STUDIES IN THE LEGEND OF MERLIN: FROM THE MIDDLE AGES TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Thesis for the Degree of M. A.

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY
MICHAEL JOHN RALEIGH

1971

ABSTRACT

STUDIES IN THE LEGEND OF MERLIN:
FROM THE MIDDLE AGES TO THE
TWENTIETH CENTURY

By

Michael John Raleigh

For hundreds of years, the Arthurian legends have captured the imaginations of writers and readers alike, appearing in the literature of countless generations in many countries. In the vast amount written about the "Matter of Britain," no figure emerges more mysterious or more captivating than that of Merlin, the magician, wizard, and prophet of Arthur's court. From the dim beginnings of the Arthurian legends, the story of Merlin has grown steadily in fame and usage, appearing in works from the twelfth century to the present day.

This work examines the growth of the story of Merlin throughout the ages, using selected works to demonstrate different phases and aspects of this growth. The works used are, in order of treatment: Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia Regum Britanniae; the anonymously written Prose Merlin; the so-called Morte Darthur of Sir Thomas Malory; "Merlin and Vivien," by Alfred Lord

Tennyson; Merlin by Edwin Arlington Robinson; The Sword in the Stone, by T. H. White; C. S. Lewis' That Hideous Strength; and Mary Stewart's The Crystal Cave, which brings the study to the year 1970. Also examined are a number of less significant works from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, such as John Dryden's opera King Arthur.

The study further attempts to analyze the particular significance of the figure of Merlin to each author.

Aside from the growth and expansion of the legend through the ages, this study has attempted to point out some of the elements of the legend which come to be regular features of each treatment of the story of Merlin. The most prominent of these are Merlin's humanity, his nature as a man with very real human weaknesses, and his wisdom, or foresight, the quality which separates him from other men in each case.

STUDIES IN THE LEGEND OF MERLIN: FROM THE MIDDLE AGES TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

By

Michael John Raleigh

A THESIS

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

1971

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank Dr. John A. Yunck of the Department of English for his advice, assistance, and encouragement throughout my work on this paper.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The legend of Merlin, like the greater legend of King Arthur of which it has become a part, has its beginnings in the dim distant past of the British Isles. Exactly where the stories of Merlin began we do not know, nor have we any way of knowing whether there was ever such a person.

Unlike the legends of Arthur which eventually merge into a coherent body whose major features do not change, there is more than one legend of Merlin to contend with. Early Welsh poems exist which are attributed to a bard Merlin, treated as a prominent poet of his time, and also as a historical personage of noble or royal blood. According to this story, Merlin (Myrrdin in the Welsh) is a prince of the Welsh who is driven to madness after a great battle; his madness and the fear of his enemies drive him into the forests where he lives like a hermit, in lonely exile from those among whom he had been a prince. Because of its apparently historical nature (Merlin's pedigree is given in one source, using several names from known Welsh history) this tradition provoked the

belief that at some time in Welsh history there had actually been a bard or prince named Merlin. Some scholars believed that this historical poet-prince later became confused with another Merlin who figures in the Arthurian stories.[1] This belief lived on well into the nineteenth century, with scholars earnestly making the distinction between the historical Merlin and the fictitious Merlin.[2] In later literature these two Merlins came to be distinguished as Merlin Ambrosius, the prophet and magician of Arthurian tale, and Merlin Sylvestris, or the Caledonian Merlin, the mad poet of the Welsh forests.

A recent authority on Welsh history and literature has stated that there was probably never, in fact, any such person; the belief that Merlin existed he feels to have been caused by a misconception that the place name Carmarthen meant Caer-Merlin, or Merlin's town.[3]

Whatever the case, the tradition of Merlin the prince, poet, and madman comes to something of a dead end; it is revived occasionally by later authors, but it remains rather outside the main body of the legend of Merlin the magician and prophet. It is with this tradition, the more famous story of Merlin at the court of Arthur, that we are to deal in this paper. We shall examine the many uses of the story of Merlin in literature from the Middle Ages to the present time, and the many additions and transmutations which the wizard undergoes.

An attempt will also be made to understand, especially in studying the later works, the significance of the legend of Merlin to each author. The works to be studied are: Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia Regum Britanniae; the anonymously written Prose Merlin; the so-called Morte Darthur of Sir Thomas Malory; several minor dramas of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; "Merlin and Vivien," by Alfred Lord Tennyson; Merlin, by Edwin Arlington Robinson; The Sword in the Stone, by T. H. White; C. S. Lewis' That Hideous Strength; and Mary Stewart's The Crystal Cave, bringing the study up to the present day. The earlier works have been chosen as representative of the early growth of the legend. The later works studied are, I believe, prime examples of the various uses made of the story of Merlin by modern authors.

We begin in twelfth-century Britain.

CHAPTER I

THE BEGINNING: GEOFFREY OF MONMOUTH'S HISTORIA REGUM BRITANNIAE

Although the poems and an oral tradition of a poet or prophet named Merlin may already have existed, it is in Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia Regum Britanniae, written around 1135, that the legend of Merlin really begins.

A pseudo-history of Britain from the time of its supposed colonization by the legendary Trojan Brutus, the Historia is a curious blend of fact and fancy which incorporates material from many sources, such as the chronicles of Gildas, Nennius, and Bede. The most important achievements of the book are the story of Arthur, the really dominant figure in the work, and that of Merlin. It is not certain exactly how much of Geoffrey's Merlin is his own creation. It is known that he borrowed an episode from Nennius, a Welsh priest writing about the year 800, and it is possible that he also drew on several native traditions. It has been demonstrated by scholars that Celtic stories of a prophet Merlin may have come to Geoffrey, perhaps through oral tradition,[1] and he may also have incorporated into his story other British legends and

traditions. For the most part, however, the mysterious wizard in the Historia is probably a creation of Geoffrey's wildly active imagination.[2]

This first definite appearance of Merlin in literature can be divided into three episodes: his initial appearance as an amazing prophetic boy; his role as adviser and prophet to the Briton King Vortigern and later to the brothers Aurelius and Uther; and finally, his famous role as the conspirator in the begetting of Arthur.

In the first of these episodes is the story borrowed from Nennius, of the boy-prophet Ambrosius. In Geoffrey's version, Vortigern, the usurper of the British throne, seeking to escape the brothers Aurelius Ambrosius and Uther Pendragon (whose father Vortigern has murdered) attempts to build a strong tower of defense on a mountain. Each night, however, the foundations of whatever Vortigern's engineers have built sink into the ground. The king's wise men suggest that he sprinkle the restless ground with the blood of a boy who never had a father. Vortigern unquestioningly sends out his messengers to search for such a boy. Before the gates of the town of Carmarthen, they come upon some boys playing; in a sudden temper, one of them suddenly blurts out to another "None knoweth what thou art, for never a father hadst thou!"[3] The messengers realize that they have found their quarry, and they send for the boy's mother. The boy, called

Ambrosius in Nennius' story, is named Merlin (Geoffrey inserts for the reader's peace of mind the information that the boy was also known as Ambrosius). When the boy's mother, reputedly a daughter of the King of South Wales now living for some reason in a convent, is brought before Vortigern's messenger for questioning, she confesses that she does not know who Merlin's father was, for she has never lain with a man. She tells of being visited by a spirit in the shape of a fair young man, prompting Vortigern's court seer Maugantius to assert that the father of the boy was probably an incubus demon. In the information that Merlin is the descendant of the King of South Wales, we have perhaps evidence of the influence of Welsh tradition on Geoffrey.

At any rate, the boy is brought before the king, where he amazes everyone with his great knowledge; he tells the king that the tower's construction is impeded by a pool of water hidden beneath its foundations, and that in this pool he will find two sleeping dragons. Upon investigation this is found to be true, and the dragons, one red and the other white, engage in a fierce combat as soon as they are freed from their place of imprisonment. This occasions the first of a long section of predictions, called the "prophecies of Merlin," symbolic prophecies of the future history of England, all attributed to Merlin.

The fight between the dragons ends with the extermination of the red by the white, betokening, as Merlin says, the death of Vortigern at the hands of the rightful rulers of the island. He tells Vortigern "Flee thou from the fire of the sons of Constantine" (p. 153). Then the boy prophet drops from the story for a time.

He reappears after the death of Vortigern. The victorious Aurelius, seeking to build an enduring monument on the plains of Salisbury to the British chieftains buried there, is perplexed as to the means of building such a monument. His wise men cannot help him, so they advise him to send for Merlin; the prophet, now apparently full-grown, appears before the King and suggests as a fitting monument the so-called Dance of the Giants, a great ring of stones in Ireland. Later, through the craft and ingenious engines of Merlin, the gigantic stones are set up at Salisbury, the site of the now well-known Stonehenge. For this story, Geoffrey probably drew upon several ancient native traditions pertaining to these stone rings and connecting them with funeral rites.[4] At any rate, Merlin has now become something of an unofficial adviser to the youthful king; upon the death of Aurelius, he remains in the same capacity to Uther Pendragon. The stage is now set for what is probably Geoffrey's most important single contribution to the legend of Merlin, the mysterious tale of the begetting of Arthur.

Merlin tells Uther that his offspring will be a famous and mighty king, whose domain will extend over all of England, Gaul, and many other nations. A short time later, Uther, young and headstrong, falls in love with Igerne, the Duchess of Cornwall, and provokes a Civil war with Gorlois, the lady's husband. During a lull in the fighting between Uther and the Duke, Merlin "beholding the effect of a love so exceeding great" on the tormented young man, agrees to help Uther satisfy his passion. He gives Uther and his closest confidant Ulfin a potion of some sort, and the three of them (Merlin included) are transformed into the shapes of Gorlois, and his two aides. Thus the king gains access to the tower where the Duchess is being kept, and even to her chamber, where the unsuspecting Igerne takes him for her lover. On this night, Geoffrey writes, "was the most renowed Arthur conceived" (p. 177).

Interestingly enough, after this great contribution to future history, Merlin disappears entirely from Geoffrey's book, without so much as a hint of his whereabouts or an excuse for his absence. Thus the seer never even meets the King Arthur to whom he is such a trusted adviser in most of the later versions of the story. It is to be remembered, however, that Geoffrey's main concern was not with this ingenious story of a magician, but with the story of the great King Arthur. As such, his creation of

the role of Merlin seems to have been an attempt to create a fitting backdrop for the legendary King. He probably saw no reason to dally further with the adventures of a magician who had already served his purpose.

It has been stated that Geoffrey drew information from several sources for his narrative, so that it is virtually impossible to know with certainty how much of this story of Merlin is actually his creation. If, as one scholar has pointed out (see p. 5), Geoffrey drew on native traditions for his episode of Merlin and Stonehenge, then perhaps other elements, such as the begetting episode, were also drawn from an existing Celtic tradition. I have already pointed out one instance where the Welsh tradition seems to have influenced Geoffrey (p. 4).

Roger Loomis has suggested that the stories of Arthur and Merlin were probably linked together long before Geoffrey, in poems or orally transmitted tales. The legend of a prophet Merlin, related to earlier tales of a Scottish madman named Lailoken, probably had its origin in the North of the British Isles, while the stories of Arthur seem to have started in the Southwest. With the Saxon invasions of the North, hordes of refugees probably carried with them and transmitted orally the tales of the madman-poet of the forests; these then became united in some way with the legend of Arthur.[5]

The Historia Regum Britanniae remains one of the great curiosities in literary history. It is an audacious work, to say the least, and is shocking in its fabrications of British history. It is also, however, a work of stupendous imagination and creativity; while the characters perhaps fall short of the modern standards of realism and consistency, they are nevertheless captivating and fascinating, as is the story which surrounds them all. Furthermore, it is unjust to judge a work of the twelfth century by twentieth century standards. The wealth of material and vastness of subject matter in the Historia effectively prevented any deeper excursions into the stories of such figures as Merlin. As for the story of Merlin, whether Geoffrey created or merely compiled his account, his treatment of the magician is nevertheless the first full portrait of the wizard that we possess in any language. As we shall see, this portrait, however sketchy and inconsistent, was quite enough to whet the appetites of later writers.

CHAPTER II

THE PROSE MERLIN

In later years, Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia was translated into French by the Norman writer Wace, and put into verse. Versions of Wace, together with other versions of Geoffrey's work probably circulated around the continent.[1] How much influence these translations of Geoffrey had upon the later French writers is open to debate. It is in the work of these French Romancers, however, that the Merlin story, like the legends of so many of the characters of Arthur's court, became expanded to the stature of a complete legend, with a consistent beginning, middle, and end.

Some critics hold that the French Arthurian tradition, culminating in the so-called Vulgate Cycle, grew from the additions and innovations of these French writers to the Celtic tradition widespread on the continent at this time. This tradition, containing the essence of Geoffrey plus other material, was transmitted by the Breton troubadours and minstrels who traveled throughout France and the adjoining lands.[2] Other scholars, however,

feel that certain parts of the Vulgate Cycle, especially the Vulgate Merlin, are largely indebted to Geoffrey's work for their material.[3]

Whatever the case, French tradition was to produce its own expanded Merlin legend; the original mastermind of this Romance of Merlin was Robert de Boron, a Burgundian poet who flourished around 1200. Robert's Merlin, a verse romance, made several extremely important additions to the existing tradition of Merlin, among them a detailed and highly imaginative account of the wizard's strange origins and birth. Robert's poem covered Merlin's life up to the coronation of the young King Arthur; at this point, an anonymous French writer took over, first putting Robert's poem into prose and then adding his own continuation of Merlin's--and Arthur's story. The resultant work, called the Vulgate Merlin, is thus transformed into a chronicle of the life of Merlin and the early years of Arthur's kingship.[4] The Vulgate Merlin was translated, again anonymously, into English, resulting in the Prose Merlin, perhaps the best example of the French contribution to the Merlin story, preserving all of the major additions of the Romancers. Put into English around 1450, the Prose Merlin is a very literal translation of some non-extant manuscript of the Vulgate Merlin. As an early editor of the text has pointed out, there is hardly a word or phrase in the 700-odd pages of the English Prose Merlin which cannot be found in some manuscript of the French Vulgate Merlin.[5]

The first six chapters of this version correspond to the original poem by Robert, and the additions to the story found in Geoffrey are prominent. In the strange opening passage, the devils, angry after Christ's redemption of the human race, hold a council to determine some new way to gain the souls of mankind. They decide to send one of their number to earth to beget a fiend upon a woman. They are powerless themselves to gain Man's soul because of the institution of the sacrament of Baptism, but a fiend in human form might be able to corrupt others of his kin.

The appointed demon goes to earth where, after a number of attempts he succeeds in isolating a pious, chaste woman; while she is sleeping alone and unguarded in a tower, he lays with her and begets upon her a devil. The great fear the young woman goes to a local priest for counsel, and is advised to pray constantly and to have the child baptized immediately after his birth.

She does as she is told, baptizing the infant as soon as it is born. It is a hideous child, hairy and ugly, and only the mother can bear to look at the child. Furthermore, the author informs us, "it hadde the engyne and the witt of a feende."[6] The child, because of the piety of his mother, is given the choice between good and evil by God, and decides to serve its creator rather than the devil. As a result, he comes to possess a strange

admixture of powers: from his demon father he inherits the ability to know distant happenings and past events, and from God he receives the ability to foretell the future (p. 22). The child, named Merlin by his mother (after her father, we are told!) amazes everyone by his ability to speak at one year of age, and he is soon called upon to defend her in court when she is arraigned for fornication.

Shortly afterward, the French Merlin story reproduces the familiar episode from Nennius about Vortiger(n) and the boy-prophet. The Romancer's additions to this story, though subtle and slight, are nevertheless significant because they are characteristic of his attitude toward his story. In Robert's version, Merlin is completely in control of events at all times; he is aware of Vortiger's search for him, and of the jealousy of Vortiger's wise-men. When Vortiger's messenger comes to Carmarthen, Merlin strikes his companion so that the angry playmate calls him "mys-begeten wreche and faderless" (p. 30). Merlin thus engineers an episode of which he was formerly only a participant. Robert keeps this attitude throughout his Merlin; one critic has credited Robert's intelligent editing of Geoffrey's Historia with making Merlin the actual hero of the story, dispensing with much that is not pertinent to Merlin himself.[7] In supporting this view, it must be conceded that there is a strong continuity within the first portion of the

Merlin, a continuity also attempted by the Prose continuator, which is not apparent in Geoffrey's tapestry of many sources. It is plain that Robert intended his story to be primarily concerned with the life and exploits of Merlin.

For the rest of the first six chapters, Robert's story agrees with that of Geoffrey, with minor changes or additions. For instance, Merlin's transporting of "the grete stones that ben in Irlonde" is occasioned by the death of Pendragon, the elder of the two sons of the murdered king Constans. His achievement at the request of Uter is accomplished furthermore, "by crafte of his arte," rather than by an ingenious use of engineering principles and machines as in Geoffrey's version. The romancer places an obvious stress on the mysterious powers of Merlin, reminding the reader that his hero is a wizard as well as a prophet.

Contributing to the portrait of Merlin as an actual wizard or magician is Merlin's propensity for changing his shape: he does this five or six times in the first thirty pages of the Prose Merlin, usually to test the faith of those with whom he is dealing, but sometimes because he apparently enjoys doing so--and confusing the poor humans. This shape-shifting, an ancient and common element in Celtic lore, has been seen as evidence of Celtic tradition in the French story, and as possible proof of the transmission of Celtic lore to the continent.[8]

Other significant additions include the institution of the Round Table by Merlin, not for Arthur, as in the version of the story given by Wace,[9] but for Uter. Merlin institues the table to commemorate the tables of the Last Supper and of Joseph of Arimathea; furthermore, he--not the king--chooses the site for the table and the number of knights to sit around it, fifty. He thus looms plainly as the most important figure in this romance.

