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Rationalizing the Irrational: Merlin and His Prophecies in the Modern Historical Novel

RAYMOND H. THOMPSON

Merlin's magical powers are usually rationalized in modern historical fiction. His visions of the future, however, remain prophetic, even when they are aided by his own inspired guesswork and intervention in events. That Merlin's prophecies should so stubbornly resist the conventions of the genre suggests they have become a core element in Arthurian tradition. (RHT)

The modern fascination with Merlin as a worker of magic sometimes leads us to forget that he has talents other than weaving spells.¹ To a large extent this is a consequence of the current popularity of fantasy as a literary genre, and it is reinforced by the ease with which special effects can be created in films, to say nothing of cartoons. Yet in medieval literature Merlin, despite his awesome reputation as an enchanter, spends most of his time dispensing wise advice, even if he does show a fondness for doing so in unexpected guises (see, e.g., Malory I: 38). In the prose romances, moreover, he also demonstrates considerable skill in military tactics, and it is by following his counsel that the young Arthur and his allies defeat the rebellious kings and other foes (see, e.g., Malory I: 27).

The authors of the modern historical novel, therefore, even though they are discouraged by the conventions of the genre from including supernatural elements, can still draw upon a well-established tradition of a figure widely respected for his wisdom. This wisdom, moreover, owes more to shrewdness and common sense than to supernatural powers, at least as far as modern readers can discern. In medieval literature, Arthur and his knights are preoccupied with honor rather than with military tactics, as indeed were their aristocratic audience. Superior enemy numbers merely offer an opportunity to exhibit heroic valor, a quality that was both the strength and weakness of European chivalry during the Middle Ages. On the one hand, it enabled them to endure desperate hardships and triumph over less dedicated foes; on the other, it rendered them vulnerable to a crafty enemy like the

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nomadic horsemen from the steppes and those who learned to fight like them, as the crusaders learned to their cost (see, e.g., Hildinger 95–107). In this warrior culture, Merlin's astuteness might well seem supernatural, inspired by either God or the Devil, and historical novelists have been quick to seize upon the naivety of the general populace as an explanation for Merlin's reputation, not only in military matters, but in other areas as well.

Because of his wisdom, Merlin is numbered among Arthur's counsellors in most historical novels. Occasionally he is self-serving: in *The Queen's Knight* (1995) by Marvin Borowsky, he is a cunning politician who sponsors Arthur's claim to the throne in the expectation that he will prove an easily manipulated puppet; in *The Emperor Arthur* (1967) by Godfrey Turton, his ambition drives him to join the Saxons and later help Mordred; in Peter Vansittart's *Lancelot* (1978), the narrator dismisses him as a charlatan who 'merely exploited the general ignorance' (120).

More often, however, Merlin is completely loyal to Arthur, especially when he starts out as his tutor. This is most strikingly witnessed in Mary Stewart's Merlin trilogy (1973–79) where the young king not only relies upon his advice, but also loves him like a father. In their respective series on Guinevere, Nancy McKenzie (1994–95) and Persia Woolley (1987–91), both of whom acknowledge their debt to Stewart,² share her view of their warm relationship, as do Edison Marshall, Jack Whyte, and Joan Wolf. All six authors reinforce the bond of affection with a link through blood: Merlin is Arthur's cousin in Stewart, McKenzie, Woolley, and Whyte (where he is both cousin and uncle); his grandfather in Wolf; and his great-uncle in Marshall. In *Kinsmen of the Grail* (1963) by Dorothy James Roberts, we are told that he tutored Arthur in his boyhood and became his foster father.

