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Zásady pro vypracování

Práce bude spadat do oblasti typologie postav. Zaměří se na zobrazení čaroděje Merlina z legend o Artušovi v próze a filmové tvorbě z konce 20. a začátku 21. století. Kapitoly budou tematicky dělené. Zvolená díla (např. Excalibur Johna Boormana a Young Merlin Tony Bradmana) bude kontrastovat s původním obrazem Merlina ve středověkých legendách. Autorka zpracuje detailní komparativní analýzu vybraných naratologických aspektů, zejména ztvárnění povahových vlastností postavy a její funkce v příběhu. Pro své rozbory využije sekundární literaturu z oblasti typologie postav (např. Propp, Greimas, Chatman). Práci uzavře kapitola, ve které autorka svá dílčí zjištění o povaze proměn v zobrazování této ikonické postavy v současné tvorbě zobecní a pokusí se je odůvodnit.

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Annotation

This bachelor thesis focuses on modern versions of Merlin in recent adaptations of Arthurian legends across three different types of media – literary works, television series, and movies. The theoretical part defines the archetypal characteristics of the character, drawing mainly upon the relevant sections of narratives written by Thomas Malory, Geoffrey of Monmouth, and Sir James Knowles. It also establishes Merlin's traditional role and function in the story, using the theory of Algirdas Julien Greimas. The analytical chapters examine how the character is portrayed in contemporary retellings.

Keywords

adaptations, Arthurian legends, Merlin, retellings, morality

Název

Obraz Merlina v moderních verzích artušovských legend

Anotace

Tato bakalářská práce se zaměřuje na moderní verze Merlina v nejnovějších adaptacích artušovských legend ve třech různých typech médií - literárních dílech, televizních seriálech a filmech. Teoretická část vymezuje archetypální charakteristiky postavy, přičemž vychází především z příslušných částí vyprávění Thomase Maloryho, Geoffreyho z Monmouthu a sira Jamese Knowlese. Rovněž stanovuje Merlinovu tradiční roli a funkci v příběhu s využitím teorie Algirdase Juliána Greimase. Analytické kapitoly zkoumají, jak je postava zobrazena v současných převyprávěních.

Klíčová slova

adaptace, Artušovské legendy, Merlin, převyprávění, morálnost

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Introduction

The figure of Merlin has been with readers for hundreds of years. In essence, the famous magician had three main predecessors: Myrddin, Lailoken, and Ambrosius. A mad prophet called Myrddin frequently appears in early Welsh poetry. These poems can be found in manuscripts, for example, in the *Black Book of Carmarthen* from around 1250. In *The Little Pig Stanzas* (in the original: *Yr Oianau*), “Myrddin addresses the piglet that is his sole companion in the woods”¹ after being exiled. Before he eventually dies, he predicts the future of Britain. Interestingly, “the primitive motif of the Wild Man of the Woods,” as Alfred Owen Hughes Jarman calls it, can be found also in Irish and Scottish traditions.² A story of a Scottish character Lailoken can be seen as an analogy to Myrddin’s. In fact, it is speculated in *Kentigern and Lailoken* that the prophet “was Merlin, the famous seer among the Britons.” His prediction involved three different predictions of his own death. In the end, all three were fulfilled.³ Another literary figure that served as a model for Merlin known to us from later periods is Ambrosius (or Emrys) who appears in *The History of the Kings of Britain* (in the original: *Historia Regum Britanniae*) as an advisor to King Vortigern. Therefore, three different prophetic figures, each with their own unique stories and characteristics, are defined, waiting to be merged into one comprehensive unit.

The person to combine the three predecessors and mark the beginning of the evolution of Merlin throughout time and cultures was Geoffrey of Monmouth. Evidence of this can be found in his poem called *The Life of Merlin* (in the original: *Vita Merlini*), where Merlin – as Geoffrey named his creation - plays a significant role. The story takes place in Wales, the birthplace of Myrddin, where the queen attempts to catch Merlin, prince of Dyfed, in the act of lying by asking him to predict the death of two boys and one girl. The trick is that, in reality, the three children are only one boy wearing disguises. As a result, Merlin predicts three different causes of death, making it seem that the Queen’s ruse has worked. However, when the time comes for the boy to perish, it happens exactly as it was forecasted.⁴ This twist almost exactly follows the pattern of mysterious triple deaths foretold by Lailoken. The poem demonstrates

¹ Alan Lupack, *The Oxford Guide to Arthurian Literature and Legend* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 329.

