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## Of Magicians and Masculinity: Merlin and the Manifestation of the New Man

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## Of Magicians and Masculinity: *Merlin* and the Manifestation of the New Man

Jennie M. Morton

As the Arthurian legends have continued to respond over time to fit specific cultural needs, the role of Merlin has evolved from mere sage to powerful wizard. In one of his most recent reincarnations, Merlin takes center stage as narrator and protagonist in a 1998 self-titled made-for-TV movie. While the story is a mixture of various Merlin traditions, hidden under the fantasy and special effects is a subtle cultural critique of masculinity. In this contemporary manifestation, Merlin, as both a man of action *and* emotion, embodies turn-of-the-century ideals for modern masculinity. Often at odds with what he considers his duty to the Arthurian realm and his personal desires, Merlin is a composite of traditional and new masculinities. This fusion is a projection of the ideological construct of the New Man and serves as a foil and critique against hegemonic masculinity that characters such as King Arthur replicate. Indicated by Merlin's pivotal role as narrator and Arthur's ill-fated reign, the movie favors a more contemporary blending of physical and emotional strength over stoicism and the warrior culture. Consequently, Merlin's hybridity functions as the sole positive model of masculinity throughout the film. Additionally, reading Merlin as a new type of hero is further enhanced by the story's reflection of the American monomyth. These elements combined reveal a time in US film culture when images of masculinity were not only becoming more complex, but were also readily accepted by the general public. Since Merlin has been a largely enigmatic figure, to fully understand how he has come to occupy these new types of masculinities and what his narrative reveals about cultural expectations for men, it is important to situate what types of positions the necromancer has traditionally held.

Regardless of text, author, genre, or even time period, Merlin has always been marked by his otherness. He is "by nature a marginal, unofficial, fugitive, [and] ambiguous figure. Yet his existence and powers are absolutely fundamental for the course of history" (Rider 3). Looking at his appearances in Wace's *Roman*, Layamon's *Brut*, and Geoffrey's *Historia*, Merlin is prophet, sage, and wizard to Vortigern, Uther, and Arthur successively. Jeff Rider, author of "The Fictional Margin," argues that "the succession of [these] kings and the progress of history depend[ed] utterly on Merlin's supernatural, fictional powers: the things which were done depended utterly on things which were neither done nor [could] be done, for they are against nature" (11). Fundamentally, this locates Merlin as "the linchpin of history. He reveals history, he shapes it, and yet he is its creature, merely tracing its preexisting shape" (2). Merlin's otherworldliness is complicated by his dual position of being able to manipulate history yet having to answer to three human kings. This arrangement also caused Merlin to be "implicitly in competition with the kings" because of their dependence on his "vision and help" (3). This influential status allowed him to hold great power over the kings for "history, their story, could easily become Merlin's story: the narrative could easily be displaced from the historical center toward the fictional margin" (3-4). In 1998, NBC, in conjunction with Hallmark Entertainment, took this latent potential and placed Merlin's fictional marginality at the center of his very own narrative, creating the first major filmic production where Merlin was the protagonist<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> NBC and Hallmark Entertainment were no strangers to made-for-TV fantasy miniseries. Prior to *Merlin*, they had collaborated on *Gulliver's Travels* (1996) and *The Odyssey* (1997). They also went on to make *Alice in Wonderland* (1999), *Jason and the Argonauts* (2000), and *The 10<sup>th</sup> Kingdom* (2000).