One of the most important additions of the romancer to the legend of Merlin, especially with a view to later writers in the Arthurian legend, is the role created for Merlin in the boyhood and kingship of Arthur. The story of Arthur's birth is essentially the same in the Merlin as in Geoffrey, but in the French version, Merlin seems to feel a certain amount of guilt for the deception he has engineered for Uter. To atone for this sin, the magician takes upon himself the responsibility for the upbringing of the child. He makes Uter promise that he will deliver the child to him when it is born. When this is done, Merlin hands the infant to a good man of the forest, named Antor; this man is to raise the boy Arthur as his own son. A few years afterward, Uter dies, leaving no heir to the throne--and the nobles grow restive. This brings about another important episode, the story of the sword in the stone. When no one can decide who the rightful monarch of the land is, Merlin has all the barons

assemble at Christmas; there appears in front of the Cathredral a mysterious anvil, fixed to a great stone, and into which is stuck a beautiful sword with the words on its hilt "Who taketh this swerde out of this ston sholde be kynge by the eleccion of Ihesu Criste" (p. 98). Every baron and knight of the realm is compelled to try his hand at the task, but none can budge the sword. Then the boy Arthur, seeking a sword to give his step-brother, accidentally pulls out the blade. The barons, of course, refuse to believe that they are to be governed by a fifteen year-old boy, and eventually rebel against him. Arthur's forces are aided in the rebellion and actually led by Merlin, who has become the boy-king's adviser and defender. The seer proves himself an invaluable ally in Arthur's first campaign, defeating the rebel army through his strategy and, once again, his sorcery. The young Arthur is moved to cry that he has won "by the help of God and of Merlin" (p. 120).

Throughout the rest of the work, Merlin is to act in this capacity of military adviser, winning battle after battle; he devises brilliant strategy, he leads armies, he recruits allies, he commands on the field--although he never strikes anyone (p. 406). He devises Arthur's battle standard, a dragon-head like the one he fashioned for Uter, and he even advises the boy on how a King prepares a

coronation reception! The coronation of Arthur ends the section of the Prose Merlin which corresponds to Robert's poem.

The chronicle nature of the second and greater portion of the work causes the continuator to employ the device of "interlacing," as he now has two purposes in his work where Robert had only one; the writer must now continue the story of Merlin, but he must also complete his self-appointed task of giving an account of the early years of Arthur's reign. Thus "The history of Merlin . . . is the history of the rise of Arthur."[10] The story of the problems faced by the young king is combined whenever possible with the story of the magician, and where it is not possible, the stories are interwoven, alternated with one another, and with the stories of other characters of the narrative. Merlin, however, remains in prominent view.

After the coronation, Merlin's military services are in great demand, as the rebellious and persistent barons, greedy neighboring kings, and pagan Saxons all seek to overthrow the new king. The battle scenes are largely repetitive and unimportant in themselves; however, in some of these the wizard displays unexpected powers. In the great battle of Bedigraine, he helps Arthur's army defeat the combined armies of eleven kings by sending great winds and tempests to destroy their camp and throw them into

panic. In later battles, Merlin goes into the fray carrying an uncanny dragon standard which spits smoke and fire, striking terror into the hearts of those who behold it.

The author allows Merlin to retain his old shape-shifting ability, as he appears as a little boy, a knight, a hermit, and a churl to aid or test his allies.

In the nineteenth chapter, the author introduces his own most important addition to the Merlin story: the love of the old man for the girl Nimiane, and his eventual imprisonment by her wiles. This theme had previously appeared in the French Arthurian cycle, notably in the Vulgate Lancelot, but never in any detail.[11] The Prose romancer's version is developed as a full-fledged love story, giving the reader the most touching and sympathetic glimpse of Merlin in the entire work.

Merlin meets the maiden, only thirteen years old, when he goes to Benoic in France to aid an ally of Arthur, King Ban. He knows that he is to meet his ruin at the hands of such a girl, for he has foretold that in Benoic, the wolf shall bind the leopard with circles that are of no material found on earth. This foreshadows his entombment by the girl in an invisible tower. Nevertheless, he goes to Benoic and there meets Nimiane, the daughter of a man who has been promised that his first-born female child will be loved "of the wisest man that ever was erthly" (P. 307). He is fascinated by the girl, for she

is precociously wise as well as beautiful. He is smitten almost immediately, and asks the maiden for her love; she is willing to offer her hand, but asks first that the seer instruct her in some of his secret knowledge. This begins a series of visits between the two, in which Merlin teaches Nimiane many things of his craft.

In contrast to many later versions of the story, the girl seems to return Merlin's love; the two pass many happy hours together in the forest of Brocelionde, and the girl soon knows many of Merlin's secrets. The seer's confidant, the holy man Blayse, cautions Merlin against this new love, but the magician is powerless against his passion and, as he points out on several occasions, he cannot change what is destined for him. The girl begins to lust for new secrets, and grows impatient with her aged lover. She finally ends her quest for knowledge by imprisoning Merlin in one of his own spells, enclosing him in an invisible tower from which he can never escape. On a happier note, however, she keeps a faithful vigil with him, rather than leave him in the forest alone: ". . . for fewe hours ther were of the nyght ne of the day but she was with hym" (p. 681). After this, of course, Merlin drops from the story, which goes on for a few more pages, valiantly attempting against great odds to tie up the author's loose ends. In a final unifying touch, Merlin is heard from once more, speaking to Gawaine from a mist in

the forest of Brocelionde. Merlin tells Gawaine of his plight and tells him to stop the rest of the knights from searching for him, as his career is indeed over. Significantly the work ends with the words:

> Explicit the shutting up of Merlin.
> May God bring us all to a good end!

Certain aspects of the Prose Merlin are of further interest. For instance, the Merlin, made up as it is of two separate works and telling the various stories of Arthur, his knights, his court, and of course, Merlin, has been accused of lacking either purpose or unity. Moreover, it has been said that the work is not about Merlin in any sense, but that Merlin becomes, after the coronation of Arthur, a mere "deus ex machina" in a story that no longer concerns him.[12]

It can readily be seen that this statement does not take into account the many roles and episodes of Merlin's life which the author has felt compelled to include. This is especially true of the account of Merlin and Nimaine, an elaboration of an earlier account which the author has been at great pains to flesh out. The imprisonment episode, not included in Robert's original, is nevertheless the most prominent and detailed episode in the entire work. The author was certainly aware of the material he had in his possession; given a work telling the story of Merlin, he expanded that story and in his own way heightened its

importance. He does this, not only by a moving and detailed account of the magician's tragic end, but by including him in the action wherever possible. Merlin's prominence and importance are never in doubt: for several hundred pages before his end, he devises tactics, leads armies, and even plays matchmaker, as in the romance which he starts between King Ban and a maiden--resulting in the birth of Lancelot. Then, as if this were not enough to insure Merlin's prominence in the tale, the author draws out the account of his affair with Nimiane for a full three hundred pages. Merlin's later appearances in the Prose Merlin, moreover, are never the illogical type that one could classify as those of a "deus ex machina"; they always fit into the plot of the story and, indeed, are somewhat expected by the reader.

In judging the unity and purpose of the Merlin, it is well to remember that the author had two tasks on his hands: he wished to provide a chronicle of Arthur's early years, and he apparently wished fervently to complete the tale of Merlin. These tasks were not, as some would declare, at cross-purposes; the idea of a work combining the two probably intrigued the author, for it allowed him to use the technique of interweaving. It is to be remembered that such a technique was almost expected: "The main appeal of the prose romances was in the elaboration of narrative."[13] Rather than composing a confused

and second-rate work, the author of the Prose Merlin was merely following one of the literary conventions of his day.

At times, however, he follows too many conventions, or too many of his own impulses; the accounts of tournaments and of battles are long-winded and repetitious, and add nothing to the story if one is not interested in fiction of the blood-and-guts variety. Furthermore, it is true that there is some difference in quality between the work of Robert and the later additions of the continuator, stemming almost entirely from Robert's simpler purpose in his work. Most of the faults of the Merlin, then, are products of the continuator's intention of creating a chronicle of Arthur's reign to accompany the story of Merlin. It is to his credit that he did not altogether bury the story of Merlin in the details of Arthur's kingship, as I hope I have demonstrated. The additions, both Robert's and his continuator's, more than compensate for the faults of the lengthy work.

Taken as a whole, the Merlin is an attempt to add to the story of the mysterious magician in such a way as to produce a Romance of Merlin. The addition of a beginning by Robert de Boron, and a tragic end by the anonymous prose continuator complete the task. The changes from Geoffrey's embryonic story of Merlin Ambrosius are drastic but altogether fortunate: the

flatly-drawn wise man has become a human being, greater and wiser than all those around him, instrumental in the founding of a legendary kingdom. He is a man possessed of an aura of the supernatural, but a man who can succumb to the most common of human passions, and who thereby provides his own dramatic, tragic end. With the completion of the Vulgate Cycle, the Merlin legend had reached almost its completed form, and already possessed those most important elements which future writers were to enshrine forever.

CHAPTER III

THE SUITE DU MERLIN AND SIR THOMAS MALORY

The legend was not allowed to retire into seclusion; a short time after the completion of the Vulgate Merlin, another sequel to the original poem by Robert was composed, once again by an anonymous author. While the Vulgate version had been a pseudo-historical continuation, attempting to "record" events in Arthur's reign, the new Merlin was more of a true Romance.[1]

This new version, known as the Suite du Merlin, took some of its material from the Vulgate and some from existing French poems and tales.[2] This new sequel had several aims: first, it was an attempt to link several already existing parts of a new Arthurian cycle: secondly, it is marked by attempts to expand some of the less prominent stories and loose ends of the Vulgate Merlin; thirdly:

> . . . it attempts above all to elucidate the earlier compositions and to give reasonable answers to the questions which will occur to any careful reader of the Vulgate Cycle.[3]

As in the Vulgate Merlin, the central character and hero of much of the Suite is Merlin himself. Added to his contributions in earlier stories are his role in acquiring Arthur's magical sword Excalibur from the Lady of the Lake, and a still more detailed account of Merlin's final destruction at the hands of his lover. He retains many of his old attributes, such as his role as Arthur's tactician, adviser, and confidant, his shape-shifting ability, and his gift of prophecy--used mainly in the Suite to foretell the coming of the Grail and the Grail Quest.[4]

The Suite du Merlin has found its way into English literature, although in a drastically altered version, through the work of Sir Thomas Malory. Malory, perhaps the most fascinating character of all the authors to use the Arthurian material, a sometime knight and chronic political prisoner in the reign of Edward IV of England, composed eight Arthurian tales around 1469-70.[5] These tales, also known collectively as Le Morte Darthur, are drawn from various sources, English as well as French, to which Malory brought his own unique touch and purpose, adding or compressing wherever he saw fit--and sometimes arbitrarily.[6] His "Tale of King Arthur," the story of the early years of Arthur's reign, is chiefly based on the account in the Suite du Merlin. It is interesting, therefore, to examine the "Tale" to note Malory's changes in the story of Merlin, and to note as well, wherever possible, the evidence of the Suite.

Merlin in the pages of Malory still retains some of his familiar attributes, though others are notably absent. He is still the practical and spiritual guardian of the young king, still the mastermind behind the throne. He figures prominently in the begetting of Arthur, he is the guiding genius in the king's first great military victory, and he is the young Arthur's first line of defense against the greedy and suspicious nobles who covet the throne. However there is an important and consistent change in the treatment of Merlin: as we shall see presently, almost all of Merlin's roles and appearances in Malory revolve around the establishment of the young King.

One of the important roles of Merlin in the Suite, changed and stressed heavily by Malory, is his function as prophet. At different points in the narrative, Merlin predicts the deaths of the knights Balin, Balan, and Gawaine, the great fight between Lancelot and Tristram, the death of Arthur and the tragic battle at Salisbury, and finally his own death. In several places, Malory expands this gift of prophecy to build up the character of Arthur and the glamor of the story he is telling. For example, Merlin tells the angry barons:

> . . . he shal be kyng and overcome alle his enemyes, and or he deye he shalle be long kynge of all Englonde and have under his obeyssaunce Walys, Yrland, and Scotland, and moo reames than I will now reherce.[7]

Malory does this at several places during his "Tale," clearly trying to make it obvious to the reader how important Arthur is. This stressing of Merlin's gift of prophecy has led one critic to propound the theory that it is Merlin who is of central importance in this story. Malory, he says, creates the role in which Merlin guides Arthur to kingship and greatness, and gives the magician the "important offices" of omniscient strategist and spokesman for God.[8] A brief reflection on Malory's immediate source and in fact on all the Romancers back to Robert will demonstrate that this theory is of questionable soundness. First, Malory does not create a role for Merlin: as we shall see presently, he diminishes Merlin's traditional roles and importance. Secondly, the offices which Malory gives--or leaves--to Merlin are not important except in the sense that they are important to Arthur's image in the story.

Through all of the "Tale of King Arthur" there is a very perceptible, conscious lessening of the role of Merlin. The battle-field leader in Malory is not the fierce, frightening wizard who bears the dragon-head, but the redoubtable young king whose strength of arm and greatness of heart are unmistakable. The guiding genius which Wright sees in Merlin is really nothing more than a supporting actor who has too many functions and roles in the French source for Malory to do away with him completely.

It seems to me that Malory would probably have liked to do away with his magician. It is equally obvious that the hero of the "Tale" is intended to be the King. As Vinaver points out, "Malory shifts the whole emphasis of the tale from the story of a great magician to that of a great king."[9]

Since the magician's role in the French is at least as important as the boy king's, drastic changes were necessary. Malory was forced to discard much that was most important in the earlier works, and also much that was most charming to later readers and writers. In a very real sense, the story of Merlin is present only in skeleton form in Malory's work.

For these reasons, Malory opens his story not with the account of the demons' plot in hell or of the strange birth of Merlin, but with the story of the begetting of Arthur. We hear nothing of the Magician's early history until the very page that recounts his downfall. In the course of his compression, Malory has reduced the Suite to one-fourth of its original size, omitting some thirty-eight folio leaves from the beginning alone![10] Omitted likewise is the story of the founding of the Round Table by Uther and Merlin, a significant feature in all the versions of the story from Wace to the Suite. In Malory, Arthur receives the table as part of Gwenyver's dowry, not as part of his inheritance from a friend of his father.

In many ways, Malory's editing is unfortunate; in the course of his snippings with the scissors, he has carved up the timeless tale of Merlin's disastrous romance. Of the story made famous by writers down to the twentieth century only the barest outline appears in Malory.

Briefly, we are told that Pellinore brings to court one of the ladies of the Lake, named Nyneve. Merlin falls in love with her:

> And ever she made Merlion good chere tylle sche had lerned of hym all maner of thynges that sche desyred; and he was assoted uppon hir, that he myght nat be from hir (Works, I., p. 125).

He follows her everywhere until:

> . . . she was ever passynge wery of hym and wolde have been delyverde of hym, for she was aferde of hym for cause he was a devyls son . . . (p. 126).

Finally she and Merlin come to an enchanted stone in which Merlin tells her there is a great marvel. Then, in Malory's sparse account:

> So by hir subtyle worchyng she made Merlyon go undir that stone to latte her wete of the mervayles there, but she wrought so there for hym that he came never oute fer all the craufte he coude do, and so she departed and leffte Merlyon (p. 126).

The account is so condensed as to become ridiculous, rather than the great tragedy that it is in both the Vulgate and the Suite. We are told little of the

relationship, nor are we told how the maiden persuades Merlin to enter the rock--and her "subtyle worchyng" is unexplained. However, such details were unimportant to an author more concerned with monarchs than with magicians.

In view of Malory's cursory treatment of this story, it is hard to agree with the theory that the central conflict in the "Tale of King Arthur" is between Merlin and King Lot.[11] Lot only becomes a villain in the piece after the nobility of England actually rebel, and there is no personal animosity between Merlin and Lot. Indeed Malory tells us of Merlin's sadness that Lot must be defeated and probably killed if Arthur is to be king. Furthermore, none of the magician's early characteristics are important in Malory's story, as one would expect if Merlin is indeed any sort of protagonist.

Most obvious among Merlin's cast-off abilities is his character as magician. Malory apparently was extremely skeptical of the supernatural, and his Merlin appears accordingly with little or no evidence of magical powers.[12] For example, Arthur's initial victory over his enemies is due first to Merlin's strategy, but mainly to the valor and ferocity of Arthur's troops--led of course by Arthur himself. The fire, windstorms, and other magical paraphernalia of Arthur's victories in the Vulgate and the Suite are totally absent. The dragon-bearing Magician who led armies into battle has been replaced by a mere cabinet member in the young king's court.

It is important to remember that this "Tale of King Arthur" was in all probability not the first tale which Malory composed; he had preceded it with his "Tale of King Arthur and the Emperor Lucius,"[13] in which the heroic feats of Arthur are related, concluding with his total annihilation of the Roman army. He seems to have written the later tale to fill in the early gap in Arthur's history, and obviously sought to make this tale accord with what he had already written--causing the tale of Merlin to suffer greatly. It is not difficult to understand Malory's logic in dispensing with the stories of minor or secondary characters--as he saw them.

Much controversy has ensued during the past twenty-five years concerning Malory's "purpose" in writing his Arthurian tales. Two opposing schools have appeared: the school of Eugéne Vinaver holds that Malory never intended to create one massive epic of the court of Arthur, but instead composed his romances one at a time--repeating and contradicting himself occasionally in the course of doing so. The other school of thought contends that Malory wrote one vast, panoramic story of the rise of Arthur's legendary court, and its fall. Whatever, the case, whether the "Tale of King Arthur" is simply the first chapter in a comprehensive story or a self-contained story in itself, it is plain that Malory knew who he was writing about. Presented with several hundred years of

of tradition about a mysterious seer and wizard Merlin, Malory chose instead to ignore it whenever possible, and indeed went far toward dismissing that tradition altogether. His Merlin is dismissed at the earliest possible occasion, with as little elaboration as possible, and his appearances in the "Tale of King Arthur" are a good deal less important than in any previous version. Malory's treatment of Merlin, consciously degrading the Legend of the great Magician, was not to be without its effects during the next three hundred years.