² Alfred Owen Hughes Jarman, “The Merlin Legend and the Welsh Tradition of Prophecy,” in *Merlin: A Casebook*, ed. Peter H. Goodrich and Raymond H. Thompson (London: Routledge, 2003), 103.

³ Lupack, *The Oxford Guide*, 329-330.

⁴ Stephen Knight, “Myrddin to Merlin and Back Again,” *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion* 14 (2008): 8-9.

how Geoffrey of Monmouth interjected the Wild Man of the Woods motif of the earlier traditions into a new character.

Despite being most importantly associated with magic, Geoffrey's interpretation lacks any signs of Merlin having such powers. For instance, when it comes to shapeshifting, his character "uses 'drugs' rather than spells to transform himself and Arthur's father, Uther Pendragon, into the likeness of other people."⁵ This more grounded portrait contrasts strongly with other medieval adaptations, in which Merlin appears as a powerful magician capable of casting spells as desired. Later writers built on Geoffrey's foundations but dramatically expanded Merlin's magic abilities, making him a figure of the archetype of magic we recognize today. However, the engrossment with the wizard did not end with literature.

Owing to an unwavering readership, Merlin appeared on the silver screen. *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1920) – an adaptation of Mark Twain's novel of the same name, published in 1889 – was the first movie to present a live-action version of the magician. William V. Mong played the role of Merlin alongside his colleagues, who portrayed both original and classic characters from the legends, like Morgan le Fay, King Arthur, or Sir Lancelot. Although "[t]he enormous popularity of *A Connecticut Yankee* was due in large part to its blatant appeal to national pride and tradition"⁶ rather than Mong's performance, it was not the last time Merlin would enter popular culture. Early adaptations or modern retellings can also be found in numerous television series.

This bachelor thesis focuses on the depictions of Merlin in prose, television, and film from the late 20th and early 21st centuries, including, for example, a short children's book "Young Merlin" by Tony Bradman, the BBC fantasy adventure TV series *Merlin* created by Julian Jones, Jake Michie, Johnny Capps, and Julian Murphy or a miniseries of movies directed by Steven Barron called *Merlin*. The aim is to compare the original image of Merlin with the modern retellings of medieval legends. The practical chapter uses A. J. Greimas' theory of structural semantics to reconstruct Merlin as an archetypal figure of wise old wizard, mentor and moral symbol, focusing on his role and function in the story in relation to the wider plot. The first analytical chapter deconstructs the primary sources, examining how Merlin is depicted through the eyes of other characters. The second analytical chapter consequently works with the sources to focus on Merlin's moral or immoral traits. The expected outcome is the discovery

⁵ C. Scott Littleton and Linda A. Malcor, "Some Notes on Merlin," *Arthuriana* 5, no. 3 (Fall 1995): 87-88.

⁶ Barbara Tapa Lupack, "A *Connecticut Yankee* at the Movies," *Arthuriana* 29, no. 2 (Summer 2019): 71.

that the modern retellings of Arthurian legends honor the tradition of keeping Merlin a mysteriously ambiguous character, who is sometimes respected, and sometimes feared.

Merlin As an Archetypal Character

In 1862, Sir James Knowles, under the initials J. T. K., published a book called *The Legends of King Arthur and his Knights*. By shortening the classic version of Thomas Malory and conjoining it with the works of Geoffrey of Monmouth, he created a consecutive story that follows King Arthur from his birth to his death, including individual adventures of his loyal Knights of the Round Table as well as the famous prophecies of Merlin. This chapter aims to define typical features of the prophet and wizard as an archetype, using the relevant parts of Malory's and Geoffrey's stories with the help of Knowles' abridged rewrite.