Directed by Steve Barron, the three-part miniseries preserves many established elements of Merlin's story from a wide range of sources. Such features include Merlin's fatherless and magical birth, his prophecy to Vortigern about the red and white dragons, his transformation of Uther to seduce Igraine, the Lady of the Lake's gift of Excalibur, and his role as Arthur's teacher and advisor. The miniseries also depicts Guinevere, Lancelot, Modred, and Morgan le Fay in their familiar pop culture roles. In addition to these, the story incorporates several new characters and a revision of another. A character not present in any Merlin traditions is Queen Mab, a sorceress figure who represents the pagan religion and the old ways<sup>2</sup>. Threatened by the nexus of Christianity and Roman rule, Mab actually creates Merlin and gives him his magical powers as a way to turn the people back to her. In a realm where magical characters cease to exist when they are forgotten, Merlin is the one way for Mab to preserve her existence. However, she does not anticipate Merlin's reaction when she lets his mother and aunt die, causing her to lose him as an ally forever. These traumatic deaths prompt Merlin to offer his services as a wizard to the three kings in order to fight against her, setting off a chain of events that determines the course of the story. Another character, Nimue, traditionally identified as either the benevolent Lady of the Lake or the fickle Viviane who traps Merlin in a cave, appears as a lord's daughter and Merlin's love interest. Through these variations and reworkings, Merlin stays at the core, serving as the audience's faithful storyteller.

Merlin's centrality to the narrative calls attention to his unique position as possessor of contemporary expectations for masculinity. At first glance, one might concentrate on the more traditional aspects of Merlin's masculinity: he holds a position of power by being an advisor to kings, he is classically educated in wizardry, he participates in several battles, and he is in conflict with women, especially the one who created him. However, Merlin's character extends beyond these conventional aspects. Though he may carry Excalibur and wear a Romanesque soldier's helmet, Merlin is not a warrior. Unlike the kings he serves, he does not live or die by the sword. The only time Merlin genuinely uses Excalibur is when he strikes a frozen lake top during a battle which causes Vortigern to drown and when he thrusts the sword into the stone to prevent Uther from causing anymore bloodshed.

Further deviating from the image of the warrior, Merlin is constantly connected with nature. Many of his scenes are filmed in vast and colorfully rich landscapes including crags above the ocean, the desert, the wilds of Britain, lakes and rivers, or in the forest. Most of his verbal battles with Mab rely heavily on the use of strong tides or winds, and several scenes that include Merlin's wooden hut in the forest depict his strong ties with home and family. Additionally, several prominent sequences feature Merlin manipulating elements of nature when he performs magic. For instance, a young Merlin commands a stick to grow so he can pull Nimue from a patch of sinking mud. This is echoed years later when Nimue is in danger of being eaten by a dragon. Merlin uses water to create a bog and causes plants to rise up and conquer the fire-breather. Another scene shows Merlin saving Arthur's life by asking bees to swarm attacking griffins that have been sent by Mab. He also comes to Arthur's aid when he is urged to use rain to delay Guinevere from burning at the stake. Merlin's relationship with nature also extends beyond just the use of magic. As demonstrated during his imprisonment in Vortigern's dungeons, Merlin is dependent on light and fresh air to receive his visions and without them, he is in danger of dying. This close connectivity with and reliance on nature clearly indicates that Merlin is not a depiction of traditional masculinity. Despite that nature has been traditionally classified as a feminine element, it does nothing to lessen Merlin's image as a

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<sup>2</sup> Queen Mab, also referred to as Medb or Maeve, is Celtic in origin. Part mythos and part reflection of goddess worship, her presence in *Merlin* signifies the archaic mother as well as the femme castratrice. Mab, including all the females represented in the miniseries, would make for a rich feminist analysis that has yet to be conducted, one of many elements in *Merlin* that demand critical scrutiny.

positive and strong male character, helping to unravel the strict polarization between masculine and feminine.

There are also other aspects of Merlin's character that indicate that he is a blending of new traits desired for contemporary masculinity. Though he is in conflict with Mab and by extension Morgan, Merlin has no reservations about seeking advice and aid from a woman, the Lady of the Lake<sup>3</sup>. She is the first one he seeks out in the fight against Mab and is responsible for giving him Excalibur and directing him to Joyous Guard where he finds Lancelot<sup>4</sup>. Her frozen lake also becomes the vantage point for the battle between Uther and Vortigern. Merlin's healthy connection with women also extends to his tender and romantic relationship with his love Nimue. Though he cannot save her face from being burned by the dragon, Merlin takes her to the Isle of Avalon to be healed by the nuns. He stays by her side during her recovery and does his best to show an extremely self-conscious Nimue that she is still beautiful to him. He also tries to remove her from her cloister at the abbey so they may live together in the forest without interference. Finally, the last trait that cements Merlin's new type of masculinity is that he is an involved father figure to Arthur, helping to raise him as a child and teaching him the principles of justice and compassion over peace and charity as a young king.

