society.

E.E.T.S. E.S. Early English Text Society, Extra Series.

E.E.T.S. O.S. Early English Text Society, Original
Series.

MLA Publications of the Modern Language Association
of America.

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