CHAPTER IV

MERLIN IN DECLINE

The "Matter of Britain" now entered a period of steady decline which was to last until the end of the eighteenth century. The Arthurian stories did not totally disappear from literature, but retained a far different, less important place from the one to which they had been raised during the Middle Ages. Of all the stories of the Arthurian Cycle, none suffered as much as the story of Merlin, as the tale of the great magician at times seems on the brink of disappearing altogether.

There are many reasons for this decline of the Cycle, and they are inextricably entwined with the political, philosophical, and critical attitudes of these later periods. During the sixteenth century, the account of the Kingship of Arthur and his wars with the Saxons still appeared in many chronicles, but in a very changed, barren way. These later chronicles are an honest attempt at recording the history of the British Isles, and as such the Chroniclers saw their material in a different light than did Geoffrey or Wace.

As a prominent example, the most famous of these chroniclers, Raphael Holinshed, the source of Shakespeare's historical material, recounts the career of Arthur and omits anything that is suspicious, including the story of Merlin and his marvels.[1] This suspicion of the Merlin story dates back to an earlier chronicler, Ralph Higden, a contemporary of Malory who was not amused by the fanciful stories of the wizard.[2] It is to be remembered that these men were searching for fact in a history that had become almost hopelessly enshrouded in fantasy; their chronicles are an attempt to glorify Britain rather than an attempt to destroy its heritage. The attitudes they brought to their work were fostered in part by the English Renaissance; they were therefore quite ready to question anything which purported to be history.[3]

It is interesting that this century was also the beginning of the age of Shakespeare, an age in which the stage came to great prominence. This new vogue, however, did not lend itself to the Arthurian material any better than did the chronicles. The fantastic characters, plots and settings of these stories of Arthur were ill-suited to a medium which commonly called for realism. As one author has expressed it, "The defect of the Arthurian stories was the defect of truth and reality."[4] Of course, no figure in the Arthurian stories springs from a more fanciful, mysterious background than Merlin.

During this period, the Arthurian tales made occasional appearances in literature; Thomas Hughes attempted to put Arthur into a drama in his The Misfortunes of Arthur, written in 1587.[5] Spenser, in his Faerie Queene, makes Arthur his ideal knight and man of virtue, but the greater legend of Arthur is not used; Spenser mentions Merlin and his arts in a minor passage, marking one of the seer's few appearances anywhere during this period. These works were the exceptions to the rule, touching the Arthurian legend lightly if at all; they were accompanied by no work using the Legend of Merlin, which now had disappeared from literature almost completely.

The importance of the story of Arthur remained historical and took on a new importance in the seventeenth century. During this most chaotic period in modern British history the story of the noble British king and, in a different way, the story of his prophet-adviser, became embroiled in political conflict.

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, belief in a historical Arthur was seldom questioned; at the same time, there had probably always been a belief among the lower classes in the historicity of Merlin, and especially in his prophecies--foretellings of British history which date back to Geoffrey of Monmouth. The Tudor monarchy was to revive, publicly, faith in the prophecies of Merlin. Tudor monarchs claimed their

descent from Arthur, emphasizing the validity of the ancient chronicles which credit Brutus the Trojan with the founding of the nation. The prophecies of Merlin were likewise held to concern the line of Arthur--and therefore the Royal House of Tudor.[6]

A new conflict arose with the accession of the Scottish James Stuart to the throne: his adherents claimed that this event was a fulfillment of the prophecy of Merlin that the three kingdoms of Britain would eventually be united in Arthur's line. There was to be a general application during this century of Merlin's name to prophecies and fortune-telling of every kind, but for the time, the seer's prominence was in direct connection with the disputes of the British Monarchy.[7]

History records the monumental conflict of the ill-fated house of Stuart with Parliament throughout the century; the conflict began when James I pigheadedly insisted on his prerogative as stated in the ancient laws of the Britons, laws which he held to be still in effect. Parliament was forced to search for a way out, which led to an examination of the history and records of the island. Eventually this led to a discovery of the great importance of the Saxons in British history, and Parliament immediately claimed the descent of the British people and their laws from the Saxons, not the Britons.[8]

This controversy was to continue throughout the century, with the result that:

> . . . interest oscillated from British to Saxon according to whether the king or Parliament was in the ascendancy.[9]

One irreversible result of this conflict, and one which could not help but set back the cause of the Arthurian Legends was the fact that:

> . . . the nation was drawn from the glamor of an Arthurian dream to the cold practicality of a study of facts . . .[10]

An example of the effects of this political controversy on the legend of Merlin as well as on the Arthurian legend in general is a play called The Birth of Merlin: or, The Childe hath Founde his Father,[11] written by William Rowley (possibly, but not very probably aided by a fellow named Shakespeare). The play was first published and performed in 1662, two years after the Restoration of Charles Stuart II to the throne, a time when the balance had swung temporarily to the pro-Briton side.

Strangely enough, the play only mentions Arthur in a prophecy by Merlin. The real heroes of the piece are Aurelius, king of Britain, and his younger brother Uter Pendragon. The plot concerns an attempt by the Saxons to deceive and weaken the British during an armistice in their

fighting. Aurelius falls in love with the daughter of the Saxon king, and suddenly offers his beaten enemies very generous terms of peace. The first two acts are spent with the major characters wondering what has so bewitched the king. These acts also devote a considerable amount of time to the search of two burlesque characters, Joan Go-to't and her loyal brother, for a mysterious stranger. Joan, it seems, is great with child and has no idea who the father may be.

Just when everything is black for the hardy Britons, the devil appears and announces the birth of his son, "Merlin Silvester," whom he has conceived upon the unwitting Joan. Accordingly, Merlin is born in the third act, presenting Joan with still another problem: she and her brother cannot help being suspicious of an infant who comes into the world full-grown, reading books, and wearing a beard.

The devil tells Merlin of the impending doom of the Britons, and the boy-magician unravels the mystery for them. He is too late to save Aurelius from poisoning at the hands of the Saxons and the treacherous Briton Vortigern, but the Britons under Uter prevail in spite of this; in the course of the action, the playwright recounts some of the elements of the story from Geoffrey, including the fight of the dragons, Vortigern's tower and his treason, and the poisoning of Aurelius.

In a strange perversion of another episode in the Merlin tradition, the magician encloses his father in a great rock when he comes groping for poor Joan again. Finally, we are told that Merlin intends to build a monument to his mother after she dies--at Stonehenge.

The degradation of Arthurian story and especially of Merlin's tale are evident in this play. It is written by a pro-Briton writer, obviously sympathetic to the legends, and professedly interested in Merlin, and yet he cannot refrain from low comedy. The drastic transmutations of the old story bear witness to the new role of the legend of Merlin. Merlin does not appear in the play until the third act, and he is the source and butt of a considerable amount of comic dialogue. It was this attitude of the author which prompted a later critic to refer to this attempted tribute to the Arthurian origins of England as a "miserable fabrication" and "indecent burlesque."[12]

This unfortunate play was not the only attempt to revive interest in the Arthurian origins of the nation; in 1634, a new edition of Malory was published for this end, but with no great public reaction.[13] This was followed in 1641 by Thomas Heywood's The Life of Merlin; as the title suggests, this work is an attempt at a biography of Merlin. It contains detailed versions of several of the most familiar incidents in the legend, but with minor changes; in Heywood's version, for instance, the fight of the

dragons ends with the defeat of the Red dragon (representing the Britons) by the White dragon (representing the Saxons).[14] This reversal is explained by Heywood's coverly political intentions in composing his work; his Life contained a large section of so-called "Prophecies" of Merlin. In the tradition of the time, these prophecies were of political import, an attempt by the author to show how the prophecies of Merlin were fulfilled throughout British history up to and including Heywood's king, Charles I. He argues vaguely that Merlin's word was that of a good Christian Englishman and therefore to be believed.[15] The Life of Merlin goes on to give a detailed account of the begetting of Arthur, and a lengthy prophecy of the deeds of Arthur and the Kings of Britain who will follow him.[16]

These feeble attempts at riviving the popularity and interest value of the Arthurian stories failed. They did even less for the legend of Merlin, as several additional factors contributed to the downfall of the magician's reputation. Throughout the 1600's, "Merlin's name was used to cover almanacs, astrological observations and any other type of prognostications."[17]

As the century ground itself out, the Stuarts under Charles II gained a complete--if short-lived--victory over the forces of Parliament, accompanied by a temporary return to prominence of the Arthurian material.

However, too much damage had been done to the legends to allow them to return to anything resembling their former stature. The eighteenth century, with its emphasis on reason and nature, was too near.[18]

A play written during this brief revival and later performed after the death of Charles in a modified form is Dryden's opera King Arthur.[19] The setting is taken from Geoffrey rather than the French Romances and concerns Arthur's wars with the Saxons. It is a rather shallow play, and this is nowhere more apparent than in the character of Merlin. The former figure of mystery and supernatural power has been reduced by now to a mechanical, two-dimensional magician whose sole function is to provide Arthur with aid at the crucial moments. He is accompanied by spirits of his own, and opposed by demons and spirits on the side of the Saxons, led by one named Grimbald. The high point in Merlin's characterization comes when he restores the sight of Arthur's blind sweetheart unaccountably called Emmeline--with a magic potion. However serious and careful Dryden's intent, the opera comes off as second-rate at best, and at worst as a dire injustice to the ancient tradition of Merlin. As one writer has said:

> Here [King Arthur] there is a touch of involuntary and unconscious burlesque, and in the next generation the scanty loans from British legend are almost always made with a farcical intention.[20]

The short revival of interest in Arthurian tales does not seem to have included Merlin in any way. The next attempt at recreating the Arthurian legend was Blackmore's King Arthur, a ponderous, wordy epic which is remarkable for, if nothing else, its portrayal of Merlin as "The Pagan Briton," driven out of England for his black arts.[21] He figures in the poem as the supernatural ally of the pagan Saxons.

Merlin received no better treatment in the next century; the eighteenth century was not the most friendly atmosphere in which to write of a figure of the occult. There were still, of course, those who saw fascination or beauty in the legend of the seer, but in such cases the talent was sadly lacking. An example of this is Lewis Theobald's play Merlin; or The Devil of Stone-Henge, written in 1734.[22] In a preface to this monumentally insignificant play, Theobald expresses his belief in a historical, heroic Merlin: "Our British Merlin has been accounted the Son of a King's Daughter."[23] He goes on to defend Merlin as a great mathematician and philosopher whose genius and learning have caused the ignorant to label him a prophet, magician, or necromancer. This view of Merlin, however, the author finds useful: "This tradition, as most fabulous and best suiting our purpose, we have hinted at in this entertainment" (Ibid., p. 8). This "entertainment" portrays Merlin as an infernal spirit, a leader among devils, and concerns his attempts to get the

familiar stock character Harlequin into hell--which he does through his cunning. This, we regretfully recall, is the work of an admirer of the Merlin tradition.

Other, more conscious attempts were made at degrading the portrait of Merlin; a perfect example is Aaron Hill's Merlin in Love; or Youth against Magic.[24] The title gives an apt summary of both the plot and the theme of this mercifully short attempt at comedy.

Merlin, complete with shaggy beard, trailing robe, and magic wand, falls in love with Columbine, and competes for her love with young Harlequin, her lover. The youths steal Merlin's wand, and he calls upon evil spirits to help him. The play is most remarkable, in my opinion, for the way in which Merlin's ancient shape-shifting talent reappears: he changes himself into an easy chair (to trap Harlequin) and is changed by the lovers with his own wand, into an ass. The play ends with the rather obvious pun, "The conjurer proves but an ass!"

The debasement of Merlin and the deterioration of the legend connnected with him are complete at this point. "Merlin's Cave" has become the devil's lair in Hill's play, used to trap the lovers. The name and person of Merlin have become completely dissociated from anything resembling the main body of Arthurian story.

CHAPTER V

MERLINUS REDIVIVUS: TENNYSON'S IDYLLS OF THE KING

The twilight of the Arthurian legends was to end in the later part of the eighteenth century. During the 1760's the Arthurian matter made several tenuous appearances in literature. The most common of these were the so-called chap-book ballads, imitations composed by contemporary writers and labeled authentic, but which nevertheless gave their readers some idea of the fascinating nature of the old legends. At around this time, serious literature also took a second look at the ancient tales; such works as Percy's Reliques of English Poetry (1765), Evans' Specimens of the Ancient Welsh Bards (1764), and Thomas Wharton's History of English Poetry (1774), established a place of at least historical dignity for the stories of Arthur and his court.[1]

For the rest of the century, a wave of Romantic reaction to the older trends in literature set in slowly; the high point of the revival, from an Arthurian standpoint, was the fiction and poetry of Sir Walter

Scott. Scott's work showed audiences as well as critics the value of these old tales of romance, adventure, and myth:

> . . . as the leaven of things new and old worked in the literary revival of the day, it came more and more to be seen not only that they [the Arthurian legends] claimed a scholarly veneration in their bygone forms, but that they were rich in suggestions for the imagination of the present.[2]

A revival of a different sort was in store for the legend of Merlin, a revival that was to reach deep into the following century and that was to see the Merlin story return from its Limbo to a new prominence as a romance. It was discovered that the story of the magician and wizard of Camelot had a certain inspirational value all its own:

> To the man with a share of genius who would fain write as though he had more, the story of Merlin was a godsend.[3]

Thus we find forms of the Merlin legend appearing during the 1800's at much the same pace as the other legends. In Germany the story of Merlin found great popularity in Karl Leberecht Immermann's Merlin, Eine Myth (1832), and in France a bit later, it received much the same response with the publication of Merlin L'Enchanter, (1860), by Edgar Quinet. Thus, by the early part of the nineteenth century all of the major elements of the Arthurian Legend, including the much-maligned story of Merlin, had been

resurrected to prominence in serious literature. During the succeeding years the Arthurian legend was used in the work of such writers as Edward Bulwer-Lytton, R. S. Hawker, William Morris, and Matthew Arnold. The Merlin story found its way into the poetry of William Wordsworth and Algernon Swinburne, who used the story of Merlin's captivation by the maiden as a symbol of the timeless power of love. Across the Atlantic, Merlin appeared in the poems of Ralph Waldo Emerson and in Mark Twain's novel A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court (although Twain's attitude toward the seer is neither dignified nor sympathetic, as he makes Merlin little more than a con-artist).

The final touch of prestige and veneration, however, was not to come from the work of any of these authors, but rather from the pen of Alfred Lord Tennyson; it was Tennyson who "was elected to give the Arthurian stories their ultimate form and genuine immortality."[4]

In the years between 1857 and 1885 Tennyson published twelve verse renditions of the Arthurian tales which he later unified under the title Idylls of the King. His source for most of the material he enshrined in his inimitable verse was Malory's Morte Darthur, although for some of his Idylls he drew on other sources. The Idylls of the King, however, represent the most complex form which the old legends had ever achieved, and indeed, which they would ever achieve. At one level, they are a master poet's attempt to capture some of the beauty of the ancient

cycle--an attempt which has led some observers, even such astute modern critics as W. H. Auden and T. S. Eliot, to view the Idylls as an ill-fated attempt by a modern poet to create an epic in the ancient tradition. This is decidedly not the case, as an understanding of Tennyson's other purposes will quickly show. For on another level, Idylls of the King are an attempt by England's poet-laureate to deal symbolically and artistically with the moral and spiritual dilemmas of nineteenth century--or modern--man, an attempt which comes close in some of the Idylls to plain allegory.

Written over a fifty-year period and published over a thirty-five year span, the Idylls treat numerous issues that were current and urgent in Tennyson's view. For this reason, notwithstanding the views of Eliot and Auden, the Idylls have come to be regarded as Tennyson's life work,[5] or his "magnum opus"[6] by other critics. Part of the complexity of the work is due also to the confusing way in which the poet came to his decision to unite the work. For instance, the last of the Idylls, "The Passing of Arthur," had originally been published as a single poem, with none of the later social comment and moral exhortations, in 1832 under the title "Morte D'arthur." Later the poem was reworked and fitted with an opening section to place it as the logical, brilliant final Idyll, perhaps the most successful portion of the completed work poetically. In

much the same way, other Idylls, such as "Geraint and Enid" and more importantly, "Merlin and Vivien," were originally published under the title "The True and the False," with their theme the value of truth in love. These Idylls, published in 1857 and again in 1859, were later incorporated into the larger work. The final touch of unity was supplied by the poet in his epilogue, "To the Queen," in which he warns her that his purpose in writing is not to portray the stories of Geoffrey and Malory, but to show the great conflict of "shadowing Sense at war with Soul"; sense here is used to mean the sensual, irrational side of man's nature which is continually making it difficult for him to achieve his true rational nature. This final decision of Tennyson to dedicate the entire work to such a comment on his society was the result of a growing fear and anxiety, a pessimism in his world view which was brought about by many factors in his world as he saw it.

> Events were in the air, and theories were being broached that might well alarm his piety to high tradition, and shake his hopes for the gradual development of man.[7]

The Idylls therefore are an attempt to bring nineteenth century England, symbolic to Tennyson of the civilized world, to the realization that it held within it the seeds of its own destruction, as well as the germs of its own regeneration. The great unifying link in the work is the

passion of Lancelot and Guinevere, a passion which affects the characters, however tangentially, in each of the Idylls, and finally destroys the ideal society of the Round Table. As can readily be seen, however, the different motives and dates of composition of the Idylls do not lend themselves easily to this unifying purpose of the author. This is most evident, I believe, in the poet's treatment of Merlin; the magician appears in the opening Idyll, "The Coming of Arthur," and of course in "Merlin and Vivien," a much older work. In the first he has a symbolic function in the story that overshadows his role as a character in his own right; this is not the case in the older poem in which the allegory and symbolism are somewhat labored and secondary in importance to the story.