Very little is known about the circumstances of Merlin's ancestry. Most legends agree that the prophet was born without a mortal man's intervention, but often do not further explore his origins, even though the information is a crucial clue to the origin of his powers. However, in Book VI, Chapter XVIII of *The History of the Kings of Britain*, there are direct indications of who the father might be when Merlin's mother, daughter to the king of Dimetia, is brought to King Vortigern for questioning. She answers:

'[...] Only this I know, that as I was once with my companions in our chambers, there appeared to me a person in the shape of a most beautiful young man, who often embraced me eagerly in his arms, and kissed me; and when he had stayed a little time, he suddenly vanished out of my sight. But many times after this he would talk with me when I sat alone, without making any visible appearance. When he had a long time haunted me in this manner, he at last lay with me several times in the shape of a man, and left me with child. And I do affirm to you, my sovereign lord, that excepting that young man, I know no body that begot him of me.'⁷

In addition, it is revealed by Maugantius that the description fits a spirit called incubus, which is half-man, half-angel and can shapeshift into a human form whenever it pleases, usually with the desire to have an intercourse.⁸ This would perfectly explain why it is possible that Merlin possesses powers no other human does.

In Arthurian legends, Merlin uses his wisdom and magic to advise and assist his master, which makes him an important agent of plot, despite not being the main character. From the narratological perspective, he has the function of a *Sender*, meaning someone "who offers the [*Object*] of the quest to the [*Receiver*],"⁹ standing on the opposite side of the spectrum. Evidence supporting this claim can be found in several stories, for instance, in Book VIII, Chapter I of

⁷ "Arthurian Passages from the History of the Kings of Britain," *Robbins Library Digital Projects*, accessed December 23, 2024, <<https://d.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/text/geoffrey-of-monmouth-arthurian-passages-from-the-history-of-the-kings-of-britain.html>>.

⁸ "Arthurian Passages," Robbins Library Digital Projects.

⁹ Algirdas Julien Greimas, *Structural Semantics: An Attempt at Method*, trans. Daniele McDowell, Ronald Schleifer, and Alan Velie (University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 282.

The History of the Kings of Britain, King Vortigern wants to know his fate and asks Merlin to reveal it to him. To put it very simply, Merlin (*Sender*) is sharing his knowledge about the future with King Vortigern (*Receiver*), thereby indirectly determining the course of action in the story, for the King must react to the prophecy to survive (*Object*).

Nonetheless, that is not the only actantial role that can be assigned to the magician. He can also be seen as a *Helper* – first to King Vortigern, later to King Arthur. Helpers “bring the help by acting in the direction of the desire or by facilitating communication.”¹⁰ Directly on the opposite side of the spectrum there is an *Opponent*. Opponents “create obstacles by opposing either the realization of the desire or the communication of the object.”¹¹ Inevitably, the sole existence of the two powers ensures their confrontation, the result of which is a success, when “the destruction of the negative term to the profit of a single positive term”¹² occurs. In the famous story about the Sword in the Stone, the ‘desire’ is for Arthur to be accepted as the true king. Other nobles of the realm (*Opponent*), want to claim the throne for themselves, thus they stand in the way of Arthur’s coronation. Merlin’s goal (as a *Helper*) is to ensure that the young Pendragon can prove himself to the nobles. A confrontation follows in the form of the trial of the sword in the stone, a symbolic event facilitated by the prophet, where one by one, all of the nobles try to pull it out because, as the golden letters on the weapon say: “Whoso pulleth out this sword of this stone and anvil, is rightwise king born of all England.”¹³ As Arthur is the only one who can do it, the nobles are forced to accept his rule, which represents the success of the Helper’s plan – Merlin’s manipulation of events ensured that Arthur was crowned and the destiny fulfilled.

Great power means great responsibility. As the keeper of the natural order, Merlin is aware of the weight of profound knowledge and the danger of revealing it on request without good reason. In Book VIII, Chapter X of *The History of the Kings of Britain*, upon the advice from Archbishop Tremounus, Aurelius, one of the three sons of King Constantine, sends for Merlin in the hope that the seer would help him construct a monument to honor those who were murdered by Hengist. To his dismay, Merlin refuses to disclose any prophecies that could prove useful to Aurelius, explaining that “[m]ysteries of this kind are not to be revealed but when there is the greatest necessity for it. If [he] should pretend to utter them for ostentation or diversion, the spirit that instructs [him] would be silent, and would leave [him] when [Merlin]

¹⁰ Greimas, *Structural Semantics*, 261.

¹¹ Greimas, *Structural Semantics*, 261.