These traits are evidence that Merlin's character is a reflection of the model of the "New Man", or what some scholars call the "modern male role" (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Messner 200). The article "Gender Display and Men's Power" defines the New Man as "a white, college-educated professional who is a highly involved and nurturant father, 'in touch' and expressive of his feelings, and egalitarian in his dealings with women" (202).<sup>5</sup> Additionally, this new type of masculinity rejects "overt physical and verbal displays of domination, stoicism, emotional inexpressivity, [and] overt misogyny" (207). The image of the New Man also "serve[s] to file off some of the rough edges of hegemonic masculinity [. . .] so that the possibility of a happier and healthier life for men is created" (207). Merlin's story can be read as a successful negation of competing masculinities, one that not only proposes an alternative to traditional notions of manhood, but presents viewers with a realized potential for emotional wholeness in men. However, despite the positive qualities such a model can offer, it is necessary to take into consideration that the "New Man does not actually exist; he is an ideological construct" (206). Like most images in films, Merlin is nothing more than a reflection of cultural attitudes toward men. Regardless, ideologically speaking, the figure of Merlin is still rewarded for his incorporation of New Man elements since this typically marginal figure is the one who has the classic happy ending.

In contrast, King Arthur is punished for his strong identification with the warrior culture, his dependence on Excalibur, and his attitudes toward women. This is an interesting shift since Arthur is typically not only the center of any given legend, but also regarded as a hero/savior figure. This is not the case in *Merlin*. Arthur is so deeply immersed in the Symbolic Order, in everything that is tied to hegemonic masculinity, he causes a series of events that leads to his own downfall. To begin with, when Arthur finally learns of his true heritage, he immediately seeks the kingship: "I want what's mine." His reign is also completely determined by Excalibur. Not only is he able to free it from the stone, but the sword proves his lineage and allows him to unite the warring lords. Everything that is

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<sup>3</sup> In this version, the Lady of the Lake is Mab's sister and also played by Miranda Richardson.

<sup>4</sup> Merlin seeks out the Lady of the Lake's advice when he needs to find someone to protect the throne when Arthur goes on the Grail Quest.

<sup>5</sup> Many thanks to Dr. Harry Brod, University of Northern Iowa professor of philosophy and religion, for taking time out of his office hours to direct me to this article. It was a turning point in my research and I am sincerely grateful for his assistance.

done to solidify his kingship involves Excalibur in some way. Arthur is not much of a king without it.

After establishing his throne, Arthur's next expression of traditional masculinity is when he sleeps with Morgan le Fay who, unbeknownst to him, is his half-sister. Her exotic arrival at his court makes it clear that Arthur is overwhelmed by her beauty and seductive nuances and though not directly stated, Arthur's stammering and nervousness suggest he has little experience with women. However, as a new king ready to prove himself, it comes as no surprise that he would allow Morgan to enter his bed. Their union results in the birth of Mordred, whose later confrontations with Arthur leads to both of their deaths.

Arthur continues to reflect ideals of hegemonic masculinity in his marriage to Guinevere. It is an arranged and loveless marriage, one that is merely decorative and for the benefit of Arthur's realm. When Merlin asks if Arthur loves her, he replies, "she'll make a splendid queen and a good wife." This passionless union provides the motivation for Guinevere to find fulfillment in Lancelot while Arthur goes questing for the Grail. In fact, Arthur's decision to leave on a futile pursuit is what causes his realm to unravel. Wearily returning after many years without the holy chalice or half his knights, Arthur finds strife and discontent has infiltrated his beloved Camelot. Mordred is the source of the contention and devastation, announcing he is Arthur's long-lost son and exposing Guinevere and Lancelot's affair. Concerned only for his own honor, Arthur angrily demands to know whether Guinevere's betrayal is true and accuses her of not thinking of him. She admits her betrayal freely and counters, "You left me alone for years, did you not think of me? What of my honor, finding out my husband had had a child with a woman named Morgan le Fay?" In turn, Mordred points out to the already agitated knights that Guinevere's affair is considered treason and demands that there be a trial. Though Arthur tries to argue that Guinevere's betrayal is only against him and not Camelot, he succumbs to Mordred's pressure and sentences his wife to death. In an attempt to rationalize his actions, he claims he must publicly uphold the law as high king. Everything Arthur is and everything he has built has been founded upon law, and yet everything crumbles for precisely those same reasons.