He also serves as tutor in George Finkel's *Twilight Province* (1967; published as *Watch Fires to the North* in the United States). Here, however, he is a wanderer from Armenia attached to the household of Bedivere's father, and he has no close relationship with Arthur who is rescued from a Saxon raiding ship. Arthur does owe his life to his skill as a surgeon, however, and these healing talents recur in other novels. Whereas in Malory Merlin takes Arthur to a hermit for treatment (I: 52), in Douglas Carmichael's *Pendragon* (1977) he himself washes Arthur's wounds after his fight with Pellinor, then 'smeared them with a stinging salve before binding them up' (48). In Victor Canning's 'Crimson Chalice Trilogy' (1976–78), he saves Arthur's life not once, but twice: first at childbirth, then after an assassination attempt. Merlin's knowledge of herbs wins him a reputation as a healer in other novels too, particularly those by Stewart and Woolley.

The story that Merlin transported the stone circle from Ireland to Stonehenge, first recorded by Geoffrey of Monmouth in *The History of the Kings of Britain*, is a tribute to another of Merlin's skills. In Geoffrey's account, Merlin uses no magic, but rather machinery of his own devising. Stewart includes this episode in *The Crystal Cave* (1970), though here it is one stone, the king-stone, that is taken instead of the entire circle. This story, presumably, explains why Walter O'Meara makes Merlin the chief of Arthur's engineers in *The Duke of War* (1966).

In Whyte's on-going series 'A Dream of Eagles' (1992–97; published as 'The Camulod Chronicles' in the United States), Merlin is skilled not only as an engineer, but also as a warrior and war leader, waging a number of successful military campaigns in defence of the Colony of Camulod. Normally, however, he holds himself aloof from physical combat in historical novels, though he can defend himself at need. He even manages to kill the much more experienced warrior who brings news of Gorlois's death at the conclusion of *The Crystal Cave* by Stewart. In Carmichael's *Pendragon*, it is he who rouses the serfs and townfolk of Caerleon to assist Arthur in his first battle against the rival kings (81), whereas in Malory they arise without his prompting (I: 19).

Merlin's finest talents, nevertheless, lie in other directions. He is a druid in Roy Turner's *King of the Lordless Country* (1971), Persia Woolley's *Child of the Northern Spring* (1987), and in Bernard Cornwell's 'Warlord Chronicles' (1995–97) where he labors to restore the power of the old gods; he is a bard trained at Mona (Anglesey) in W. Barnard Faraday's *Pendragon* (1930) and in Anna Taylor's *Drustan the Wanderer* (1971) where he is named after the first Merlin, a druid; and he is both druid and bard in John Gloag's *Artorius Rex* (1977) and in Catherine Christian's *The Sword and the Flame* (1978; published as *The Pendragon* in the United States) where Merlin is a rank rather than a personal name. After Arthur's death Bedivere, the novel's narrator, himself becomes the Merlin, but it is his predecessor, Celidon, who fulfils Merlin's traditional role. Celidon is later imprisoned by the Lady of the Lake, not out of hostile intent, but for protection from the madness into which he sinks. This madness, with its origins in the Celtic story of the Wild Man in the Woods (see Jarman; Galyon and Thundy), occurs in other historical novels as well, including Thomas Clare's *King Arthur and the Riders of Rheged* (1992) and Stewart's trilogy where it is blamed upon a poison administered by his bitter enemy Morgause.

In Carmichael's *Pendragon*, Merlin demonstrates another of his talents when he hypnotizes the guards and Igraine herself so that they see Uther as

Gorlois. In Warwick Deeping's *Uther and Igraine* (1903), conversely, he hypnotizes Igraine to make her marry Gorlois.

These qualities are all credible enough to the modern mind, but another, the ability to foresee and prophesy the future, is more controversial. Nevertheless Merlin is blessed, or cursed, with the talent of a seer in many historical novels, including those by Stewart, Woolley, McKenzie, Canning, Carmichael, Deeping, Taylor, Parke Godwin, Gil Kane and John Jakes. That many people, even in this scientific age, believe in the power to foretell the future is suggested by the popularity of horoscopes in newspapers and magazines. Nevertheless historical novelists strain credulity when they preserve this feature, and thus we can assume that they believe its advantages outweigh its disadvantages.