¹² Greimas, *Structural Semantics*, 49.

¹³ “The Project Gutenberg eBook of Le Morte D'Arthur, Volume I (of II), by Thomas Malory,” Project Gutenberg, accessed December 24, 2024, <<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1251/1251-h/1251-h.htm#bibl01>>.

should have occasion for it."¹⁴ He explicitly implies the existence of an unspecified higher spirit, the guidance of which is important to the prophet. Therefore, he cannot risk losing its support when he needs it most, for it could have fatal consequences such as changing the course of history. In essence, he realizes that his prophetic ability lies in knowing the answers and when and why to provide them.

Many authors incorporated shapeshifting abilities into the prophet's skill set but many refrain from it. Merlin likely inherited his capability to change forms from his father – if the incubus theory is correct – but is seldom seen using them. On rare occasions, he appears in different disguises, usually to test and instruct Arthur. In Chapter III of *The Legends of King Arthur and his Knights*, Merlin approaches Arthur in the likeness of a fourteen-year-old child and claims to know better than anyone how the Pendragon was born. When the King refuses to believe him, dismissing the boy as too young to remember such a thing, Merlin leaves and soon returns, this time looking like an old man. Arthur decides from one look at him that he is a wise, trustworthy person, and immediately tells him about the boy he met a little while ago. The magician corrects the King's mistake of calling the boy a liar, revealing the trick he played on Arthur as well as his true identity. They end up riding together on horseback to Caerleon, while Merlin foretells the circumstances of his, and the King's, death.¹⁵ This innocent play served as a strategic move to get to know Arthur before the formal introduction, wanting to see him react genuinely in constructed situations. It also ensures that their relationship begins with a foundation of trust and respect.

At this point, it is important to note that even though he played a key role in Arthur's conception, Merlin's name no longer appears in *The History of the Kings of Britain* after the existence of an heir born out of the love of Uther and Igraine is revealed. For that reason, there is no in-person interaction between Merlin and Arthur, which subsequently causes some of the most famous moments of Arthurian legends, such as the introduction of the legendary sword Excalibur or of the Lady of the Lake, to be missing from Geoffrey's work. He does not completely abandon Merlin and returns to him some fourteen years later in *The Life of Merlin*, however, because it is primarily based on the old Celtic tradition rather than adding new pieces of lore, the poem is not very influential. Regardless of that, Merlin's association with Arthur marks a distinctive feature of the general archetypal character, thanks to other contributors who focused on their relationship.

¹⁴ "Arthurian Passages," Robbins Library Digital Projects.

¹⁵ Sir James Knowles, *The Legends of King Arthur and His Knights* (Arcturus Publishing Ltd, 2021), 44-45.

Although Merlin is a trusted advisor to King Arthur, his complex nature often causes others to perceive him as either a powerful ally or a subject of ridicule. In Volume I, Chapter VIII of Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* it is mentioned that "some of the kings had marvel of Merlin's words, and deemed well that it should be as he said; and some of them laughed him to scorn, as King Lot; and more other called him a witch."¹⁶ Later on, in Chapter X, Arthur defends Merlin and tries to persuade the barons to be more trusting by telling them: "[Y]e know well that he hath done much for me, and he knoweth many things, and when he is afore you, I would that ye prayed him heartily of his best advice."¹⁷ Ultimately, despite some skepticism, Arthur's unwavering trust in Merlin is a testament to the wizard's true value as a guide and protector, reinforcing his importance in the realm.

Merlin's role as a magician gradually replaced his prophetic identity, particularly in works from the 13th century, leading to the creation of the modern image of Merlin as an enchanter by the 19th century. In early romances, the idea of Merlin as a magician was always secondary to his role as a prophet. The public opinion of sorcery gradually changed from disdain to curiosity, bringing the subject into later romance texts.¹⁸ According to Paul Zumthor, "[o]n the basis of certain generally-known facts—not, of course, in the light of an as-yet-nonexistent critical science, but borne along by the general cultural current—a certain type of magician developed." Then he continues to explain that this new type differed from 'real' sorcerers like Paracelsus or Cornelius Agrippa. While their magic was based on knowledge of alchemy and occultism and thus more complex, Merlin's magic system is nothing more than a work of fantasy.¹⁹ This change in Merlin's depiction marks the evolution of the magical figure in literature, where the emphasis has shifted from his prophetic role to a more fantastic and mysterious identity.