The accumulation of Arthur's stubborn refusal to venture outside of the warrior-king role is what causes his ultimate failure—his death. In a fog-covered battle, Arthur and Mordred battle for the crown and die by each other's swords. Unlike other Arthurian endings, there is no question left in the viewer's mind that the king is dead. There is no boat to take him to Avalon, no chance of having his wounds healed, and there is no possibility of a return. Instead, it is Merlin who is the focal point of the close of the movie, perhaps as a reward for refusing to participate in hegemonic masculinity. He is reunited with Nimue and uses the last of his magic to make them young again. Merlin is the triumphant hero, not Arthur. This certainly deviates from much of Arthurian tradition. How is it possible for a character such as Merlin, who traditionally plays a secondary and static role to Arthur, to take Arthur's place as a hero figure and to morph into his own empty signifier? To answer this, it is necessary to understand the cultural climate and the decade that produced the *Merlin* miniseries, starting seven years earlier.

According to the article "The Big Switch: Hollywood Masculinity in the Nineties," Susan Jeffords argues that 1991 presented a changed image in US masculinity. Films like *Terminator 2*, *City Slickers*, *Switch*, and even Walt Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* showed a representation of men that suggested that "the hard-bodied male action heroes of the eighties ha[d] given way to a 'kinder, gentler' U.S. manhood, one that [was] sensitive, generous, caring, and perhaps most importantly, capable of change" (Jeffords 197). This transformation was in response to several key factors that had arisen during the 80s, including "feminism, civil rights, and a declining Cold Warrior validation" (197-98). Movies like *Kindergarten Cop* clearly demonstrate that the 90s' message was that "the emotionally whole and physically healed man of the eighties want[ed] nothing more than to be a father, not a warrior/cop, after all" (200). Audiences had grown tired of seeing men use their bodies as lethal weapons—they wanted to know what else these men could offer. Heroes often had to

prove that they were capable of change and practicing a “softer” version of masculinity. Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast* provides an excellent example of a man who behaved so monstrously that he was literally turned into an animal. The Beast is only turned back into a human once he has demonstrated his *capacity for humanity*, that he can negotiate turn-of-the-century ideals for masculinity that incorporate kindness, compassion, and respect toward women.

By the time *Merlin* is produced in 1998, viewers are presented with the image of a man who has no need to reform. He already possesses these new traits, and there is no need to justify his projection of modern masculinity. Additionally, because King Arthur is still influenced by hegemonic masculinity—much like the 80s action heroes—he is cast aside in favor of the wizard’s hybridity. Furthermore, looking at other contemporary films from the same year, it is clear that Merlin is not a unique figure. He is only one of many representations from successful mainstream movies that supported these New Men. Such popular movies included *Armageddon*, *Patch Adams*, *There’s Something About Mary*, *Pleasantville*, and *The Horse Whisperer*. These examples indicate that right at the turn of the century, the masculinity shift that had started in 1991 had been successfully integrated and was readily accepted in American film culture.