In "The Coming of Arthur" Merlin is primarily a symbol of one aspect of this ideal kingdom, a kingdom that has the potential to bring man to the greatest heights that he can reach. In this court Merlin with his wisdom is Arthur's adviser, so that in the scheme of symbol and allegory he stands for the element of reason in the life of modern man; he is also Arthur's chief artisan, builder, and engineer:

> Merlin, who knew the range of all their arts,
> Had built the King his havens, ships, and halls,
> Was also bard, and knew the starry heavens;
> [1.165-167][8]

As Arthur's court is man's greatest attempt at worldly sanctity, the King has Merlin equip all the towers and turrets of Camelot with pinnacles to make them reach to the heavens.

To make the old legend conform with his idea of an originally spotless Camelot which fails through later transgressions, it was obvious that Tennyson would have to make some changes. Accordingly, Merlin has no part in the begetting of Arthur; legend has it, we are told, that on the eve of Uther's death a naked babe was borne in to shore amidst a tossing sea, while overhead a great cloud appeared in the form of a dragon-ship. Merlin finds the babe, and Uther has an heir not conceived in sin. Merlin's importance is as the person who helps Arthur secure his kingship and establish his ideal court. Thus it is that at Arthur's coronation he is flanked by symbolic figures, one of whom is Merlin. On the one side is the Lady of the Lake, symbol of the power of the Church, the power which gives this Ideal Man his cross-hilted sword Excalibur; on the other side is the seer, the man of wisdom, Merlin, symbolic of the Reason which alone will allow Arthur to govern in the difficult years ahead. Other than this symbolic role, this treatment of Merlin dispenses with most of the magician's early functions and appearances.

By contrast, Merlin is a realistic character in the earlier Idyll "Merlin and Vivien"; to reconcile this

poem with his later work Tennyson has added a section of flashback, to give the seductress Vivien motives other than those of selfishness and pride. The result is not altogether successful, as the reader finds the larger theme of corruption in Camelot drifting further and further away as the story unfolds. Tennyson's treatment of the seduction of Merlin, however, has a mastery and fascination all its own.

The Idyll opens with Merlin in the forest Broceliande, with "wily Vivien" at his feet. There follows a sizable flashback explaining Vivien's purpose, which takes the reader back to the court of King Mark of Cornwall, already mentioned in the Idyll "Gareth and Lynette" as a symbol of corruption. Mark and Vivien listen to a minstrel from Caerleon tell of the pure, spiritual love of Lancelot for the Queen, and of the importance of this example for the younger knights. Mark, Arthur's enemy since the time the King scorned his attempt to buy his way into the Fellowship of the Round Table, tells Vivien:

> "Here are snakes within the grass;
> And you, methinks, O Vivien, save ye fear . . .
> . . .
> . . . can stir them till they sting."
> ["Merlin and Vivien," 1.33-36]

Vivien jumps at the opportunity, boasting of her hatred for this Arthur who killed her father in battle and caused

the death of her broken-hearted mother. For this, and, more shocking to the reader, for love of the hateful Mark, she promises:

> . . . "I bring Thee back
> When I have ferreted out their burrowings,
> The hearts of all this Order in mine hand."
> [1.54-56]

She then goes to Arthur's court to sow the seeds of discord, immediately being accepted as one of the generous Queen's ladies-in-waiting. Her unnatural hatred leads her to attempt the King; at her ill-advised attempt at seduction Arthur can only stare uncomprehending and walk absent-mindedly away--a comic scene which is unfortunately witnessed by one of the knights. Vivien becomes the laughing stock of the Court she attempts to destroy, and soon imagines her name in every whisper or joke. Unswerving in her purpose, she sets herself to destroy Merlin, "the most famous man of all those times" (1.164), a conquest that will presumably help to pull down Arthur's throne.

She begins to tease and flatter Merlin, who watches with benign, almost indifferent curiosity, until:

> . . . the old man,
> Tho' doubtful, felt the flattery, and at times
> Would flatter his own wish in age for love
> And half believe her true.
> [1.181-84]

After a time, the magician is engulfed by a terrible depression, a "great melancholy" in which he imagines what seems to be a great wave about to fall, a wave of doom and destruction, bringing:

> Death in all life and lying in all love,
> The meanest having power upon the highest,
> And the high purpose broken by the worm.
> [192-94]

The dream, which persecutes Merlin in his waking and sleeping hours, is an omen of the impending dissolution of the Round Table as well as of the imminent destruction of Merlin, for the agent of both--in part--is Vivien. To escape his mental anguish, Merlin seeks to leave Camelot and so takes a boat to Broceliande across the water; unfortunately he is accompanied by an uninvited guest, Vivien. The poet tells us that she had now another purpose for Merlin's destruction; her new intention is to learn the charm that Merlin traditionally possesses, the charm by which he can imprison a person in an invisible tower forever. By his downfall, Vivien hopes to gain everlasting fame:

> And Vivien ever sought to work the charm
> Upon the great enchanter of the time,
> As fancying that her glory would be great
> According to his greatness whom she quench'd.
> [213-16]

Her attempt at seducing or weakening Merlin is one of Tennyson's great triumphs in the Idylls, as we see her using all her ingenuity and charm to seek out a chink in the old man's mental armor. Her tremendous hatred and malice are combined with her great beauty as the poet repeatedly describes her in terms of bestiality; she is a playful kitten, a reptile, a raging beast, an ever-coiling snake that Merlin does not see. For his part, Merlin is indeed a man of the mind, silent, oppressed by his cares and his age, a million light-years away from the willing slave of love in the Vulgate Merlin or the Morte Darthur.

At first Merlin refuses--or is unable--to speak, as he walks about led by Vivien as though in a trance. She attempts to make him speak by teasing and charming him with studied childishness:

> "And lo, I clothe myself with wisdom!", drew
> The vast and shaggy mantle of his beard
> Across her neck and bosom to her knee,
> And called herself a gilded summer fly
> Caught in a great old tyrant spider's web,
> Who meant to eat her up in that wild wood
> Without one word.
>
> [1.253-59]

Finally Merlin is persuaded to speak; Vivien is encouraged and plaintively asks what she has done to deserve such a treatment. Merlin, weakening for the first time, is softened and amused by her antics, and confides in his temptress about his dream; he explains his depression and confesses that she seemed to be the great wave about to

break upon him. He grants her a boon for amusing him, and she immediately, impetuously asks to know "this charm / Of woven paces and of waving hands / As proof of trust" (327-29). She swears that she loves him and asks him to prove that he loves and trust her. Merlin is of course suspicious of this "favor," and tells her that such curiosity led Eve to destroy Adam.

There follows a long dialogue in which several ideas are discussed, especially Merlin's dictum that use in life is vastly superior to fame; Merlin is also persuaded to admit for the first time that he loves the girl "somewhat." The tide has turned in favor of the temptress, and she grows bold, sensing her hour of triumph. At first she overplays her hand, lashing out viciously at the reputations of Arthur's knights; she questions the purity of Sagramore and Percival, the manhood of Arthur, and gradually loses control of her bitter tongue:

> Polluting and imputing her whole self,
> Defaming and defacing, till she left
> Not even Lancelot brave nor Galahad clean.
> [801-3]

For a brief space of time Merlin understands the true personality of Vivien and sees through her, growing furious at this vile little creature who dares defame those so much nobler than herself. He mutters to himself angrily of her audacity, calling her a wanton and a harlot. In this final round of the combat, Vivien gives

an admirable account of herself; she takes only a few seconds to recover from a tactical error. At the sound of the word "harlot" she erupts in a great passion of righteous indignation, feigns great injury and of course allows a judicious tear or two to slide down her pretty cheeks. Ever the human being, Merlin is taken aback slightly by this display of hurt feelings; when the old man attempts to soothe her ruffled pride (his most troublesome attribute throughout the contest seems to be this overabundance of pity) she turns on him coldly. Tennyson draws the offended Vivien with genius, as Merlin learns that Hell indeed hath no such fury:

> But she dislink'd herself at once and rose,
> Her arms upon her breast across, and stood,
> A virtuous gentlewoman deeply wrong'd,
> Upright and flush'd before him:
>
> [1.907-10]

The final blow against the aging man is struck by heaven itself, as a great lightning bolt strikes the tree against which they huddle, causing the girl to leap in very real fear into Merlin's arms. This appeal to Merlin's masculine sense of protectiveness, acted to the hilt by the ever-wary Vivien, adds the final touches:

> The pale blood of the wizard at her touch
> Took gayer colors, like an opal warm'd.
> She blamed herself for telling hearsay tales;
> She shook from fear, and for her fault she wept
> Of petulancy;
>
> [947-51]

Weakened by his natural pity, and ever susceptible to the beauty of this young girl who declares that she loves him, Merlin succumbs at last:

> . . . and what should not have been had been,
> For Merlin overtalk'd and overworn,
> Had yielded, told her all the charm, and slept.
>
> Then in one moment, she put forth the charm
> Of woven paces and of waving hands,
> And in the hollow oak he lay as dead,
> And lost to life and use and name and fame.
> [1.962-68]

The destruction of the great adviser is as complete and sudden as the storm which took part in it.

Interestingly enough, this seduction scene, written as it was during the staid Victorian period, carried an added power that is lost on modern audiences. The object of great controversy, it was censured by the more conservative of Tennyson's readers and critics as being immoral and offensive, and was praised and greatly admired by the poet's more liberal-minded readers. Some thought it a highly original piece, and one of the poet's friends is said to have referred to the Idyll as "the naughty one."[9]

There are several very plausible interpretations of the action in "Merlin and Vivien." Taken, as Tennyson would have hoped, as one of the twelve Idylls purporting to demonstrate the savagery of this never-ending war between man's soul and his sensual, grosser nature, the Idyll becomes the story of reason being overcome by

fleshly passion. It has also been seen by one critic as the story of the conquest of Creative Imagination at the hands of Chaos and Nature,[10] and by another as a conflict between service and selfish passion.[11] On a more literal level, the Idyll is intended to show how the seed of sin destroys society; throughout the early Idylls, Tennyson has used the sin of Lancelot and Guinevere, always referred to as the "Queen's sin," to symbolize the wordly corruption that will always set back man's noblest efforts until removed, and Vivien is a corollary of that sin. It is the sin which, in the later version of the poem, sends her to Arthur's court. In most of the other Idylls, however, the framework fits the story much better. Rumor of the Queen's transgression causes Prince Geraint to doubt his flawless wife Enid; the same rumor, spread by Vivien, causes the enraged Balan to kill his brother Balin, bringing about his own end; knights like the young Pelleas are driven mad by this shock to their ideals, while others like Tristram become worldly, cruel, and cynical. One critic attempts to see this rumored sin as at least a part of Merlin's downfall, as the seer's belief in the noble experiment of Camelot is shattered and his moral fiber is weakened.[12] However, the main point in this later version of "Merlin and Vivien" is Merlin's lapse into sensuality, and on this point Tennyson's success is dubious. As one author has expressed it:

> . . . if we are supposed to feel . . . that here is an example of sensuality destroying the moral virtues of Camelot society, then we must feel that Merlin is ill chosen as victim.[13]

The main reasons for this failure are the poet's masterful treatment of Vivien, and his originally different motive for writing the poem in 1857. Tennyson's Vivien, far from being the naive and selfish girl in the ancient stories, is crafty and beautiful, and guided by an unnatural hatred for Arthur's court and an unhealthy desire to secure glory as Merlin's destroyer. As such, the reader finds Merlin's defeat inevitable and hastened by his own greatness of character, his human pity, and his belief in human nature. Merlin's inability to resist Vivien's physical charms is an unnecessary corollary in the seduction scene, and indeed passes almost unnoticed once he has finally believed in the truth of Vivien's love. The reader is fully aware of the various factors contributing to Merlin's downfall, the most important of which is the girl's falsehood.

It is this question of truth in love that, despite Tennyson's later bold efforts at didacticism, remains the theme of "Merlin and Vivien." The original examination of the tragedy of falsehood in love is the strongest single feeling evoked by the poet. Indeed, to change this he would have had to do much more than to add one simple passage of flashback and motivation. The characters of both Merlin and Vivien would have had to be changed.

Whatever the interpretation the reader wishes to give the poem, Tennyson's contribution to both the legend of Merlin and the lore of Camelot is prominent and was to influence later authors. Tennyson's interpretation of the time-honored man of magic and wisdom is brilliant, as we see for the first time a Merlin who is a lonely, confused old man, a giant in his time, yet a man tormented by great depression over the plight of "my friends of old" as he refers to the men of Arthur's Table. Merlin is an ideal foil for the equally human, warped, vicious girl who sets herself to ruin him, using those very obvious traits of Merlin which she sees as weaknesses.

Many of the oldest traditions about Merlin are absent in Tennyson, including much that gave him his reputation as a magician. There is no need for these elements in the Idylls of the King, for the supernatural in most cases is symbolized by the Church. But in many ways the reader is compensated for the loss of these fascinating items of myth and superstition. The story of Merlin and Vivien is essentially a tragic, one-sided love story, and from that it derives its beauty.

It is certainly no exaggeration to say that Lord Tennyson restored the Arthurian legends to a place of importance and immortality in literature; more than this, he gave to the legends a new relevance and symbolism, a symbolism which I believe was always dormant in the story

of the noble court with the rotting foundations, and a symbolism which was to be much-used in the succeeding century. The twentieth century also found a place of relevance and beauty for the legend of Merlin.

CHAPTER VI

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON'S MERLIN

The revival of interest in the Arthurian legends which began in the nineteenth century was to reach its high-water mark in the twentieth century. During this period several different schools of literature and many different authors were to try their hands at employing the old legends, and especially the legend of Merlin. The first, and probably the greatest version of the story of Merlin in a major work came with the publication of Edwin Arlington Robinson's Merlin, in 1917. The first of three loosely connected long poems employing the Arthurian legends, Merlin demonstrates Robinson's highly original attitude toward the Matter of Britain and proved that a modern writer of a realistic bent could find a proper use for such a body of mystery and fable as the legend of Merlin. A taciturn but deeply penetrating critic of human nature, Robinson first rose to prominence for the great psychological depth of his verse portraits. As shall be demonstrated, he applied this psychological realism with

great success in his Merlin, and later in his Lancelot and Guinevere, and his Tristram of Lyonesse, for which he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize.

It is a commonplace of Robinson's poetry that he was primarily interested in people as individuals.[1] The result of this attitude in Merlin is that we are given two very human portraits, drawn with compassion and knowledge of human nature, in Merlin and his temptress Vivian. In one sense, the poem is a study in Merlin's thoughts and feelings, and the crisis in the work is the moral crisis which arises in Merlin's heart. The poem is more complex than that, however, for there is another extremely important undercurrent of thought in the poem. The Camelot which Merlin has helped to found is more than a kingdom; it is the modern world, and its problems are those of the world. Robinson had read and greatly admired Tennyson's Idylls; it is probable that he drew his inspiration for using Camelot as a symbol of his own contemporary world from Tennyson.[2] The causes which prompted him to inject this symbolic element into his work, however, were more immediate and pressing than those of Tennyson; Merlin was composed in 1916, at the height of the First World War. To Robinson, as to most men of the time, the war was an appalling shock; Robinson felt the war to be the harbinger of man's self destruction, and was convinced that modern

society was doomed to a short life.[3] Indeed we find the poet writing, five years later:

> The whole Western world is going to be blown to pieces, asphyxiated, and starved, and then, for a few centuries we poor artists are going to have a hard time. There may not be any, in fact, for they will have either to die or to dig.[4]

At any rate, Robinson intended Camelot to symbolize the world, and Arthur's court is accordingly--as it usually is--an insane, disillusioning affair with bloody wars and foolishly started strife between those who should be allies, if not friends. Camelot's basic inadequacy as an Ideal for civilization, as well as its selfish, pig-headed leadership, are clearly intended by Robinson to have a message for his world; he wished to "use Arthur and his empire as an object lesson to prove to coming generations that nothing can stand on a rotten foundation."[5] He goes on, however, to caution the reader against going too far in this sort of interpretation. The main theme, though impossible to separate from the backdrop of trembling Camelot, is the brief love, and inevitable crisis of Merlin.

For many reasons Merlin puzzled critics, and still puzzles readers (myself among them, of course); the themes are tightly interwoven, the plot is complicated and unorthodox, the imagery is at times purposely obscure. There is another startling element: while keeping within the greater framework of events in the old Arthurian

legend, Robinson departs ingeniously from the legend of Merlin, taking up where the legend ends. His poem is about Merlin's final return to Camelot.

Accordingly, the work begins with Gawaine and several others of Arthur's knights discussing in worried tones the rumored return of Merlin from his "grave" and its possible significance. Gawaine feels that this return of the wiseman, reportedly at Arthur's personal behest and coming at a time of growing discord at Camelot, can only be a sign that the worst is soon to come and that Arthur has despaired of solving his own problems. He tells Dagonet:

> "There's more afoot and in the air to-day
> Than what is good for Camelot."[6]

Dagonet's ominous retort is:

> "If you see what's around us every day
> You need no other showing to go mad." (Ibid.)