To reduce the sense of disbelief in the reader, the authors often try to deal with prophetic visions as plausibly as possible. Thus in Carmichael's *Pendragon*, Merlin explains his foresight to one visitor: 'One guesses. One reasons. One sees it in the fire....For one with the seeing, the changing shapes mirror the changing world, and when the coals become clear, so do the things to come' (16). Thus he later urges Arthur to spare Pellinor whom he has hypnotized: 'I have seen it in the fire. He can do you good service, and his sons after him' (47). He is honest enough, however, to admit the limitations of his visions: 'Sometimes the things I foresee do not occur if action is taken to prevent them. Sometimes they occur in spite of our efforts. A few times they do not occur even if I keep quiet about them' (27). Such visions would seem little more than daydreams about what the future may hold: some prove to be shrewd or lucky guesses, while others are fulfilled because the dreamer takes action to bring them about. Another explanation, equally acceptable to modern readers, is provided in *Excalibur!* (1960) by Kane and Jakes, where the visions are drug-induced.

Under such circumstances, belief in Merlin's prophecies reveals less about his powers than about the superstitiousness of the age in which he lives. Credulity is a particularly effective trait when it applies not only to the general populace, but also to the narrator himself as is the case in Cornwell's trilogy and in *The Pagan King* (1959) by Edison Marshall.

In the latter, Arthur begins to grow skeptical about some of the claims that Merlin makes, 'because [he] was a great gamester...and he would not let the telling of lies interfere with his winning' (77). Eventually he discovers the full extent to which Merlin has manipulated events to allow him to fulfil the auguries in the ancient Song of Camlon. This foretells that 'the King of Britain who would arise was found in a wild boar's burrow' (291), and Arthur

can point to 'the holes front and back in my shoulders made by the teeth of Droit' (291). These were made, however, not by Droit but 'by two little cones of bone which Merdin [Merlin] thrust into your baby shoulders, a little deeper every day' (291), he learns. Merlin also arranges for Arthur to gain his sword from the Lady of the Lake, but it comes, 'Not from the hands of a fairy, dwelling in the bottom of the mere' (292), but from the very human Elain who is a powerful swimmer. Unfortunately, Arthur does not shed his credulity in time to avoid the deception of Vivain who plots his downfall behind a guise of friendship. Merlin's deceptions thus not only provide a measure of Arthur's development from naivety to understanding, but also help to explore the theme of illusion and reality. Ironically, however, as Arthur grows more skeptical, so he learns to appreciate the value of the imagination:

'What is any king without an excellent bard to lie about him?...And let him not tell of the dread violence of our dark age, of murder, rape, and incest, and men burned alive, torture, and the poisoned cup, for our folk see little of it in their innocent fields, and like not to hear of it....for century beyond century our earth will remain uninhabitable, and life intolerable without kind lies.'
(373)

Not all authors are so ready to rationalize Merlin's prophetic visions, however, and one compelling reason is that it enables them to develop the theme of destiny. The implacable workings of fate have been an important aspect of Arthurian legend since its inception, particularly in accounts of Arthur's birth and death. In medieval literature this was made explicit not only by the symbol of the Wheel of Fortune which appears in Arthur's dream before the Battle of Camlann, but also by the prophecies of Merlin, and some modern historical novelists make Merlin a seer for this purpose, as an examination of Victor Canning's 'Crimson Chalice Trilogy' and Parke Godwin's *Firelord* (1980) reveals.

Merlin appears late in *The Crimson Chalice* (1976), the first book in Canning's trilogy. He maroons Arthur's parents on an island, thereby ensuring that they conceive the future savior of the land. When Baradoc, as Arthur's father is here called, eventually finds Merlin and asks why he stole their boat, he is told,

'Because it was written so....And in sleep and in full eye-wake the gods have shown me the past and the future, and...the future is a river which the gods have set in its course but which time and man's works can loose from its bed to new courses....Keep faith with the true dream. Mis-shape it not by impatience and greed for false glory. One day men will call you Pendragon as many before have been called. But the true king comes to meet glory and betrayal and then

to sleep until all lands groan with the labour and distress of chaos and he comes again and the true march of centuries begins anew.' (214)

Baradoc recognizes that the man is 'mad with the innocence of one touched with the disease of the gods, one for whom the air was full of voices and for whom the shape of solid things...wavered always as though seen through water and became the fabric and fancies of a phantom world' (214–15). This is a madness, however, that commands respect from others, even when it is viewed with skepticism. Thus one character wryly muses, 'Merlin...would probably say anything that came into his head that he fancied might feed his reputation and then rely on chance to prove him right—yet, whatever men might say, there was something in Merlin that tied him to the gods' (*The Circle of the Gods* 241).