Merlin (Merlyn) from Terence Hanbury White's four-part fantasy book series *The Once and Future King* (1958 – 1940) can be seen as an example of the new type of a magician. White provides us with many concrete instances when Merlin uses his powers, usually to teach Arthur (Wart) important life lessons by transforming his mentee into various animals with his spells. Nonetheless, his most unique magical attribute is his relationship with time – in Chapter III of *The Sword in the Stone*, Merlin explains he "was born at the wrong end of time" and has to "live backwards from in front, while surrounded by a lot of people living forwards from

¹⁶ Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, vol. 1.

¹⁷ Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, vol. 1.

¹⁸ Paul Zumthor, "Merlin: Prophet and Magician," in *Merlin: A Casebook*, ed. Peter H. Goodrich and Raymond H. Thompson (London: Routledge, 2003), 131.

¹⁹ Zumthor, "Merlin: Prophet and Magician," 131–32.

behind.”²⁰ His disorienting perspective on the world is often comical, but it only adds to the complexity of the character. On the other hand, Christopher Dean argues that:

‘[Merlin] tries spells that sometimes work but just as often do not. But this kind of trickery no longer impresses modern readers or audiences the way it did medieval ones. Magic is passé today – it is associated with magicians and children’s parties. Fantasy writers as a group rarely even use the word ‘magician’ preferring instead ‘enchanter’ or ‘sorcerer’ or even the more august ‘mage’.’²¹

This observation highlights a key shift in the portrayal of magic within modern fantasy literature, and by extension, how Merlin reflects this transformation as a character. At the same time, he points out that today’s readers are markedly different from those of the past.

Not only the readers or the image of Merlin himself changed over time, but also how the legends in which the wizard played a key role were retold. “The year 1800 is taken, somewhat arbitrarily, as the starting point, because that marks [...] the beginning of the modern attitude towards the material,”²² however, parody contributed to the popularization of Arthur’s legends, followed by drama and modern poetry, and finally, thanks to the technological marvels of the Lumière brothers and Thomas Alva Edison, these stories reached the cinemas and televisions already in the 18th century. Not only Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur*, but also T. H. White’s *The Once and Future King* served as an inspiration to many moviemakers. Disney’s *The Sword in the Stone* (1965) exemplifies the latter. Although it is based on the first part of White’s book only loosely,²³ it keeps Merlin’s role as a mentor to Arthur, along with his teaching method. The new addition to the story – relating directly to the mage – is “Mad Mim, an evil witch whom Merlin eventually defeats in a magical battle of wits”²⁴ who serves as Merlin’s nemesis. The concept of Merlin as an educator in the background, leading Arthur to greatness was rather appealing to the British and American audience at the time and appeared in many more adaptations that followed.

The 19th century witnessed the Romantic revival of Arthurian legends, a phenomenon that can be attributed to the key influence of Alfred Tennyson. He found his inspiration “in the Vulgate Merlin, one of the prose continuations of Robert de Boron’s poem” for his story of

²⁰ “A Project Gutenberg Canada eBook of *The Once and Future King* by T. H. White,” Project Gutenberg Canada, accessed February 13, 2025, <<https://gutenberg.ca/ebooks/whiteth-onceandfutureking/whiteth-onceandfutureking-00-e.html>>.

²¹ Christopher Dean, “The Many Faces of Merlin in Modern Fiction,” *Arthuriana Interpretations* 3, no. 1 (Fall 1988): 72.

²² Clark S. Northum, and John J. Parry, “The Arthurian Legends: Modern Retellings of the Old Stories: An Annotated Bibliography,” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 43, no. 2 (1994): 173.

²³ Kevin J. Harty, “Cinema Arthuriana: Translations of the Arthurian Legend to the Screen,” *Arthuriana Interpretations* 2, no. 1 (Fall 1987): 103.

²⁴ Harty, “Cinema Arthuriana: Translations of the Arthurian Legend to the Screen,” 103.