"What's around us" is a hopeless muddle of sin, hatred, and confusion at the core of which is the sin of Lancelot and Guinevere; in Robinson's version this passion is known to everyone in Camelot. Arthur seems to be unable or unwilling to do anything about it, even while it undermines the atmosphere of his court. As if this were not enough, the king has two considerable reminders of his own human

failing at the court, bastard sons by different women, Borre and Modred. Not understanding the king's inactivity, Bedivere expounds:

> "The King must have the state, and be the state;
> Or then we shall have neither king nor state,"
> [p. 244]

The trouble goes deeper, however, for Arthur's knights are no longer united among themselves. While Modred seeks to ruin the King, his half-brothers Agravaine and Gawaine plot what they feel is righteous revenge upon Lamorak and Tor, the sons of the man who killed their father. As Lamorak calmly states:

> ". . . King Arthur's house
> Has more divisions in it than I like
> in houses."
> [p. 248]

The tone of the first part of the work has now been set, and the scene shifts to Arthur's chamber, where Merlin has indeed come back from his long exile. His appearance causes a shock and disappointment to the king (who by now is easily shocked) for he has lost his beard and black robes. Arthur believes that Merlin has lost his wisdom as well as his authority during his "imprisonment" by Vivian. This, however, is the muttering of a desperate man, himself becoming increasingly bereft of whatever wisdom and authority he once had. Robinson's portrait of Arthur is that of a haunted mind, a conscience torn by past

indiscretions and hypocrisies and faced with the now-overwhelming consequences of his faults. This is the Arthur, unlike perhaps any other in literature, of whom Kay can say:

> ". . . the King I saw today
> Was not, nor shall he ever be again,
> The King we knew. I say the King is dead;
> The man is living, but the King is dead."
>
> [p. 248]

Arthur has recalled the seer from his self-imposed absence and pleaded with him to help him right his listing kingdom. Merlin can only tell the man what he has told him before, and what needs no telling. He warns Arthur that the hour of trial is near and that he must be quick and firm when the time comes--and that the King's mortal enemy will be not Lancelot, but Modred. He then foretells of the coming of Galahad and his realization of the Grail Quest; more than this he cannot do, and so the interview between these two who were once close friends ends on an unsatisfactory note.

Merlin returns to Broceliande, where Vivian anxiously awaits his return; there follows a long flashback, the most beautiful part of the poem, which tells of Merlin's first arrival in the forest of Broceliande ten years earlier to become the willing servant of the Lady Vivian. Our first view of the Mistress of Broceliande shows her to be inextricably connected with the beauty and serenity of

her surroundings, the quiet forest. She is dressed in green, blending almost too perfectly with the natural background, and possessed of a natural beauty and grace which make a slave of the physical man in Merlin. The scene of their first meeting in many years is a creation of particular beauty; each has long awaited this meeting, as each is a lonely exile from a world that has tired him. Their secret hope is that this love will forever protect them from the outside. At Merlin's first sight of the Lady:

> . . . her beauty and her grace
> Made passing trash of empires, and his eyes
> Told hers of what a splendid emptiness
> Her tedious world had been without him in it.
> [p. 263]

The desperate world-weariness of both, and their eagerness for some sort of isolation from the outside is stressed by Robinson; stressed equally, however, and a factor neglected by many readers of the poem is the fact that neither is an ordinary person. Merlin is much more than a man of great wisdom, Vivian much more than a pretty woman; to the girl, the old man's great strength of character and the loneliness that comes of his wisdom make him a perfect soul-partner. To Merlin, Vivian's unique personality, her delicate charm and great wit make her:

> "The beauty of all ages that are vanished,
> Reborn to be the wonder of one woman."
> [p. 284]

They are also people, simple people who are in love, and the anxiousness of their passion for each other, together with an increasing sense that they are doomed in some way, lends credence to their love. This unusual passion of an old man for a young girl has been criticized by some as sensual folly and "an unnatural delusion."[7] This, I feel is to misread the poem, or to see it in only the most general way. The folly, if there is folly involved, is that each believes that he can escape Time and the world by means of this love. This idea of escape provides Merlin with his final soul-rending conflict; for the time, however, Merlin is able to shut his mind completely to the ugliness and frustration of the world of men, and is content to stay at the forest manor, grateful for the Lady's love and attention.

At their charming first dinner together each denies the uncharitable stories that lesser minds have spread about them: she denies that her mother was a fairy, he that his father was a devil. This is one of Robinson's devices for removing any trace of the supernatural from the story, for this story is about men. It further illustrates some of that offensive quality of the outside world which has driven Vivian to abandon it, and which has now made Merlin seek out her retreat for himself.

The beauty of their lonely love is mixed with some humor, as the lady possesses some of the nymph-like

qualities which Tennyson's Vivian feigns. She is offended by his great shaggy beard, and when the seer tells her that it is his "surviving ornament of office," she asks him to take it off; she adds that she is in the habit of poisoning people she does not like, bearded old men being foremost in that category. There follows a wry scene of this old, immensely dignified, world-weary founder of empires shaving--a totally new experience--and being shocked at seeing his chin for the first time in many, many years.

In the background of the idyl in the forest is the phantom of crumbling Camelot, which Merlin seems able to forget, and the presence of Time, which he never forgets:

> "Time enjoys
> The look that's on our faces when we scowl
> On unexpected ruins . . ."
>
> [p. 275]

At times, their sojourn in the forest is peaceful and serene:

> Vivian . . . smiled at him across their gleaming rims,
> From eyes that made a fuel of the night
> Surrounding her, shot glory over gold
> At Merlin, while their cups touched and his trembled."
>
> [p. 276]

At other times, Merlin is serious, even somber, as he ponders abstractly the troubles of men: Kings totter, he says "for the world to see, / And heed if the world would" (p. 276).

As the poem develops, however, even their banter comes to be tinged with hints at Fate and doom; on one occasion Vivian lightly tells Merlin: "Vivian is your punishment / For making kings of men who are not kings;" (p. 281). The twofold irony of course is that Merlin is deeply troubled by Arthur's imminent downfall, and that his love of Vivian is eventually to prove a trial of the gravest sort. Ten years pass in this way during which the two are very happy, although Vivian has begun to have occasional doubts:

> . . . not always wholly sure,
> Nor always wholly glad, that he who played
> So lightly was the wizard of her dreams:
> "No matter--if only Merlin keep the world
> Away,"
>
> [p. 281-2]

Finally there comes an invasion of their precarious paradise in Broceliande, in the form of Dagonet who has come with the king's personal entreaty for help. Merlin knows that he must go, but he vows to return; even as he leaves, he realizes that there is nothing he can do for Arthur that he has not already done:

> "The king believes today, as in his boyhood,
> That I am Fate; and I can do no more
> Than show again what in his heart he knows,"
> . . .
> "This time I go because I made him King,
> Thereby to be a mirror for the world;
> . . . this time I go; I go because I must."
>
> [p. 282]

Although he says that he will return, Merlin's sense of duty has already begun to haunt him; with Dagonet's arrival in Broceliande, Merlin's brief but cherished exile comes to a close. For the remainder of the poem, he is the Merlin of old, care-worn and concerned, and very unhappy.

Merlin returns from his melancholy meeting with the King with a renewed purpose to stay in Broceliande; his return to the world has deepened his disillusion. Vivian, for the time, is relieved for she saw in his eyes, as he accompanied Dagonet, the Merlin who wished "to make other kings, / And shake the world again in the old manner" (p. 284). Merlin thinks he will never go back, but an imperceptible change has come over him, as he is now unable to forget the world in the way he once had:

> Since he had come again to Brittany
> From Camelot, Merlin found eternally
> Before him a new loneliness that made
> Of garden, park, and woodland, all alike,
> A desolation, and a changelessness
> Defying reason . . . [p. 285]

The only thing that can make him put the world away from him is Vivian, and she can do it only for a time. He begins to wish that Time could be held at a standstill, for he knows that a stronger power than his love is at work in his life, the power of Fate. Vivian, attempting to cheer up the morose old man, unwittingly strikes a nerve when she asks him:

> "Tell me a story now about the world,
> And the men in it, what they do in it,
> And why it is they do it all so badly."
> [p. 288]

Merlin, of course, recounts that which is foremost in his mind, the story of the kingdom he himself founded to be a symbol for all the world. Realizing by now that Change has come into his refuge and that things will never again be the same, Merlin decides to go; as he was the guiding genius in the foundation of the kingdom, his place is there, not with Vivian. So he tells her:

> " . . . and I shall see the King
> Once more; and I may come to you again
> Once more; and I shall go away again forever.
> There is now no more than that
> For me to do; and I shall do no more.
> I saw too much when I saw Camelot."
> [p. 297]

Merlin's increasing pessimism and disillusionment is perhaps best explained by this last line; he saw, as one critic has stated, all that was wrong, but did not have it within his power as a man to change it.[8] The final parting of Merlin and Vivian is accompanied by silence, for each has said all that needs to be said. The Lady watches him depart, understanding only that he has gone to serve this weakling king that she despises, and silently shuts the gate to Broceliande forever.

The final scene of the poem takes place in Camelot, where we hear Bedivere and Gawaine discussing the King's

preparations for war with Lancelot. Since Merlin's departure the worst has happened; Tor, Gareth, Gaheris, and many others have died in Lancelot's rescue of Guinevere from the stake. Lamorak too is dead, murdered by Modred. Arthur, in spite of Merlin's final warning, has allowed the fury and revenge of his knights to dissuade him and makes war, not on Modred, but on Lancelot. The remaining knights of the table, loyal as they are to the King, are prepared to march against Lancelot. Thus, it is a column of wagons and marching men that greets Merlin when he returns, disguised as a hermit.

He makes for his accustomed place of contemplation, "Merlin's Rock," where he finds Dagonet, the fool, who alone has the sanity to remain outside the increasing whirlpool of violence and madness. The two sit on the rock and watch the crazed knights make ready for a suicidal expedition. Seeing that Merlin has come back with his beard, that he has returned for good to his responsibility, Dagonet asks Merlin to intercede with the King. Merlin, however, knows that he can do no more; he predicts that two future lights of wisdom will come to the world of the future: "The torch of woman, . . . and the light that Galahad found, / Will some day save us all" (p. 311). As for the Camelot of the present, he decides to allow things to take their course, for better or worse, and to leave the court in all its decadence and insanity as the mirror he intended it to be.

For himself, there is nothing left but to leave the world, and even his love in Broceliande:

> ". . . I an farther now
> From her, I see no more for me to do
> Than to leave her and Arthur and the world
> Behind me, and to pray that all be well
> With Vivian, whose unquiet heart is hungry
> For what is not, and what shall never be
> Without her, in a world that men are making . . ."
> [p. 311]

With the prediction of future salvation, the war-preparations of Arthur, and the touching final scene of Dagonet and a greatly-aged Merlin leaving Camelot forever, the poem ends.

This final section of the poem is by far the most difficult to understand, and has been interpreted in various ways. In Merlin's final departure from Vivian, some have seen a rejection of his "foolish" passion, or a decision that duty is more important than love in man's life. This is decidedly not the case. Merlin leaves Vivian because his place is at Camelot; their love affair is ended with tragic finality because each sought that love as an escape from a world that seemed to hold no place for him. Robinson seems to justify Vivian's attempt at isolation, or at least to sympathize with her plight in Merlin's final speech to Dagonet: men have made of the world a place of inhumanity, violence, and sordid passion, a cruel place unfit for the delicate, unique Vivian.

Merlin does not take her with him because he knows that there is no place for her in Camelot. He can only hope that the world will one day right its own error. Vivian and those who come after her are to be one of the saving lights of the world, the power of love working in co-operation with duty, and giving strength to man. In a letter, Robinson stated simply: "'The torch of women' is to be taken literally."[9]

For Merlin, however, love has been something else and he realizes it; love has provided him with a ten-year escape from a world whose capacity for blundering and cruelty frightened him, but a world which was nevertheless partly of his making, and therefore the only place for him. The decision to return seems academic in the poem, for Camelot by the time of his return is so far beyond reclaim that he can do nothing for it. His foresight has so disillusioned him, however, that he has no other place in the world; as he says, he has seen too much ever to be the same. He can only hope that his remaining days will pass quickly and that he will have no more to do with Kings and Camelots and the ways of men.

Robinson's philosophy does perhaps cloud the end of the work if the reader either does not follow it, or does not agree with it. It is difficult, for instance, to agree with Merlin's decision to leave the beautiful, charming

Vivian that Robinson portrays for the crumbling court and weak-willed king that he portrays in his Camelot.

Whether the reader completely understands the motivation of Merlin in the poem or not, the work remains as a substantial contribution to the legend of Merlin. It marks the first successful adaptation of the Arthurian legends to the realistic techniques and psychological interests of modern literature. It is, above all, notwithstanding the backdrop of a corrupt world consuming itself, a great love story. Merlin and Vivian are real characters, with nothing supernatural or symbolic about them. Their love has an urgency and beauty never again equalled in all the literature of Arthurian story, and in this is Robinson's triumph.

CHAPTER VII

T. H. WHITE'S THE SWORD IN THE STONE

The figure of Merlin was to find its way into the works of more authors in the twentieth century than in any other period since the days of the romancers. Perhaps the most imaginative and unusual treatment of Merlin is the portrait of the magician in T. H. White's The Sword in the Stone, published in 1938. Part of the novel's fascination stems from the fact that the plot of the novel concerns the previously untold story of Arthur's magic boyhood, and his early relationship with Merlin (spelled "Merlyn" in the text). For all of his later Arthurian works, which were incorporated with The Sword in the Stone in 1958 to form the best-selling The Once and Future King, White was reasonably faithful to his revered source, Malory's Morte Darthur. For this first book of the series, however, he had no model on which to form his story, and the world is better for it. The Sword in the Stone is the story of Arthur's tutelage under the eminently learned though sometimes befuddled Merlyn, and it is a creation of beauty, sensitivity, and high comedy.

Aside from its unusual content, the novel is unique for another reason: it is the self-portrait of a very unusual man. White could not resist putting something of himself into both the boy Arthur (called Wart in the story) and the old magician. In the boy he gave himself a happy, wish-fulfilling childhood free from the constraints of a mother (for Arthur is, of course, an orphan); his own childhood was quite the opposite, as he was the product of a broken home and violently unhappy marriage.[1] The magician, more importantly, represented to White: "an ideal old age, free from care and the contradiction of circumstances, practicing an enlightened system of education on a chosen pupil."[2] In many ways Merlin is White, the benevolent, white-haired old man with the idealist's painful knowledge of all that the world is not. The magician bespeaks the author's wide knowledge of the legends of the Middle Ages, and his interest in hunting, fishing, and especially natural history. The methods by which the old man teaches his unique pupil are a product of this knowledge: he teaches the boy about the world and man by turning him into various animals and birds so that he can study the different species. For his own part, the old magician, like White, has a pet tawny owl called Archimedes, which talks to him (though we have no evidence that White's owl knew the English tongue).

Merlyn is a startling creation, and at times a side-splitting one. Notwithstanding his immense learning

and great age, he has occasional problems in getting his spells to work. He is forgetful, likes to take naps because the opportunity to do so does not come often to a magician, and is prone to reminisce distractedly about such irrelevant things as the Boer War, because he lives backward in time. He is eccentric and moody, and possessed of an impish humor which becomes a powerful weapon when combined with a stubborn old man's peevishness. On one occasion he gives Sir Ector, Arthur's loyal but none-too-bright guardian, rheumatism for two nights when he defends athletics as a way of education. In appearance, Merlyn is even stranger:

> . . . he was far from clean. It was not that he had dirty fingernails or anything like that, but some large bird seemed to have been nesting in his hair. The old gentleman was streaked with drippings over his shoulders, among the stars and triangles of his gown, and a large spider was slowly lowering itself from the tip of his hat.[3]

He possesses dishes which wash themselves, a talking owl which dislikes strangers and accounts for most or all of the drippings on his mantle, and a lot of spells which misfire. When he attempts to uncurl a pompous drill-sergeant's mustaches, he accidentally makes the gentleman's ears flap. On another occasion, in a burst of anger he jumps on his anachronistic eyeglasses and shouts "'Castor and Pollux blow me to Bermuda!'", an entreaty which results in his sudden and unwilling departure to that

island. A few minutes later he tells the astonished Wart, "'Let this be a lesson to you not to swear'" (p. 130).

Merlyn explains his strange powers of foresight in an unusual way. He can see the future, he tells the boy, because he has already lived in it: "'I have to live backwards from in front. . . . Some people call it having second sight'" (p. 38).

In spite of the author's obvious enjoyment in his work, there is a more serious undercurrent in the novel. It is created with a view to the works that must follow, works that will tell of the downfall of Arthur as Malory told it. White's Merlyn, therefore, is more than a funny old necromancer: he is a man with a distinct purpose, the man who must prepare Arthur for his kingship. He alludes to this greater purpose as well as the higher power from whence he receives his magic, twice in the novel. When Arthur asks Merlyn to change Kay into an animal so that he too can have an adventure, Merlyn replies:

> "I can't change Kay into things. The power was not deputed to me when I was sent. Why this was so, neither you nor I am able to say, but such remains the fact" (p. 130).

On another occasion White gives us this odd exchange:

> "Would you mind if I ask you a question?"
> "It is what I am for," said Merlyn sadly (p. 36).

The boy that Merlyn must instruct is also a singular characterization; he is a good boy, generous, full of pity, honest, earnest, and loyal, a boy who loves animals and adventures, who dreams of being a mysterious knight and never having a wife, in the words of White, "a born follower" (p. 10). It is this artless, normal young fellow that Merlyn must prepare for his inevitable battle in the great world of ignorance and evil.

The story-line in The Sword in the Stone is quite simple; White, having to respect the integrity of no source, allows his imagination free reign. Wart and his foster-brother Kay go from one exhilarating adventure to another, encountering the legendary Robin Hood, watching the ancient and bumbling King Pellinore in his traditional search for the Questing Beast, accompanying the great master huntsman William Twyti on a boar hunt, fighting griffins and wyverns, being chased by giants, and behaving like typical boys. In addition, Wart learns something of the great outside world at first hand.