Another contributing factor to *Merlin*’s success with home-viewing audiences is its relationship to traditional hero narratives. Its basic premise follows the model of the monomyth, a term coined by Joseph Campbell in his book *A Hero with a Thousand Faces*. This is an expression, also referred to as the master myth, used to describe Western civilization’s hero legends and the basic pattern that accompanies each story. This can be reduced to the simple formula of a hero engaged in “a separation from the world, a penetration to some source of power, and a life-enhancing return” (Campbell 35). The champion, usually of noble descent, is aided by mystical powers, confronts a monster or tyrant, and comes back to society with a boon, typically a wife, treasure, or special knowledge. *The Odyssey*, *The Lion King*, the *Star Wars* episodes, and most Arthurian legends are all examples of this model. However, the hero of the classic monomyth is *always* a warrior to some extent. He is clearly aligned with traditional masculinity and rarely deviates from this position; he is only motivated by his own glory and gain.

However, Merlin is not this sort of hero. Instead, he is concerned about the great good and future of his society, places others ahead of himself, and his only real threat, aside from Mab, are his own inner demons. A more accurate classification of Merlin’s story is under a subset of the master myth, the American monomyth. These story arcs “derive from tales of redemption [. . .] combining elements from the selfless servant who impassively gives his life for others [with] the zealous crusader who destroys evil” (Jewett and Lawrence xx). Furthermore under this model, the hero is a substitute for the Christ figure, “motivated not by the quest for self [like in] the classical monomyth, but a sort of *selflessness*” (Doty 193, italics added). These components reinforce Merlin’s tale of redemption and compassion, but it is important to note that he is only able to achieve these because of his incorporation of new masculinities.

Perhaps the most significant trait that solidifies Merlin away from hegemonic masculinity is his humanness. Merlin may be indomitable, but his greatest flaw is his inability to judge human character correctly. This imperfection creates many troubles for Merlin, often producing disastrous consequences. Merlin’s first major misstep is when he helps Uther over Vortigern, thinking the former is the savior king he has been hoping for when he only turns out to be just as greedy and power hungry as the latter. Once Uther has the crown, his lust for Igraine compromises his kingship and he betrays Merlin’s trust when he has Lord Cornwall, Igraine’s husband, killed. This event may result in Arthur’s birth, but it also introduces Morgan le Fay into the family unit. Years later, another lapse in error occurs when Merlin leaves a newly-crowned Arthur alone, thinking that with a good king finally on the throne, he can join Nimue in peace. His departure gives Morgan the chance to sleep with Arthur which facilitates the disastrous birth of Mordred. Lastly, when the Lady of the Lake tells Merlin that a good man to look after the throne is at Joyous Guard, Merlin assumes the man is Lancelot when instead it was his young son Galahad. Merlin’s choice lays the groundwork for

Lancelot and Guinevere's affair. As he reflects on the result of their relationship, he confesses, "I judged them too harshly. The blame was mine too. I picked Lancelot after all. I wished I had told them that. It might have made it easier."<sup>6</sup> Despite that Merlin errors many times, he is never condemned for it. He accepts he cannot be perfect and learns to overcome his weaknesses. In the end, after Arthur dies and Merlin throws Excalibur into the lake, the Lady offers him a parting reassurance: "It's human to make mistakes. And part of you is human, the best part." This gracious judgment actually creates a space where Merlin can come to terms with his mistakes. As William Doty contends in regard to the American monomyth, "Such a figure will have faced his own weaknesses [. . .] and he will have learned that being vulnerable results in being receptive to more aspects of the human experience than it is possible to experience when defensively guarded or heavily armored" (203). Ultimately, Merlin has achieved the path of reconciliation and enlightenment that the new hero figure demonstrates. This message extends to *Merlin's* male viewers, encouraging them to abandon fruitless quests for god-like perfection and lordship. Instead, they are encouraged to emulate Merlin's multifaceted masculinities and consider that the best part of them includes making mistakes—being human.

So what does this examination of Merlin and Arthur's masculinity tell viewers and scholars alike about how this version of the Arthurian legends has come to manifest itself in modern-day film culture? To begin with, it should be pointed out that "myths provide projective psyche models for contemporary life even when they are materials no longer immediately familiar" (Doty 8-9). Even though Campbell contends that "when a civilization has passed from a mythological to a secular point of view, the older images are no longer felt or quite approved", fortunately for modern film viewers, Arthurian legends are still an accessible source of knowledge (248). In fact, the importance of it is so great that King Arthur is no longer the only character that can take on different meanings and interpretations. As evident by Merlin's projection of the New Man, the wizard has evolved to become his own empty signifier, replacing Arthur as the dominant symbol to encode the values du jour. For this particular manifestation, Merlin is rewritten to reflect cultural wishes for men to find alternative masculinities away from those influenced by hegemony.