Merlin and Nimue, where the wizard, knowing that Viviane (Nimue) is plotting to imprison him, abandons all hope of ever experiencing true love, which leaves him melancholic.²⁵ In *The Idylls of the King*, “Merlin is seen largely in moral and social terms, he works for the salvation of Arthur’s society, in which Tennyson reflects a vision of his own England, and Merlin’s failure reveals the weakness which keeps it from fulfilling its ideals.”²⁶ It is evident that Tennyson is returning to tradition and in doing so, he uses Merlin’s errors to criticize the society of his era.

It has been proven that Merlin from the Arthurian legends embodies the archetypal role of a prophet in the earlier depictions and a magician in the later medieval or modern retellings, whose narratological function in the story is either a *Sender*, through his visions of the future he offers to those he serves, or a *Helper*, by assisting the kings to achieve their goals. His mysteriousness and abilities (that may or may not include shapeshifting, because some authors did not incorporate it into the wizard’s skillset) both stem from his supernatural origins as a son of no mortal man. Using his unique gift, Merlin often puts his mentee Arthur through various trials to test his righteousness – their relationship is one of mutual trust and respect. On the other hand, it does not necessarily apply to the public view of the wizard as he has to face not only admiration from the public but also fear or ridicule. Over the centuries, Merlin has undergone an evolution during which he has been assigned new appellations like ‘the new type of magician’ and deepened his connection to natural forces. Not only Merlin but the Arthurian legend as a whole stayed popular long enough to enter both the movie and the TV industry, becoming a timeless phenomenon appealing to all generations.

²⁵ Gordon S. Haight, “Tennyson’s Merlin,” *Studies in Philosophy* 44, no. 3 (1947): 551.

²⁶ Gwyneth Evans, “Modern Views of Merlin,” *Mythlore* 16, no. 4 (Summer 1990): 22.

Merlin As Seen by Other Characters

Since Merlin's personality is not only formed by his magic or prophetic power but also by the way other characters perceive him, it is vital to examine the perspectives of those who meet him. In the original Arthurian legends, Merlin is seen in a variety of ways – one full paragraph is devoted to this topic in the first chapter. Views of him often differ to such an extent that they can often be described as contrasting; while some consider the wizard as awe-inspiring, others fear his immense power. These differing perceptions mirror his mysterious nature. The objective of this chapter is to observe the perspectives of the characters in selected modern literature, movies, and television series regarding Merlin.

The story of Tony Bradman's *Young Merlin* (first published in 2009) is based on the events described through the end of Book VI and the beginning of Book VII of Geoffrey's *The History of the Kings of Britain* (or Chapter I of *The Legends of King Arthur and his Knights* by Sir James Knowles) that introduce Merlin into the legend for the first time. As the title suggests, Bradman focuses on Merlin in his childhood years just before he discovers his magical prophetic abilities. The writing style is adjusted to suit the needs of young children with dyslexia. What is more, the book is generally designed to teach children about kindness through the thoughts and good deeds of the hero.

Each character can be defined by the means of his or her function in the narrative. Merlin is the *Hero*. According to Vladimir Yakovlevich Propp, author of *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928), there are two types of heroes: *Seekers* and *Victimized Heroes*. The latter is detailed in the following generalized example:

‘If a young girl or boy is seized or driven out, and the thread of the narrative is linked to his or her fate and not to those who remain behind, then the hero of the tale is the seized or banished boy or girl. [...] Heroes of this variety may be called *victimized heroes*.’²⁷

Merlin's journey creates a concrete analogy of this description – Merlin is escorted from his mother by warriors at the command of King Vortigern;²⁸ it is him, not his mother, who must produce an escape plan to save himself from certain death by sacrifice – from which we can categorize the character as the *Victimized Hero*. Another significant character is previously mentioned King Vortigern, the ruler of Britain, who functions as the *Villain*. “His role is to disturb the peace of a happy family, to cause some form of misfortune, damage, or harm.”²⁹

²⁷ Vladimir Y. Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. Laurence Scott (American Folklore Society and Indiana University, 1968): 36.

²⁸ Tony Bradman, *Young Merlin* (Edinburgh: Barrington Stroke Ltd, 2009), 12.

²⁹ Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, 27.