While Merlyn is occasionally content to subject the boys to the traditional amo-amas-amat torture, he changes Arthur into significant animals. Arthur's first lesson comes when he is turned into a perch. He finds himself inside the moat round Ector's castle and meets, for the first time, a creature possessing the type of power which he himself must some day wield (though he does not know

this). His first "king" is the great, vicious pike Old Jack, who lectures the young perch on the source and value of power:

> "There is nothing . . . except the power that you profess to seek: power to grind and power to digest, power to seek and power to find, power to await and power to claim, all power and pitilessness springing from the nape of the neck. . . . The power of strength decides everything in the end, and only Might is right" (p. 61-2).

The pike concludes his lesson by attempting to swallow Arthur: the boy has seen the first example of corrupting power.

At other times his schooling is of a more humorous nature, for his mentor is a man of pet peeves. When Arthur, who believes that he has no real father, bemoans the fact that he can never be a knight, Merlyn bursts out in a breathless tirade against the silliness of glorifying war through jousting and war-games:

> "A lot of brainless unicorns swaggering about and calling themselves educated just because they push each other off a horse with a bit of stick!" (89).

To make his point he introduces Wart to the reality of jousting and knighthood by transporting him to a clearing in the all-purpose forest surrounding the castle, to witness the titanic strugglings of two inept knights, the fearsome Sir Grummore Grummursum and the redoubtable King Pellinore. Their joust, complete with ceremonial insults

and challenges, ends with both of them colliding with trees and being knocked unconscious.

Throughout his schooling, the future lord of the Round Table is taught the common-sense realities of life and the nature of his fellow man. As a snake he learns that species which persist in indiscriminate killing usually are the victims of their own violence--and that Man is one such species. As a hawk he demonstrates his courage and learns to respond to discipline. As an owl he is introduced to Archimedes' patron Hecate, who shows the boy a vision relating the creation of the world: the vision ends with a scene of man fashioning an arrowhead to kill his brother.

When Kay, the older of the two boys, is to be knighted, Merlyn gives Arthur the final installment in his unique education by turning him into a badger. Wart is sent to meet the old badger, Merlyn's close friend. Before meeting him, however, the boy reveals something of his own growing character; unhappy that his days with his tutor and with his former playmate Kay are to end, he decides to kill something with his newfound badger-claws. The hedgehog he corners, however, strikes pity in Arthur, and makes him realize that he had no urge to kill anything at all. Besides, the hedgehog is one of Merlyn's former pets. The boy then returns to the badger's hole; the old badger reads to him from his Doctoral Dissertation (!!) a long parable "on the trustful relationship between God

and Man."[4] The speech is significant as it comes almost on the eve of Arthur's own kingship and acquisition of power and responsibility.

Merlyn never forgets the fate awaiting the boy in his charge, and shows a new sadness as the time of Kingship approaches. When the naturally generous boy declares:

> "I should pray to God to let me encounter all the evil in the world in my own person so that if I conquered there should be none left, while if I were defeated, it would be I who would suffer for it."

Merlyn's response is a feigned contempt:

> "That would be extremely presumptuous of you, and you would be conquered, and you would suffer for it." . . . He thrust the end of his beard into his mouth, stared tragically in the fire and began to munch it fiercely (pp. 275-76).

The final chapters in the book relate the now-familiar story of the boy drawing the magic sword from the anvil, and also of the coronation of Arthur. Merlyn makes a final reappearance and takes his place as the new King's adviser, setting the stage for the next of White's Arthurian works.

This next book, originally called The Witch in the Wood and later included in the completed 1958 version of The Once and Future King opens with Arthur the King on the battlements of his castle and Merlyn standing next to him in his traditional capacity as trusted adviser. There are several changes apparent in the later works. For one

thing, White is now working within the framework of Malory's Arthurian tales. More importantly, there is a change in theme. All of White's later Arthurian tales were either written or conceived in wartime or post-war England, and the war has left its imprint. The Sword in the Stone had been concerned with Merlyn's attempts to instruct Arthur in the ways of the world, in preparation for his Kingship. In the later works, however, Merlyn appears as the mouthpiece of many of White's ideas about war and its causes. In the completed edition of The Once and Future King the author reworked The Sword in the Stone, cutting several of its lighter episodes and adding incidents relating to man's greatest bane. In this later version, Merlyn sends the boy to visit the warlike vicious ants who fight their own species, and the graceful, peace-loving geese who know nothing of either boundaries or warfare. Indeed, White had originally planned for his Arthurian work to end with a "Book of Merlyn," in which the King, after the battle of Salisbury, and the magician after his imprisonment, were to be reunited underground. They were then to have discussed war and its possible "cures," but White never finished working on the section.[5]

Throughout the early part of Arthur's reign, Merlyn points out to the boy the appalling violence into which he has been thrust:

> "You have become the king of a domain in which the popular agitators hate each other for racial reasons, while the nobility fight each other for fun, and neither the racial maniac nor the overlord stops to consider the lot of the common soldier, who is the one person that gets hurt."[6]

At other times he points out the things that cause great wars: "Life is too bitter already, without territories and wars and noble feuds" (p. 232).

The magical aspects of his power, as well as a good deal of his humor, have disappeared with Arthur's coronation. Instead White stresses Merlyn's capacity as mentor to the King. Time and again Merlyn refuses to help the boy make decisions, for the King must learn to make his own plans sooner or later: "Education is experience, and the essence of experience is self-reliance."[7] He is quick, however, to point out the occasions where Arthur's thought-processes leave something to be desired. After hearing Arthur's jubilant description of the first battle of his reign, he says:

> "When you said about the battle being a lovely one, you were thinking like your father. I want you to think like yourself, so that you will be a credit to all this education I have been giving you . . . are you going to go on all your life being like Uther Pendragon?" (p. 224).

Like Robinson's Merlin, White's is the king-maker, whose life-purpose is the establishment of Arthur's kingship. White's description of Arthur's momentous first official council is curious for the behavior of the magician:

> Merlyn was watching him with a sharp eye. His knobbed fingers fluttered among the stars and secret signs of his gown, but he would not help the speaker. You might say that this moment was the critical one in his career--the moment towards which he had been living backward for heaven knows how many centuries, and now he was to see for certain whether he had lived in vain (p. 246).

In spite of all his other innovations, White stays reasonably close to Malory for the chronology of events and for the activities of Merlyn. In the great battle of Bedegraine, for instance, Merlyn advises the king to ally himself with King Ban and King Bors, and he gives the King the successful strategy by which the battle is won. Seldom, if ever, does White introduce any elements of magic into the later portrait of Merlyn. As in Malory, the magician's downfall comes at the hands of the maid Nimue. White's treatment of the romance of the magician is even more casual and offhand than Malory's--but for different reasons. His Merlyn is too much of a self-portrait for the author to treat seriously a love story involving him; further, a serious, even tragic romance for the magician would have been completely out of place, as he is a basically humorous character throughout the work. Thus, White's Merlyn can speak of his own ruin with humor and nonchalance:

> "It is nothing. I am due to fall in love with a girl called Nimue in a short time, and then she learns my spells and locks me up in a cave for several centuries. It is one of those things which are going to happen."

He explains to Arthur that a man cannot change his fate, and even adds: "As a matter of fact, it will be charming to rest for a few hundred years, and, as for Nimue, I am looking backward to her a good deal" (p. 224). Accordingly, the magician takes up his knapsack and walking shorts (he frequently appears in modern dress in the book) and happily goes forth to meet his Fate.

There follows a rather unhappy addition to the traditional Arthurian jumble. Despite the nobility of his intentions and his importance in the establishment of Camelot, Merlyn contributes to Arthur's downfall. Part of his duties has been to inform Arthur of both past and future occurences which have bearing on Arthur's throne; he informs the King that Uther was his father (legitimately in White's version) and about the impending, fatal romance between Lancelot and Guinevere (at which Arthur scoffs). He leaves on his final journey to Northumberland, however, bothered by the unshakable conviction that he has forgotten to tell Arthur something of importance. Finally, just as Arthur is about to be seduced by the beautiful, much older Queen Morgause of Orkney, Merlyn remembers that he has not told Arthur who his mother was. The King's mother, of course, is traditionally the mother of Morgause, and so the naive young man unwittingly commits incest--which produces Modred.

This is in accordance with White's view that Malory's Morte Darthur is a perfect Aristotelian tragedy, a completely unified work. Part of the difficulty in holding such a view is that he must account for everything in the traditional work within the limitations of tragedy. Arthur sins in innocence, and White must account for both the sin and the presence of the all-seeing Merlyn. He also introduces a talisman called a Spancel which Morgause uses on the young king. At any rate, White has allowed the comical absent-mindedness of Merlyn which provoked so much humor in The Sword in the Stone to contribute to Arthur's ruin. The whole thing seems an unfortunate addition to the story.

The magician makes one final appearance in the book, when he shows up at the court of King Ban of Benwick to summon the king's son, Lancelot, to the court of Arthur. He is not alone; with him is "a handsome minx with an olive complexion and plucked eyebrows." When Merlyn forgets to tell Lancelot that Arthur is now married, he complains:

> "I have been getting bejingled in my brains!"
> Here he glanced at the beautiful lady, as if she might be responsible for the jingling--which she was. She was Nimue, and he had fallen in love with her at last (p. 326).

Shortly afterwards, Merlyn goes amiably to his living grave.

Thus the funny old wizard is not present at the book's final scene which finds the now-ancient, white-haired King weeping in his tent on the eve of the battle in which he must slay his son. He remembers the long-gone days of his happy boyhood with Merlyn, and his education suddenly takes on a new significance:

> "And Merlyn had taught him about animals so that the single species might learn by looking at the problems of the thousands" (p. 638).

Somewhere along the line, something in man and in the world has hopelessly corrupted the noble plans of Arthur and Merlyn. There is a greater power of evil at work which will not be subdued so easily; however, White makes the reader feel that this evil has little to do with men like Arthur and Merlyn. The book ends on a hopeful note, as the King realizes that he will have yet another go at this world of cruelty. The reader recalls Merlyn's prophecy of many years ago:

> "I will tell you something else, King which may be a surprise for you. It will not happen for hundreds of years, but both of us are to come back" (p. 287).

The reader remembers, and with the old King, is relieved.

T. H. White's treatment of the Arthurian legend is outstanding in many ways. His Arthurian characters have a life all their own, and each one is unique, from the confused lovers Lancelot and Guinevere to the blundering,

well-meaning Gawaine and his hopelessly crazed brother Mordred. His story is the time-tested story of Malory, and to this White has added a unique blend of comedy and drama. The climax of his achievement, however, is in his brilliant creation of the relationship between the wizard and the future King of Britain. White's is perhaps the most human of all Arthurs, and his Merlyn defies comparison. Throughout the humor and the inanity of the early adventures of this improbable duo there is a poignance and knowledge of the world that remains to the end of the book. It is this wisdom that raises White's work from the level of literary curiosity to that of lastingly significant literature. It is this quality that makes T. H. White's the Arthurian legend of the twentieth century.

CHAPTER VIII

C. S. LEWIS' *THAT HIDEOUS STRENGTH*

T. H. White's lengthy treatment of the Arthurian legend by no means exhausted the figure of Merlin as a literary symbol. The twentieth century was to see many works dealing with Merlin, both within and outside the traditional framework of the Arthurian legends. Two of the more important works using Merlin, after White, are Laurence Binyon's *The Madness of Merlin*, and the Arthurian poetry of Charles Williams. Binyon's work, an unfinished drama in verse, makes use of the tradition of the Caledonian Merlin, portraying Merlin as an isolated prince of the Welsh. Williams' two volumes of separate Arthurian poems, *Taliessin through Logres* and *The Region of the Summer Stars* deal with Arthur's kingdom as a system of private philosophical and religious symbols. Merlin, in Williams' work the son of Nimue, resides in a cave by the sea where he and his sister Brisen "are to set up . . . the kingdom of a complete and balanced humanity."

The most unusual treatment of Merlin in the twentieth century, however, occurs in C. S. Lewis' highly

imaginative That Hideous Strength, a novel which resurrects the magician in twentieth century Britain. A combination fantasy and science-fiction story, That Hideous Strength is the final volume of Lewis' moralistic science-fiction trilogy which describes, among many other things, the spiritual struggle in the universe between the forces of Good and Evil. Lewis tackles this ambitious theme with many weapons, all of them rather unusual. Foremost in the trilogy is Lewis' creation of a Christian cosmology in his own terms; the universe is ruled by Maleldil (God), who is aided by his own spirits, the more important of which guard each planet in the universe, and the lesser of which, called eldils, seem to correspond roughly with what we would call angels. The evil in the universe has been isolated into the earth and its satellite, which is under constant assult by the Master of the Evil eldils, apparently Satan.

Lewis also uses the traditional elements of Greek myth, as the eldils which guard each planet are called by the names of the Greek and Roman gods, Mars, Mercury-Thoth, and so on.

Finally, he brings into the third book, as a backdrop for the struggle with which the book is to deal, his own version of Arthurian Britain, thriving and struggling in a world of evil, led by the Pendragon and aided by its traditional defender--Merlin.

Briefly, That Hideous Strength deals with the rise to power of a ruthless group of ultra-pragmatic scientists, philosophers and scholars who have as their ultimate goal the overhauling of man's universe, and of man himself. Ultimately, they hope to create of humanity a new species, giving to certain select members of the race immortality. In the course of their striving, they will eliminate all in man's world that is not useful: inefficient members of society, malcontents, physical misfits, inferior minds, and as one overly-zealous scientist puts it, "backward races."

The power behind this group (which calls itself the N.I.C.E.: National Institute for Co-ordinated Experiments) is none other than the power of evil itself, the "Masters" who seek to gain for all time the souls of the foolish and to destroy forever the God-given independence of Mankind. The Masters have prepared their servants well: the N.I.C.E. has its own police force, controls the entire British press, issues propaganda regularly, and effectively convinces the British people that its purpose is to alleviate sociological evils by studying them on a round-the-clock basis. Added to this is the fact that the Institute possesses some of the foremost minds in England in its ranks.

Opposed to this formidable, perfectly planned coup of the country is Lewis' contribution to Arthurian literature. A small group of uncorrupted, determined people, led by Dr. Ransom the philologist, hero of Lewis' first

two books in the trilogy, Out of the Silent Planet and Perelandra, are preparing to do combat in their own way with the N.I.C.E. These people are all that remains of Arthurian Logres, the spiritual heart of England which is constantly at war, throughout the ages, with the evil and materialistic forces of "Britain." Ransom, who in the first two books is taken into outer space and appointed Keeper of the Grail in England, is Pendragon of Logres. Lewis even changes the man's name to Mr. Fisher-King, as the Arthurian terminology is occasionally tossed about in a rather heavy-handed manner. The people of Logres, through the leadership of Ransom, have the powers of Maleldil and Heaven on their side; these powers, however, cannot be used by normal men in the fight against evil. They can only be used through a man who has seen and worked in the supernatural. Thus it is that Ransom's force begins its search for the only man in all the Western world who had lived in the age of magic and still remained to be called back: Merlin.

The plot resolves itself into a search by both sides for a historical Merlin who lived and worked his magic in but apart from the world of men, a Merlin who is said to lie sleeping in his tomb beneath Bragdon Wood. The N.I.C.E. is even more interested in Merlin, for they see his services as the only missing ingredient in their conquest; as Ransom puts it, they:

> ". . . simply want to increase their power by tacking onto it the aid of spirits--extra-natural, anti-natural spirits. Of course they hoped to have it both ways. They thought the old magia of Merlin, which worked in with the spiritual qualities of Nature, loving and reverencing them and knowing them from within, could be combined with the new goetia--the brutal surgery from without."[2]

In the midst of the search for his tomb, Merlin appears: he is a tall, heavy man with graying red hair and a great shaggy beard; he calls himself Merlinus Ambrosius. He appears to be a very sinister figure, but Lewis is at great pains to explain that Merlinus' magic is far from sinister, as the world in which he lived was far from evil. Merlinus is a man of ironies, British and Roman, Christian yet druid, learned in the ways of Nature and, we are told, in the art of ancient Numinor in pre-Atlantean days. He is one of a long line of men who have carried on and preserved this magic, white magic stemming from a time when "the general relations of mind and matter on this planet had been other than those we know" (p. 201). He is gentle and completely at one with Nature, notwithstanding his ferocious appearance and his fierce, warlike background as a Celt of the Dark Ages:

> "He is the last vestige of an old order in which matter and spirit were, from our modern point of view, confused. For him every operation on Nature is a kind of personal contact, like coaxing a child or stroking a horse" (p. 285).

Merlinus is a man whose first home is nature; indeed, at one point he offers to the Pendragon the services of Nature itself: "'Leave me to work, Lord. . . . I will set a sword in every blade of grass to wound them and the very clods of earth shall be venom to their feet'" (p. 288). Ransom forbids the use of such power, for the earth has changed since Merlin's day, and to dabble with such power is unlawful; Ransom adds "It was never very lawful, even in your day. . . . And because Our Lord does all things for each, one of the purposes of your reawakening was that your own soul should be saved" (p. 289).

Thus it is that Merlinus arrives to serve the Pendragon, pushed on by a power much greater than himself; at times Lewis seems confused as to who it is that really sends Merlinus to the Pendragon, as we find Ransom telling his followers that Merlinus has come of his own accord, and

> "That he went out of time, into the parachronic state for the very purpose of returning at this moment" (p. 226).