Additionally, looking at four of the most recent Arthurian productions, *Merlin* (1998), *Mists of Avalon* (2001), and the movies *King Arthur* (2004) and *The Last Legion* (2007), it is evident that contemporary audiences are seeking new Arthurian representations, ones that address unexplored elements of the legends. Viewers want to know the story from Merlin or Morgaine's point of view, to see what the historical Arthur or Britain might have been like, or to see a retelling that is colored by current issues and events. Therefore, functioning as a projective psyche model, it comes as no surprise that this simple made-for-TV movie could yield such a rich critique of masculinity, an issue that certainly permeated other productions of its time. Perhaps our current culture is no longer as fascinated with King Arthur as the subject of a film as much as we are now interested in characters that represent the fictional margin. Maybe Merlin has become a more realistic and accessible figure than Arthur and his one-dimensional connection with the Symbolic Order. Perhaps these shifts also indicate we are in a transition between a mythology and secular society, one that is constantly negotiating the symbols and tropes of old to try and adapt them to our twenty-first century perceptions and experiences. Jewett and Lawrence argue that since "Americans have not moved beyond mythical consciousness," hero/ines and myths are integral to our visual culture, in part explaining why so many movies still dwell on these themes (xxi). Regardless of the stage, Merlin's representation can still be read as a progressive step in creating images of men that are not damaging examples to imitate, a concern still at the forefront of many contemporary minds.

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<sup>6</sup> This quote was in response to the wedge that was driven between Lancelot, Guinevere, and Arthur. It also followed the scene where Lancelot rescues Guinevere from the stake and they literally ride out of the story.

What does the future hold for Merlin? Since the miniseries, recent attempts to modernize his story have focused on either creating a “historical” Merlin who is a wild Celtic tribesman or showing him as a bubbling has-been magician, yet none have chosen to inscribe new meaning to his character.<sup>7</sup> Given that popular and high culture both share a concern with and reveal the myths of their time in distinctive ways (Jewett and Lawrence xx), it is imperative to scrutinize each new retelling of Arthurian legend so we may better understand ourselves and the cultural attitudes that impel us to return again and again to these legends of yesterday. As Campbell points out, when myth is regarded “in terms not of what it is but of how it functions [ . . . ], mythology shows itself to be as amenable as life itself to the obsessions and requirements of the individual, the race, [and] the age” (383). Hence the adaptability of figures such as Merlin, ones whose stories have hung in the shadows and can shape-shift endlessly, constructing bridges between the past and present.

With the prevalence and resurgence of heroes since the turn of the century, both graphic, traditional, animated, and otherwise, it is clear our culture still depends on their stories for inspiration and stimulation. These characters are evolving and deepening in ways that fluctuate so rapidly that we can barely keep up with them before they have taken on a new set of meanings. As of current, these structures seem to indicate that our society still takes comfort in the images of old and is trying to reconcile figures of the past with our present day struggles. As William Doty ponders:

Perhaps ‘hero/ine’ can become the adult model once again, a model not of self-aggrandizement but of community-enhancement, a model in which the maleness or femaleness of the heroic figure no longer matters very much, a model realized not in exclusion but in inclusion, not domination but cooperation, growing together rather than towering over. (206)

If this is the case, Merlin’s story is surely exemplarily of this wish. His synthesis of physical and emotional strength positively emphasizes the ideals of collaboration, respect, and compassion, traits that bind him to the inherent qualities of Camelot. May we only be as lucky to find more Arthurian figures breaking away from the binary orders of old to become more fluid and constructive models to emulate.

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<sup>7</sup> See *King Arthur* (2004) and *Shrek 3* (2007).



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