Merlin is absent throughout most of the action, but he reappears at crucial points to ensure that the river follows the course that will fulfil the true dream, as he himself puts it: he intervenes to ensure the conception and safe birth of Arthur, 'the true king'; he escorts mother and child to the safety of Baradoc's tribe; he saves Arthur's life as he lies bleeding from the wounds of an assassin, even though he grumbles that the gods 'stir themselves and begin to meddle with my affairs and give me dreams to plague my path' (*The Circle of the Gods* 438); and as Arthur lies dying at the edge of a lake after his last battle, he comes to him in a boat to tell him, 'the dream runs on through all time and now you must shape it for yourself. Before you move on the waters you must finish the earth dream from your own fashioning' (*The Immortal Wound* 650). Thus prompted, Arthur casts his sword into the waters, passes to Merlin the Chalice (Grail) which had been first entrusted to his parents by a hermit, then sets forth 'into veils of rain and darkness which slowly enshrouded him and hid him from the sight of Merlin' (651).

Like Merlin, Arthur too is convinced of his own destiny, as others recognize, and this draws many to his banner, for they 'knew well that behind the high words lay the iron will which took men into battle ready to give their lives for him and his god-touched passion' (*The Circle of the Gods* 382). The prophecy thus becomes self-fulfilling, gods or no gods, as the more perceptive characters realize.

In *Firelord*, Godwin deals with Merlin's prophetic powers by making him a creation of Arthur's own imagination, though stories of Merlin are well known amongst his people. Visible only to Arthur's eyes as a mirror image of himself, he too appears at important junctures in the story and offers tantalizing visions of 'bright tomorrows you carved out of wishes and painted

with dreams' (7). He is, in fact, the embodiment of Arthur's own dreams and ambitions, offering glimpses of the future, choices to be made, lessons to be learned, and, inevitably, prophecies:

'You will be king, Arthur. There will be victories at first and a kind of defeat in the end, but that won't last. You'll be remembered. They'll sing your name through long, dark nights and darker centuries. They'll conjure with it, make you a legend and a god and sacrifice you as all god-kings are sacrificed.' (59)

First, however, Arthur must learn to read not only men's failings, but also 'the heart that churns them out' (59). This he does among the Prydn, discovering 'what Merlin would teach me. To love, to care, to be small as well as great, gentle as well as strong. . . . To be a king, to wear a crown, is to know how apart and lonely we are and still exist and *dare* to love in the face of that void' (90-91). Thus prepared, Arthur becomes not just a dreamer, but a king worthy of dreams, as Merlin finally admits: 'You didn't do badly at all, Arthur. If I hadn't been at this for ages, I might even boast a bit' (391).

Merlin's prophecies of the future in the historical novels of Canning, Godwin, and others not only reinforce the sense of destiny, but also serve to bring about that very destiny. They condition people to accept Arthur as leader; and, more importantly, they encourage him to reach for a prize that he might otherwise not even think of, especially since his birth is so obscure and the obstacles to success so formidable. They thus serve to develop both theme and character.