At other times, however, it is apparent that Merlinus is not in complete control of his mind; he makes occasional prophecies concerning the struggle with the N.I.C.E. and the future of humanity, but does not seem to know more of the future than what comes out of his mouth. It becomes more and more apparent that the Power of Heaven

has chosen to use him as a vessel, to fit him for the reception of the powers that would destroy ordinary men. It is Ransom who finally explains to Merlinus why his services are needed; he tells the magician that the spirits of Heaven can only work through

> "one who by his own will once opened [his mind]. . . . One who has dabbled . . . in the days when dabbling had not begun to be evil, or was only just beginning . . . and also a Christian man and a penitent" (p. 291).

More than a dabbler in the occult and a wizard of Nature, Lewis' Merlinus is a man of the Dark Ages, and suggests life in a violent but very different time from ours. The reader gets an interesting glimpse of this when Merlinus dreams of his great past:

> Merlin saw in memory the wintry grass of Badon Hill, the long banner of the Virgin fluttering above the heavy British-Roman cataphracts, the yellow-haired barbarians. He heard the snap ofbows, the CLICK-CLICK of steel points in wooden shields, the cheers, the howling, and the ring of struck mail. He remembered also the evening, fires twinkling along the hill, frost making the gashes smart, starlight on a pool fouled with blood, eagles crowding together in the pale sky (p. 324).

He bears other unmistakeable marks of his era, some of which are a source of humor in the book. Merlinus sees all groups as hierarchies, with a Lord at the top and slaves at the bottom. He is accustomed to dealing with enemies of Logres with force, and so cannot understand, early in the book, how it is that the Pendragon of Logres

does not send out his "forces" to destroy the N.I.C.E. On another occasion, when one of the women, Jane Studdock, angers him, he asks that her head be cut off. At her charge of cruelty he shows wonder, for it is a charge he has not heard leveled at him before. He points out rather casually that women of greater status and position than Jane have had their heads lopped off without hesitation. He is indeed a stranger in a strange land.

Another occasion for humor arises when Merlinus realizes who his allies in the momentous struggle are. It is explained to him--with the greatest of care--that Ransom the Pendragon, as well as the others, are the English that he fought all his life as Saxons. It takes the poor fellow a while to recover from such a blow.

But he does recover, for the Pendragon is, now as then, his Lord, and the struggle is still, in a general way, the one that was under way when Merlinus fought for Arthur. The odds do not frighten him either, for he remembers greater odds:

> "I saw the time when Logres was only myself and one man and two boys, and one of those was a churl. Yet we conquered" (p. 292).

He awaits the coming of the gods, and upon their arrival, receives into himself the temporary combined powers of the planet spirits, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Saturn, and Jupiter, by their Roman names. With his newfound power, he goes out to do battle with the forces of Belbury.

Once inside the stronghold of the N.I.C.E., the battle is swift and one-sided; Merlinus' hour comes at the time of the Institute's great banquet. He sits calmly in the room, disguised as a Basque interpreter, and using his power confuses the tongues of all the servants and members of the N.I.C.E. in a scene deliberately reminiscent of the Biblical Tower of Babel. In the resulting chaos, Merlinus steals down to the dungeons where the N.I.C.E. carries on its repulsive experiments on man and beast alike, and releases the prisoners. His old friends, the animals, finish off Merlinus' work on the men of the N.I.C.E. A short time later, Merlinus is seen walking calmly in the direction of Bragdon, presumably to return to his grave for his final rest. His task is done and his magician's soul is now beyond reproach.

It is difficult to evaluate any work in the area of science-fiction as literature; C. S. Lewis' trilogy is more complex than even the most ambitious science-fiction novel. If anything, the work is too ambitious, covers too many disparate elements--though it is an admirable attempt. The didactic element is ever-present in the trilogy, as the first two books satirize man's failings, and the third book mocks modern man's worship of science. As a novel, <u>That Hideous Strength</u> is fascinating, if uneven. The framework of the trilogy is original and so imaginative as to make up for even some of its most glaring faults. Lewis

is obviously enjoying himself in these pages. His description of Merlinus, and especially of the world that we disparagingly refer to as the world of the Dark Ages, is worth the trouble to read the book.

We view a world of magic, of peace between man and Nature, and a world in which Nature had a personality and character in its own right. Merlinus looms as a Celt of the fifth or sixth century, a man who knows how to use a sword, who is proud of his Roman heritage and Latin speech. He is equally versed in the rites of Christianity and druidism, in a world in which neither is better than the other. At times Lewis does not seem to be quite clear as to the nature of Merlinus' occult practices: at one moment the magician is a practicioner in harmless, even beautiful arts, and at another moment his soul is tampering with evil. Whatever the case, Lewis clearly envisions for the reader a world in which man is perfectly at ease in and with his world, and foremost among such men is Merlinus, protector of Logres and friend of Nature.

CHAPTER IX

THE BOY FROM WALES: MARY STEWART'S THE CRYSTAL CAVE

What T. H. White had done for Arthur, Mary Stewart, another British author, attempts to do for Merlin in her novel, The Crystal Cave, published in 1970. It is an interesting treatment of some of the most familiar elements in the legend of Merlin, with significant additions. Told in first-person by an aged Merlin, the book recounts his boyhood and growth to manhood and purpose. Mrs. Stewart combines the legends of the two Merlins: her Merlin is a bastard Welsh prince, living at the court of his grandfather the King of Wales. His mother, the King's daughter, is Niniane, a proud woman who refuses to disclose the identity of the boy's father, and who possesses in a very limited way the power to foretell the future.

This royal birth, however, is actually the only element taken from the legend of the Caldeonian Merlin. The major part of the subject matter, and indeed the entire plot outline of the later portion of the book, comes from

that earliest account of Merlin, Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia Regum Britanniae.

A major change in the tradition is that the author eventually makes Merlin's father known to him. Merlin Emrys, as his mother calls him, is the child of the future King of all Britain, Prince Ambrosius, brother of Uther Pendragon. As in Geoffrey, the two are exiled in Brittany, awaiting the day of their vengeful return to Britain. Merlin is thus "twice royal," the son of a prince and a princess. He is first, however, a prophet, a tool of the gods. In recounting his boyhood, Merlin tells how he has come by all that he has learned. He reveals the purpose, hid from him at first, which led him from place to place in loneliness and exile, gathering at all times the knowledge which would fit him for his future role in history. This aspect of the story is one of Mrs. Stewart's highest achievements, as she portrays admirably the little boy with an ever-growing knowledge, power, and importance.

While at the court of Wales, Merlin becomes a loner, growing to love his own solitary pursuit of knowledge. To the Welsh king, he is a nuisance, a weakling unfit for war, a bastard unfit for the throne. To Prince Camlach, however, the boy is a force to be feared. It is through Camlach, his uncle, that Merlin first learns that he is really different from other boys; the Prince, knowing that Merlin has inherited some of his mother's

mysterious power, attempts to poison the boy and is foiled by the very power of prediction that he sought to erase.

It is not really clear at the beginning of the book what Merlin's power is. He sees occasional, brief glimpses of the near future, recognizes men he has not met before; this vague power is referred to by everyone in the book as "the Sight." His mother's "Sight," Merlin later states, only concerned "women's things." His own is different.

Throughout his life he adds to his power, combining the knowledge of many people. The first and most important of these is Galapas, a gentle old magician who lives in a cave at the top of a hill. This is the "Crystal Cave" of the title, and is destined to become Merlin's home. Galapas himself possesses the Sight, but seems to sense that Merlin's power is greater than his own, and undertakes to tutor the boy. He has much to teach the boy, for he knows much: natural history, medicine, the use of drugs and herbs, "how to stop bleeding, how to set a broken bone," how to use a primitive form of anesthetic, and an occasional spell:

> "I remember that the first spell he taught me was the charming of warts; this is so easy that a woman can do it."[1]

More than this, however, Galapas teaches Merlin the use of the Crystal Cave. If he possesses any real magic beyond trifling spells, it is in the knowledge of the cave. In

this cave is a round opening, studded with rough crystals, in which he sees the future. In his first use of the cave, Merlin sees a subterranean mine which is to prove useful to him at a later time, when he meets Vortigern, High King of Britain. Merlin is to inherit this globe and the cave, and both seem to be a symbol of his power in the early segments of the book. Unfortunately, after the preliminary description of the cave's importance, the author allows it to drop from view. Merlin returns to the cave at several times in his young manhood, making it his home eventually; but never in the later portion of the book does he use the crystal-studded globe to see the future. The cave is displaced as the story-line from Geoffrey of Monmouth takes over.

After his tutorship under Galapas, events take a fortunate turn for the boy; fleeing from the ruthless Camlach after the death of the old King, Merlin is captured by two spies of the exiled Ambrosius and Uther and finds himself at the court of Less Britain. Here he meets his father, now preparing to invade Britain and regain his throne from the usurper Vortigern. The description of the relationship between the two is curious, and well-done. Merlin reveals his shock at learning, after so many years of wondering and day-dreaming, that he has a father of whom he can be proud; moreover, he learns to his chagrin that he was conceived in the very cave which he is to inherit. Ambrosius is a grim man, determined to use every

man to the extent of his usefulness to the cause; his son is no different. When Merlin demonstrates his "Sight," Ambrosius prudently turns him over to a pair of curiously different but equally efficient tutors: Belasius, a sinister, cold-hearted man, teaches the boy mathematics and astronomy. But he is also a secret priest of the druids, and he initiates the boy to these ancient rites. Merlin's other tutor at this time is Tremorinus, a brilliant man who teaches him the fundamentals of engineering.

At this time the boy begins to have strange inklings of the purpose for which he has been given power. He know, with increasing certainty, that some greater power, a god, is working through him:

> ". . . it feels, as if I were an empty shell with something working through me. I say things, see things, think things, till that moment I never knew of. . . . I can't command whatever speaks through me. . . . Someday I shall command this part of me that knows and sees, this god, and that really will be power" (p. 212).

Knowing he has a greater purpose in life, the boy begins his quest in earnest, gathering knowledge where it is available, taking power where it is offered. His hour draws near.

When Ambrosius sends him back to Wales to spy, the familiar plot from Geoffrey's Historia begins to emerge. Mrs. Stewart does an admirable job of recounting

in plain, realistic terms the fantastic events of Geoffrey's account of Merlin. In Wales, Merlin finds much changed; civil war has ravaged the country, and Vortigern's spies are everywhere. While talking with his cousin Dinias in a tavern, Merlin is approached by Vortigern's men, who have heard the drunken Dinias call Merlin "'a no-man's-child who never had a father at all!'" They have been searching for such a child, and therefore lose no time in taking both Merlin and his mother, now a nun, to Vortigern. The episode of Merlin and Vortigern is done with no small amount of skill, but is done without emphasis on magic. When confronted with Vortigern and his blood-thirsty magicians demanding the death of a fatherless boy, the youthful Merlin uses his power (or it uses him) and a good deal of common sense to save himself and discredit the magicians. He is aided by certain signs in the heavens, such as a rainstorm which suddenly stops as he promises to help Vortigern.

After disclosing to Vortigern the subterranean pool which prevented him from building his tower of defense (a pool which he saw in his boyhood in the cave) Merlin is aided by his god. He astonishes everyone with his predictions of the coming of Ambrosius and the defeat of the Saxons, predictions which are followed by the ominous signs of Vortigern's white dragon-standard falling suddenly to the ground. Overhead men see the sudden appearance of the

firedrake, the dragon of fire, and the comet dispels any further doubt in Merlin's power. Vortigern is a superstitious man, and knows only that he has seen the Red dragon of Ambrosius overcome his own White dragon. Merlin's reputation is made for all time.

It is an interesting characteristic of Mrs. Stewart's Merlin that his brain and his nerve are often more useful to him than his "power." Thus, after disclosing to Vortigern the pool that prevents completion of the tower of Dinas Brenin, he convinces the King that the tower, in actuality an impregnible military position, is to be his death-trap. Vortigern flees with his host, only to be utterly destroyed by the avenging Ambrosius and his Breton army.

As in Geoffrey, Ambrosius dies after consolidating all of Britain for the first time. Merlin erects a memorial to his father, adding to the already existing ring of stones at Stonehenge the greatest stone of them all from Ireland, the tombstone of Ambrosius. He now becomes adviser to the fiery Uther, who seems to have much more need of an adviser than his brother. For a time, all is quiet and Merlin lives at peace in his cave; then Uther calls him, and Merlin knows that he must go. He has had another vision:

> "It seemed that the whole countryside, the whole of Wales, the whole of Britain could be held small and shining and safe between my hands, like something

> set in amber. I . . . knew that this was what I had been born for. The time was here and I must take it on trust" (p. 444).

Uther's problem, of course, is his fierce and dangerous passion for Ygerne of Cornwall, and he pleads with Merlin to help him. Merlin agrees, but not out of pity: his instinct of his purpose has told him that something of future greatness shall come of this situation--a child, a child for Britain.

In the resulting chaos of war between Uther and Gorlois of Cornwall, Merlin brings the young king to Ygerne--without magic, potions, or spells. He uses only disguises, his own ability to mimic voices and dialects, and a sentry who is in his employ. The only supernatural element in this version of the begetting episode is Merlin's vision: his knowledge of the purpose of the union of Uther and Ygerne, and his assurance that somehow, Gorlois will be kept away for that night. This night is the purpose for which Merlin lives, the purpose for which he was given power. As he tells his servant Cadal,

> ". . . a King will come out of this night's work whose name will be a shield and buckler to men until this fair land, from sea to sea, is smashed down into the sea that holds it, and men leave earth to live among the stars" (p. 480).

The lovers are joined and Arthur is conceived. The night is marred by the news that Gorlois has been killed in battle, and by a brief but savage fight between Merlin and

Gorlois' man Brithael. Merlin kills Brithael before the gates of Tintagel, and, bleeding and weary of his dealings with Uther and the world, returns to his cave.

The story ends at this point, making no mention of the later stories connected with Merlin; Mrs. Stewart sees no point, apparently, in relating adventures of the magician that do not concern his higher purpose, although the boy Merlin, early in the book, has a vision that he is to be trapped in his own cave by a young girl's wiles.

As a whole, The Crystal Cave has several outstanding virtues, and several glaring faults. Mrs. Stewart's recreation of post-Roman Britain with its colonnaded houses and hypocausts is realistic and believable. Her account of the events of Geoffrey's Historia, a difficult task, is equally well-done, dispensing with many of the more fantastic elements in Geoffrey's story of Merlin.

Her most brilliant achievement in the book is in her characterization of the important secondary characters, the men of hallowed legend, Ambrosius, Uther, Gorlois, Vortigern, and her own curious creations, Galapas and the druid Belasius. The best of these portraits are reserved for the brothers of Brittany, Ambrosius and Uther. In Ambrosius, the author portrays a brooding, intelligent man who lives only for the moment when he will regain his heritage; he is a man of courage and sensitivity. Merlin

treats his father as a great man, and Mrs. Stewart shows us nothing to alter that impression. Her characterization of Uther is surprisingly close in spirit to the Uther of Geoffrey; the younger of the two princes is a fierce, selfish soldier, possessing all of his brother's determination and courage, none of his prudence. He is suspicious of all that he does not understand, and is quite believable as the monarch who would throw away a kingship won at great cost for another's wife.

Another strong point in the story is the brief but poignantly told relationship between the quiet, wise Galapas and the lonely little boy. After this episode, however, the story begins to show difficulties.

First person narration may be the easiest method of telling a story, but it is the most difficult method to use effectively. The reader rightfully expects more of a narrator professing to be Merlin than he finds in The Crystal Cave; at times, Merlin is less than believable, and, as the plot from Geoffrey takes over, reveals little of the emotion or thought that is to be expected. There appears to have been a change in the author's viewpoint somewhere in the final third of the book, as the story is no longer the story of Merlin, but the story of the reunion of Britain. The elements which were most important in the early part of the book are no longer mentioned. For instance, the author at first emphasizes the importance of

the Cave in Merlin's life: here he was conceived and tutored, here he will live, and, she hints, will die. After the return of Merlin to Britain, however, he never uses the cave as more than a dwelling; of the mysterious crystal globe of Galapas we hear little. Merlin's visions come of themselves. The author simply finds no time to describe the secret uses of this strange apparatus. Nor is there time for Merlin to come to an understanding (for the reader's sake) of his power. He never gains that control over his power that he predicted as a boy. He ends the story possessing no more knowledge about his power and the god who sends it than he had as a boy in Brittany.

At any rate, The Crystal Cave is notable for its treatment of a hitherto untouched area: the boyhood of Merlin. Mary Stewart's treatment of this boyhood, and her brilliantly lifelike characterizations of Britain's legendary figures, make the book worth reading.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have examined the legend of Merlin in the literature of nine centuries. I have attempted to trace the many changes and additions which the men of these vastly different periods have brought to the figure of Merlin and to his story. The legend begins with Geoffrey of Monmouth, who almost unintentionally creates one of the most memorable legends in literature. Through the later French romancers, especially the writers of the Vulgate Cycle and the Suite du Merlin, it is fascinating to watch the growth of the story of the magician and wise man. As I hope I have demonstrated, those elements which were to interest and captivate later writers most were already incorporated into the legend of Merlin by the time it reached Malory. Since that time, the legend has seen retellings and uses of every kind, from the Romantic version by Tennyson, to the psychological treatment of Robinson, and the realistic version of Mary Stewart. In each case, Merlin emerges as the familiar figure from the old legends, but also as something different to each author.