Vortigern intends to sacrifice Merlin in the belief that springing the fatherless boy's blood on the walls of his fortress will lift the curse placed upon the land where the fortress is supposed to stand.³⁰ The last character that should be taken into consideration is the dragon. Merlin encounters the dragon accidentally in Chapter 4, after getting trapped in a cave under the fortress. It tells him to embrace his magical powers and fulfill his destiny – thus it leads Merlin to a figurative “agent [...] which permits the eventual liquidation of misfortune,”³¹ in our case, solving the problem of building Vortigern's fortress. This makes the dragon the narrative's *Donor* (or *Provider*).

The observation of the points of view of the main and supporting characters in *Young Merlin* shows that each character takes a subjective stance towards Merlin while some maintain their stance from beginning to end, others change it over time depending on the facts that are newly revealed to them. Merlin's mother remained loving even though it was his birth that caused her banishment from the town and throughout the story repeatedly refers to her son as ‘very special’. When the boy asks how he may have no father, the question is answered rather eloquently: “[she] said that [Merlin] had just ... arrived.”³² Taking into consideration Bradman's source material, his Merlin probably is, in fact, an offspring of a human and an incubus, however, taking into consideration the age of his readers, he decided to omit this detail, leaving the circumstances of his hero's conception a mystery. While the mother's love and pride are evident from start to finish, Vortigern's feelings turn from initial scorn to fear. At first, the Great King sees Merlin as a mere means to an end or, more precisely, as a sacrificial lamb. He is willing to do anything to protect himself from the Saxons who swore to kill all the Britons.³³ After Merlin sets his powers free by bathing in the waters of the Cave of Wisdom, and returns to the King's tent, Vortigern, witnessing the boy's newfound strength, falls on his knees and begs for mercy. Merlin then continues to benefit from Vortigern's change of heart, persuading him to arrange better housing for his mother.

The red dragon has great faith in Merlin, for it knows that the boy is the only one who can stop the slaughter of the Britons (whom the red dragon represents in the battle between the two peoples). His voice is described as “soft and kind”³⁴ when he speaks to the boy about his destiny. Even after Merlin becomes powerful, the dragon does not stop trusting Merlin and shows it by leaning its head close to him, letting himself be petted “as if it was a huge cat.”

³⁰ Bradman, *Young Merlin*, 22-24.

³¹ Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, 39.

³² Bradman, *Young Merlin*, 4.

³³ Bradman, *Young Merlin*, 23.

³⁴ Bradman, *Young Merlin*, 38.

Furthermore, he vows to always be there for the young warlock, affirming Merlin's question about their friendship.

On the contrary, the village people's prejudice prevents them from seeing Merlin's real value. Their view of the boy is explored the most in Chapter 1 when Merlin is sent to a farm near the village to get a bucket of milk. The farmer and his wife are said to be "[giving] him nasty looks from the door of their cottage," implying that they won't even come to meet him outside, and from the doorway, the man raises his hand "with the fingers in the shape of a devil's horns," to "defend himself and his wife against The Evil Eye" because "there was something about [Merlin] that made them feel very nervous."³⁵ The said nervousness is likely caused by the boy's unknown, and potentially evil, origin. Merlin is aware that he cannot change who he is and naively hopes that modifying his behavior could change people's negative attitudes. Unfortunately, the book ends before the readers can witness if Merlin's power gain had any influence on his relationship with the locals.

Young Merlin reflects on the concept of mixed admission to society as the views of him vary from positive to negative. Bradman's usage of the wizard mirrors the broader themes of the Arthurian legend, where belief in one's purpose is the key to fulfilling great destinies. He continues the Arthurian tradition by putting the mage in the forefront, making him function as the *Subject* and the *Receiver* as he transforms himself to eventually align with his eventual role in Arthurian legend as a wise advisor.

Perilous Times (2023) is a satirical novel written by Thomas D Lee. In his book, the author has rendered the Legends of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table relevant to contemporary discourse on the environmental crisis and prevailing social mood in the twenty-first century, so that his protagonists are confronted not only with fantastic beasts but also with phenomena such as climate change or the refugee crisis. In the narrative, Merlin plays a supportive yet notable role, effectively serving as a bridge between the intricacies of the legendary realm and contemporary reality.