There is, of course, a price to be paid, and not just by Arthur in pursuit of his destiny. Despite efforts to rationalize the irrational, it does creep into the historical novels. Images of the future often include details that go beyond mere daydreams, like Lancelot in Godwin's *Firelord*. First seen in Arthur's vision while still a child, he subsequently turns up to play an important role in the battle at York: 'Being here, being real, he made my dreams augury and Merlin a prophet' (134), Arthur decides. At the start of his Acknowledgements, Godwin avoids the issue by announcing, '*Firelord* is a fantasy, though I've attempted to stretch an elastic legend over the bone of historical fact.' In an interview Cornwell acknowledges, 'I found in my Arthur trilogy that I could dabble in the magic. . . . I went slightly over the top with Arthur because it was a romantic, magical background' ('Life After Sharpe,' 14). Whether Stewart's Merlin trilogy are fantasy or historical novels remains debatable.³

Merlin's powers can thus raise questions about the genre of the novels in which he appears. To the list of those mentioned above, one might have added *Merlin's Ring* (1957) by Meriol Trevor. Like Hank Morgan in Mark

Twain's *Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889), a modern boy is transported back to Arthur's time, albeit by the power of Merlin's magic ring rather than a blow to the head. Apart from this device, however, the story is scrupulous in its concern for historical authenticity. Such issues matter more to scholars than to authors who write the story that comes to them rather than seek to adhere to genre conventions. Nevertheless the difficulty that historical novelists experience in purging Merlin of all his supernatural trappings reveals their fascination with the figure as he is found in tradition.

The most important of these supernatural features is Merlin's prophetic sight. Other achievements are more readily rationalized: Merlin gives Uther the appearance of Gorlois by hypnotizing others to see him that way in Carmichael's *Pendragon*, and by trickery and disguise in Stewart's *Crystal Cave*; he ensures that Arthur alone draws the sword from the stone through a system of levers in Carmichael's novel, and he tricks Arthur and others into believing that his other sword is given him by the Lady of the Lake in Marshall's; the superior temper of the sword that he supplies to Arthur is because it is forged from 'sky-iron,' metal found in a meteor, in the novels of both Christian and Whyte. His visions, however, remain stubbornly, indeed mystically, prophetic.⁴

That so many historical novelists should preserve this feature, despite its inappropriateness to the genre, suggests that Merlin's prophetic visions have become a vital, or core, motif in Arthurian legend.⁵ They thus take their place alongside such motifs as the sword in the stone, the sword from the lake, the love triangle, the Grail quest, and Arthur's final departure for Avalon. Though it is not necessary for modern authors to include all of these motifs in their works, they must preserve certain essential elements in those they select—and Merlin's visions must be prophetic, even when they are supplemented by inspired guesswork and aided by his own devices and the efforts of those who believe in them, most especially Arthur himself. Deprived of prophecy, Merlin is reduced to a mere politician, one among so many, sometimes well-intentioned, sometimes not. Both he and the motif are robbed of power, and the novels are the poorer for it, despite their greater credibility.

Like it or not, prophets inspire us to believe in ourselves, to dream of a brighter world, and to try to build it, and we all, characters and readers alike, have need of them. It is because historical novelists intuitively recognize this that so many of them, I would argue, retain Merlin's prophetic visions when they rationalize the irrational. They are too wise to tamper with our dreams.

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NOTES

- 1 For the purposes of this survey, I have standardized the spelling of all the characters' names which are variously represented in the different novels.
- 2 See the Preface in McKenzie, *Child Queen*; and Woolley, *Summer* xi. The former, for example, like Stewart, blames Morgause for poisoning Merlin (254) and for murdering the infants at Dunpelder (120).
- 3 Dean considers Stewart's Merlin trilogy an 'epic fantasy' (282); Thompson, *Return*, includes it among the historical novels (50). See also Fries and Watson.
- 4 Interestingly, although it is a fantasy, Thomas Berger's *Arthur Rex* also takes this approach to Merlin's powers. As the Lady of the Lake tells him, he is 'incapable of making a true miracle' (107), achieving his effects through levers, hypnosis, and legerdemain. His prophecies, however, remain valid (see Thompson, 'Comic Sage,' especially 145–48).
- 5 For a brief discussion of the historical background of this feature, see Jarman and the entry on 'Merlin and the Prophetic Tradition' in *The New Arthurian Encyclopedia*.

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