It is difficult to point out any consistent development in either the figure of Merlin or the tradition surrounding him; however, certain characteristics stand out as timeless, traditional elements of the story, elements that are almost the symbol of Merlin himself. The first of these is Merlin's humanity. No writer after Geoffrey, with the notable exceptions of the unsympathetic dramatists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, is able to portray Merlin without making him first and foremost a human being. We see this clearly in the Prose Merlin, where the old man, quite conscious that his passion for a thirteen year-old girl will destroy him, is yet unable to do anything about it. He is, after all, but a man. The story of this destructive love then becomes a regular feature of the legend. In Tennyson's Idyll, it is Merlin's pity and susceptibility to the charms of a deceitful woman which destroy him, and it is his pity for his "friends of old" that torments him while he stays at Arthur's court. To Robinson, the humanity of Merlin is the essence of the legend; his Merlin is no more than a very wise man, and a very lonely, disillusioned one. In the same way, T. H. White's Merlin is portrayed with a great deal of sensitivity; although he coats his treatment at times with an abundance of humor, White at all times gives his reader a Merlin who is only human, and delightfully so. Even C. S. Lewis' Merlinus, amidst the complex battle of good against

evil in the universe, is basically nothing more than a rough, shrewd, forthright man of fifth century Britain. He is an honest Celt, a man of action, a fighter. Finally, Mary Stewart's Merlin not only follows in the tradition of these other portraits, but adds to the humanity of the seer: she gives us a glimpse into the mind of the man, and attempts to record his boyhood.

Throughout all these treatments, there is a gradual but persistent lessening of the element of the supernatural in the story of Merlin. The outlandish stories one finds in Geoffrey, or the pious fables of incubi and supernatural powers from God are absent in the later treatments. This begins as early as Malory, the gruff old knight who sees nothing charming in such nonsense about magicians and demons. Tennyson allows the supernatural element to drop as quietly as possible, for it is not in keeping with either his greater moral purpose or with his concept of Merlin as a man with human weaknesses. In Robinson's Merlin there is no such thing as magic; the world dealt with in the poem is the world of today, the world of hard facts and inescapable reality. Mary Stewart's Merlin occasionally alludes to "spells" and minor powers, but these are not dwelt upon, for they are not important. Merlin is not a magician. He is a man.

If there is one consistently developed characteristic in all the serious treatments of Merlin from Geoffrey

to Mary Stewart, it is perhaps his aura of wisdom. At all times he is a wise man, a seer. It is this characteristic that makes him different from other men, when he is like them in so many other ways. He is, especially in the works of Tennyson, Robinson, and White, a man who has vision in a world of chaos and violence. He is the element of stability, the man who sees where others are blind. It is a common character in literature, but in the works dealing with Merlin, the stock character rises to extraordinary heights. Throughout the tradition of Merlin, this wisdom causes him to raise Arthur to the ideal throne, and to defend the young King and his order. In the later works this becomes the struggle of the man of vision to eliminate the chaos and folly around him. In Robinson's treatment, this is a major cause of the tragedy: the wise man has been defeated by the corrupt world, though he never quits the field. In White's work, Merlin's very life-purpose is his tutorship of the boy who is the hope of man's corrupt world. In his foresight he tells the King that they will both return to attempt once more to right the tottering world.

This struggle with the world is a very lonely one; its loneliness is heightened by the fact that Merlin is alone in his struggle. He can see, others cannot. In his solitary wisdom he becomes at once a symbol for all men and an outcast among men. His humanity makes this all the

more poignant. It is probably this loneliness in wisdom that has made the character of Merlin so attractive to the writers of so many generations. The figure of Merlin, the man of wisdom in an insane world, the man of stability in chaos, will probably cause future authors to enshrine him in the literature of coming generations.

Some things are better not left alone.

NOTES

NOTES

Introduction

[1]W. D. Nash, "Merlin the Enchanter, and Merlin the Bard," in Merlin: or, The Early History of King Arthur: A Prose Romance, ed. Henry B. Wheatley, EETS o.s. #10,21 (Bound as volume I), #36,112 (volume II) (London, 1899), I, p.x*-xi*. Henceforth cited as Merlin.

[2]S. Humphreys Gurteen, The Arthurian Epic (New York, 1895), pp. 163-64.

[3]A. O. H. Jarman, "The Welsh Myrddin Poems," in Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages, ed. Roger Sherman Loomis (Oxford, 1959), p. 30. Henceforth cited as ALMA.

Chapter I

[1]Roger Sherman Loomis, "The Oral Diffusion of the Arthurian Legend," in ALMA, p. 52.

[2]John Jay Parry and Robert A. Caldwell, "Geoffrey of Monmouth," in ALMA, p. 83.

[3]Geoffrey of Monmouth, Historia Regum Britanniae, trans. Sebastian Evans; rev. ed., Charles W. Dunn, Everyman's Library (London, 1963), p. 133. Subsequent references are to this edition.

[4]Laura Hibbard Loomis, "Geoffrey of Monmouth and Stonehenge," PMLA, 45 (1930), pp. 400-15.

[5]Roger Sherman Loomis, The Development of Arthurian Romance (London, 1963), p. 125.

Chapter II

[1]Alexandre Micha, "The Vulgate Merlin," in ALMA, p. 320.

[2]R. Loomis, "The Oral Diffusion," p. 52.

[3]Micha, "Vulgate Merlin," p. 320.

[4]Ibid., p. 322.

[5]William Edward Mead, "Outlines of the History of the Legend of Merlin," in Merlin, I, clxxxiv.

[6]Merlin, I, 14.

[7]Micha, "Vulgate Merlin," p. 320.

[8]Roger Sherman Loomis, Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance (New York, 1927), pp. 124-36.

[9]R. Loomis, Development, p. 126.

[10]Micha, "Vulgate Merlin," p. 322.

[11]Ibid., p. 324.

[12]Mead, Merlin, I, p. ccxliii.

[13]Eugéne Vinaver, Malory (Oxford, 1929), p. 29.

Chapter III

[1]Fanni Bogdanow, "The Suite du Merlin and the Post-Vulgate Roman du Graal," in ALMA, p. 325.

[2]Ibid., p. 334.

[3]Eugéne Vinaver, ed., The Works of Sir Thomas Malory (Oxford, 1967), III, 1270. Subsequent references are to this edition.

[4]Ibid., III, 1272.

[5]Ibid., I, xix.

[6]Vinaver, Malory, p. 29.

[7]Vinaver, Works, I, 18.

[8]Thomas L. Wright, "'The Tale of King Arthur': Beginnings and Foreshadowings," in Malory's Originality, ed. R. M. Lumiansky (Baltimore, 1964), pp. 23-24.

[9]Vinaver, Works, III, 1279.

[10]Vinaver, Malory, p. 30.

[11]Wright, "Tale of King Arthur," pp. 30-31.

[12]Vinaver, Works, III, 1291.

[13]Eugéne Vinaver, "Sir Thomas Malory," in ALMA, p. 544.

Chapter IV

[1]Robert Huntington Fletcher, The Arthurian Materials in the Chronicles, Burt Franklin Bibliographical Series, #88, ed. Roger Sherman Loomis, 2nd. ed. (1906; rpt. New York, 1966), p. 269.

[2]Ibid., p. 182.

[3]Ibid., p. 275.

[4]M. W. Maccallum, Tennyson's "Idylls of the King" and Arthurian Story From the XVIth Century (Glasgow, 1894), p. 127.

[5]Ibid., p. 119.

[6]Roberta Florence Brinkley, Arthurian Legend in the Seventeenth Century (1932; rpt. New York, 1967), p. vii.

[7]Ibid., p. 77.

[8]Ibid., pp. 25-55.

[9]Ibid., p. viii.

[10]Ibid., p. 39.

[11]William Rowley, The Birth of Merlin: or, The Childe Hath Founde his Father (London, 1662).

[12]Maccallum, Tennyson's "Idylls," p. 124.

[13]Vinaver, Malory, p. 113.

[14]Margaret J. C. Reid, The Arthurian Legend (1938; rpt. New York, 1961), p. 75.

[15]Brinkley, Arthurian Legend in the Seventeenth Century, p. 77.

[16]Reid, The Arthurian Legend, pp. 75-76.

[17]Brinkley, p. 79.

[18]Vinaver, Malory, p. 113.

[19]John Dryden, King Arthur, or The British Worthy: A Dramatick Opera, in The Dramatic Works, ed. Montague Summers (New York, 1968), VI.

[20]Maccallum, Tennyson's Idylls, p. 127.

[21]Ibid., p. 154.

[22]Lewis Theobald, Merlin: or, The Devil of Stone-Henge (London, 1734).

[23]Ibid., p. 8.

[24]Aaron Hill, Merlin in Love, or Youth against Magic, in The Dramatic Works of Aaron Hill (London, 1760).

Chapter V

[1]Maccallum, p. 162.

[2]Ibid., p. 179.

[3]Ibid., p. 212.

[4]Ibid., p. 268.

[5]Ibid., p. 300.

[6]Clyde de L. Ryals, From the Great Deep: Essays on "Idylls of the King (Ohio University, 1967), p. 200.

[7]Maccallum, p. 313.

[8]Alfred Lord Tennyson, "The Coming of Arthur," in Idylls of the King, ed. William J. Rolfe (Boston, 1896). Subsequent references to this edition.

[9]Ryals, p. 42.

[10]William R. Brashear, "Tennyson's Tragic Vitalism: Idylls of the King," Victorian Poetry, 6 (1968), p. 34.

[11]Ryals, p. 139.

[12]Ryals, From the Great Deep, p. 142.

[13]Paull F. Baum, Tennyson Sixty Years After (Chapel Hill, 1948), p. 180.

Chapter VI

[1]Ellsworth Barnard, "'Of This or That Estate': Robinson's Literary Reputation," in Edwin Arlington Robinson: Centenary Essays, ed. Ellsworth Barnard (Athens, Ga., 1969), p. 9.

[2]Charles Davis, "Robinson's Road to Camelot," in Centenary Essays, p. 95.

[3]Hoyt C. Franchere, Edwin Arlington Robinson, Twayne's United States Authors Series, gen. ed. Sylvia E. Bowman (New York, 1968), p. 119.

[4]Edwin Arlington Robinson, Selected Letters of Edwin Arlington Robinson (New York, 1940), p. 125.

[5]Ibid., p. 112.

[6]Edwin Arlington Robinson, Merlin, in Collected Poems of Edwin Arlington Robinson (New York, 1929), p. 236. Subsequent references to this edition.

[7]Charles Cestre, An Introduction to Edwin Arlington Robinson (New York, 1930), p. 84.

[8]Mark Van Doren, Edwin Arlington Robinson (New York, 1927), p. 71.

[9]Robinson, Letters, p. 113.

Chapter VII

[1]Sylvia Townsend Warner, T. H. White (London, 1967), pp. 25-26.

[2]Ibid., p. 99.

[3]T. H. White, The Sword in the Stone (New York, 1939), p. 30. Subsequent references are to this edition.

[4]Nathan Comfort Starr, King Arthur Today (Gainesville, Fla., 1954), p. 123.

[5]Warner, White, pp. 176-77.

[6]T. H. White, The Once and Future King (New York, 1958), p. 236. Subsequent references are to this edition.

[7]White, Sword in the Stone, p. 53.

Chapter VIII

[1]C. S. Lewis, "Williams and the Arthuriad," in Arthurian Torso (London, 1969), p. 108.

[2]C. S. Lewis, That Hideous Strength, Macmillan Paperbacks (New York, 1965), pp. 285-86. Subsequent references to this edition.

Chapter IX

[1]Mary Stewart, The Crystal Cave (New York, 1970), p. 59. Subsequent references to this edition.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barnard, Ellsworth, Ed. Edwin Arlington Robinson: Centenary Essays. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1969.

Baum, Paull F. Tennyson Sixty Years After. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1948.

Brashear, William R. "Tennyson's Tragic Vitalism: Idylls of the King." Victorian Poetry, 6 (1968), 29-49.

Brinkley, Roberta Florence. Arthurian Legend in the Seventeenth Century. 1932; rpt. New York: Octagon Books, Inc., 1967.

Cestre, Charles. An Introduction to Edwin Arlington Robinson. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1930.

Dryden, John. King Arthur, or The British Worthy: A Dramatick Opera. The Dramatic Works. Ed. Montague Summers. New York: The Gordian Press, 1968. VI.

Fletcher, Robert Huntington. The Arthurian Materials in the Chronicles, Especially Those of Great Britain and France. Ed. Roger Sherman Loomis. Burt Franklin Bibliographical Series, #88. 2nd. Ed., 1906; rpt. New York: Burt Franklin, 1966.

Franchere, Hoyt C. Edwin Arlington Robinson. Twayne's United States Authors Series, Gen. ed. Sylvia E. Bowman. New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1968.

Geoffrey of Monmouth. History of the Kings of Britain. Translated by Sebastian Evans. Ed. Charles W. Dunn. Everyman's Library. London: Dent, 1963.

Gurteen, S. Humphreys. The Arthurian Epic. London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1895.

Hill, Aaron. Merlin in Love, or Youth against Magic. The Dramatic Works of Aaron Hill. London: n.p., 1760.

Lewis, C. S., Ed. Arthurian Torso. London: Oxford University Press, 1969.

Lewis, C. S. That Hideous Strength: A Modern Fairy-Tale for Grown-Ups. Macmillan Paperbacks. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965.

Loomis, Laura Hibbard. "Geoffrey of Monmouth and Stonehenge." PMLA, 45 (1930), 400-15.

Loomis, Roger Sherman, Ed. Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages: A Collaborative History. Oxford: Clarendon University Press, 1959.

Loomis, Roger Sherman. Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance. New York: Columbia University Press, 1927.

Loomis, Roger Sherman. The Development of Arthurian Romance. London: Hutchinson, 1963.

Maccallum, M. W. Tennyson's "Idylls of the King" and Arthurian Story From the XVIth Century, Glasgow: James Maclehose and Sons, Publishers to the University, 1894.

Malory, Sir Thomas. The Works of Sir Thomas Malory. 3 vols. Ed. Eugéne Vinaver. 2nd. ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967.

Merlin: or, The Early History of King Arthur: A Prose Romance. Ed. Henry B. Wheatley. EETS, o.s. #10, 21, 36, 112. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd., 1899.

Reid, Margaret J. C. The Arthurian Legend: Comparison of Treatment in Modern and Medieval Literature. 1938; rpt. New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1961.

Robinson, Edwin Arlington. Collected Poems of Edwin Arlington Robinson. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1929.

Robinson, Edwin Arlington. Selected Letters of Edwin Arlington Robinson. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1940.

Rowley, William. The Birth of Merlin: or, The Childe hath Founde his Father. London: Thomas Johnson for Francis Kirkman, 1662.

Ryals, Clyde de L. From the Great Deep: Essays on "Idylls of the King." n.p.: Ohio University Press, 1967.

Starr, Nathan Comfort. King Arthur Today: The Arthurian Legend in English and American Literature, 1901-53. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1954.

Stewart, Mary. The Crystal Cave. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1970.

Tennyson, Alfred, Lord. Idylls of the King. Ed. William J. Rolfe. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Company, 1896.

Theobald, Lewis. Merlin; or, The Devil of Stone-Henge. London: J. Watts, 1734.

Van Doren, Mark. Edwin Arlington Robinson. New York: The Literary Guild of America, 1927.

Vinaver, Eugéne. Malory. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1929.

Warner, Sylvia Townsend. T. H. White. London: Jonathan Cape with Chatto and Winders, 1967.

White, T. H. The Once and Future King. Berkly Medallion Books. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1958.

White, T. H. The Sword in the Stone. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1939.

Wright, Thomas L. "'The Tale of King Arthur': Beginnings and Foreshadowings." Malory's Originality, A Critical Study of "Le Morte Darthur." Ed. R. M.

General References

Anderson, Wallace L. Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Critical Introduction. Riverside Studies in Literature. Gen. Ed. Gordon N. Ray. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Company, 1967.

Bradbrook, M. C. Sir Thomas Malory. Writers and Their Work, No. 95. Gen. Ed. Bonamy Dobree. London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1958.

Bruce, James Douglas. The Evolution of Arthurian Romance, from the Beginnings down to the Year 1300. 2nd. ed. Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1928. 2 vols.

Camerson, J. R. "T. H. White in Camelot: The Matter of Britain Revitalized." The Humanities Association Bulletin, 16 (1965), 45-48.

Chambers, Edmund Kerchever. Arthur of Britain. 1927; rpt. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1964.

Coxe, Louis. Edwin Arlington Robinson: The Life of Poetry. Pegasus American Authors Series. Western Publishing Company, 1969.

Crowder, Richard. "E. A. Robinson's Camelot." College English, 9 (1947), 72-79.

Dunn, Stephen P. "Mr. White, Mr. Williams, and the Matter of Britain." The Kenyon Review, 24 (1962), 363-71.

Griscom, Acton. The "Historia Regum Britanniae" of Geoffrey of Monmouth. New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1929.

Haight, Gordon S. "Tennyson's Merlin." Studies in Philology, 44 (1947), 549-66.

Jones, Richard. The Growth of the "Idylls of the King." Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1895.

Kaplan, Estelle. Philosophy in the Poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson. New York: Columbia University Press, 1940

Loomis, Roger Sherman. Wales and the Arthurian Legend. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1956.

Moorman, Charles. Arthurian Triptych: Mythic Materials in Charles Williams, C. S. Lewis, and T. S. Eliot. Perspectives in Criticism, No. 5. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1960.

Paton, Lucy Allen. Studies in the Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance. Burt Franklin Bibliographical Series, XVIII. 2nd. ed. 1903; rpt. New York: Burt Franklin, 1960.

Perrine, Laurence. "Contemporary Reference of Robinson's Arthurian Poems." Twentieth Century Literature, 8 (1962), 74-82.

Priestley, E. E. L. "Tennyson's Idylls." Critical Essays on the Poetry of Tennyson. Ed. John Killham. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960.

Reiss, Edmund. Sir Thomas Malory. Twayne's English Authors Series. Gen. Ed. Sylvia E. Bowman. New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1966.

Tatlock, J. S. P. The Legendary History of Britain: Geoffrey of Monmouth's "Historia Regum Britanniae" and its Early Vernacular Versions. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1950.