

Merlin: a character of the ages

The character of Merlin plays a significant role within the Arthurian cycle of stories. The legendary character of Welsh verse, Myrddin, “embodied the primitive motif of the Wild Man of the Woods.” (Jarmen, 1991. p.117) and was transformed by Geoffrey of Monmouth into “the internationally famous Merlin, wizard as well as vaticinator” (Jarmen, 1991. p. 117). Various retellings of the legend of Arthur, and the Knights of the Round Table, have depicted Merlin's role in different ways. It will be suggested in this essay that the role of Merlin has been adapted to suit each interpretation, or retelling, of the legend. A comparison of similarities and notable differences will be undertaken to reveal what has influenced the changes in Merlin's role. I have chosen four works to discuss: Andrea Hopkins *Chronicles of King Arthur* (1993), John Boorman's film *Excalibur* (1981), Disney's *The Sword in the Stone* (1963) and finally the T.V film *Merlin* (1998). Firstly Merlin's role in Arthur's pre-birth, birth, coronation and founding of the fellowship of the round table will be discussed. Secondly Merlin's role in the betrayal of Lancelot and Guinevere will be examined. Thirdly the magic and wonder of Merlin will be scrutinised. Finally comparisons in the portrayal of Merlin's relationship with Nimue will be investigated.

Merlin's role in the conception and birth of Arthur has remained unchanging through the ages. Merlin's use of magic to charm or beguile the Lady Igraine into sleeping with Uther Pendragon remained consistent through three retellings. The offspring of this union, Arthur, similarly is consistently Merlin's payment for the deed. As Merlin says in Hopkins (1993) version:

the first night that you lie with Igraine you will beget a child on her and, when it is born, it must be delivered up to me, to bring up as I shall see fit. (p.14)

The Disney retelling of the legend excludes Arthur's conception. A speculative reason for this exclusion is Disney's target audience, young children. Disney would not want to communicate notions of adultery to this audience. The idea of adultery would be considered inappropriate material for children about the time, 1963, of the movies release in America. Contrasted to this is the modern fantasy, made and produced in 1998, *Merlin* that includes Merlin's involvement in this adulterous plot. In three decades the ideals of what children should understand, and hear about, have radically altered. Comparison of Merlin's role in the pre-birth of Arthur can be examined for further differences.

Merlin's role and involvement in the events leading up to Arthur's birth vary in different representations. Two accounts can be contrasted here, *Excalibur* and *Merlin*. *Excalibur* sees Merlin pronouncing Uther Pendragon king, by right of the sword of power, Excalibur, which Merlin gives to Uther. However in the T.V film *Merlin*, it is Merlin himself, armed with Excalibur, who kills King Vortigern, Uther's enemy in battle. One could speculate the movies basic theme can account for the difference. Boorman's classic *Excalibur* is a faithful adaptation of Sir Thomas Mallory's classic *Le Morte Darthur*, concerning the quest, and tragic downfall, of a hero. *Merlin* however is a T.V adventure fantasy film concerning an unwilling hero, with unwanted power, seeking only his true love and a simple life. The representation of Merlin's role in the upbringing of Arthur has been interpreted in different ways.

Merlin's part in the upbringing of Arthur has been represented differently in the various interpretations. In most versions Arthur is raised and trained as a squire by Sir Ector and Sir Kay. Comparison of the training Arthur receives under the tutelage of

Merlin reveals interesting differences. In *Excalibur* Arthur is trained by Merlin to “learn the ways of the Dragon” (1981). These “ways” are Merlin’s philosophies on strategy, the natural world, decision-making and the understanding of men’s hearts. In stark contrast to this is Disney’s Merlin, whose job it is to teach Arthur academic knowledge, to “educate” young Arthur in the skills, Latin and Science, of higher learning. A speculative reason for this could be the underlying purpose of Disney’s movie. One may argue Disney is attempting to install within the audience, children, the importance of education through the retelling of the legend and portrayal of Merlin as an educator. Further differences are apparent in analysis of the coronation of Arthur.

Merlin is central to the prophecy and the coronation of Arthur as King of England. In several adaptations Merlin makes the prophecy of the sword in the stone, “Whoso pulleth out this sword from this stone and anvil is true-born king of all England.” (Hopkins, 1993, p.15). Analysing the act of the coronation one finds in Boorman’s *Excalibur* Merlin proclaims Arthur, similar to Uther’s coronation, king by right of the sword Excalibur. In contrast the other three retellings, Hopkins’s recounts that the “Archbishop crowned him king”. (1993, p.19), depict Arthur as being crowned by the people. One reason for this may be Boorman’s focus on the sword of legend, the sword that is the weapon of the true king, whereas other depictions of Excalibur are as powerful magic weapon and not the legendary sword in the stone. One may look at the formation and fellowship of the round table for more differences.

Merlin plays a central role in the formation of the fellowship and the construction of the round table. Three different versions of Merlins role can be analysed: Hopkins, the

T.V movie *Merlin* and *Excalibur*. In Hopkins's retelling it is Arthur who decides to form the table at his wedding to Guinevere because "each one of whom strove to be the best, and none of whom would think himself a lesser man than the others"(1993, p.34). In the T.V film *Merlin* Arthur is given the table as a gift to symbolise "honour, justice, truth and equality." (1998). Moreover in *Excalibur* Merlin prompts Arthur to "rejoice in fellowship as one under the stars."(1981). The notable difference here is that in Hopkins Arthur is wise and thoughtful. Arthur can think on his own, he is independent and Merlin the wise prophet and seer who provides guidance when needed. In contrast to this Merlins role in *Merlin* and *Excalibur* is that of the powerful sorcerer, the controlling force, Merlin tells Arthur what to do.