The entire narrative is dependent on a covenant Merlin has forged with the earth by which he anchored his function in the story as the *Donor*. The covenant is expressed as such:

Make this warrior whole again and surrender him back to the realm of the living, whenever Britain is in peril. Return him with his sword and shield and other tools of war, untarnished. When peril is bested, let him return to your bosom and sleep, until peril calls him forth again.³⁶

³⁵ Bradman, *Young Merlin*, 6.

³⁶ Thomas D. Lee, *Perilous Times* (London: Orbit, 2024), 4-5.

Its existence is pivotal to the story, as it enables Sir Kay, Arthur's brother, to visit near-future Britain whenever he is needed there to face peril. The agreement is accompanied by several benefits, including "the gift of tongues" which grants the knight "knowledge of the words which are spoken by the people in the realm, so that he will not be a stranger in his own land,"³⁷ thereby making communication with Modern English speakers easier. Despite certain limitations, such as not providing enhanced strength or invulnerability, only immortality in the form of repeated resurrection,³⁸ it is undoubtedly a very powerful kind of magic. In Propopian terms, the covenant can be seen as an agent created to offer a solution to the plot in case of a supreme emergency, which consequently makes Merlin the *Donor* (or *Provider*).

However, some parts of the agreement are the subject of criticism from the Knights, who have voiced concerns regarding its shortcomings for which they blame Merlin and his inability to adapt to the new times. For example, while Sir Kay would appreciate being armed with more advanced weaponry that matches the power of modern guns,³⁹ Lancelot voices a complaint that the wardrobe does not adhere to contemporary fashion trends.⁴⁰ Both of their struggles stem from Merlin's inability to conform to present-day standards. This paragraph indicates a new addition to the wide range of views the characters have of the magician that are uniquely contemporary and would have been unthinkable in medieval prose.

In this iteration of the Arthurian legend, there is also a noteworthy absence of trust in Merlin's predictions of the future. It contrasts with the general tendency in the Arthurian legends and their retellings to treat his prophecies with utmost seriousness, in this case, they are disregarded as "half-baked prognostics" or dismissed as the "usual bollocks." Kay's comment about Merlin being "on mushrooms again"⁴¹ suggests that his visions are perceived more as meaningless hallucinations of a notorious addict rather than true prophecies. When Kay becomes a direct witness to the destruction humanity inflicted on nature, he reports that "the idea of men killing God's creation [...] would have been heresy. Madness. Only Merlin would have thought like that,"⁴² which only supports the theory that Merlin's warnings have become so mad and unlikely that the real threads often get disregarded.

Notwithstanding the arguments presented in the preceding paragraph, there is at least one instance in which Merlin's directive was loyally followed, however, the wisdom behind it

³⁷ Lee, *Perilous Times*, 11.

³⁸ Lee, *Perilous Times*, 13-14.

³⁹ Lee, *Perilous Times* 12.

⁴⁰ Lee, *Perilous Times*, 27.

⁴¹ Lee, *Perilous Times*, 49.

⁴² Lee, *Perilous Times*, 150.

was subsequently cast into doubt. It is proposed that Arthur in *Perilous Times* is not the same virtuous king as depicted in the works of Malory or Geoffrey of Monmouth. Since Caliburn (Excalibur) is said to be entrusted only to a person of pure heart, it appears illogical to Kay that the Lady of the Lake should have given it to Arthur. According to Nimue, Merlin came to her and said: “Here’s this scrawny ginger lad, it’s his destiny to fix everything, give him the sword,” and because she “was young enough to believe it” the sword was therefore handed to Arthur – not on the basis of his having a pure heart, but because Merlin ordered it. The explanation is enough for Kay, for he knows that this is how the wizard usually operates. She also suggests that it is improbable that the same action will be repeated with haste and if the order is to be repeated, further consideration and caution must be given to the matter, even if she had to guard it forever.⁴³ It indicates that those without personal knowledge of Merlin are more inclined to follow his advice than those who have previously been misled. Overall, it is apparent that as the keeper of fate, Merlin must prevent the dissemination of profound knowledge to unauthorized individuals, which, means keeping it secret even from those who play key roles in the plans he schemed.

Despite all of Merlin’s flaws, Kay is delighted when he finally encounters the wizard in a magically disguised cave. After being scolded for arriving late, Kay laughs, “happy to be getting a lecture from Merlin again [as] it’s been more than a thousand years since the last one,” and “wants to run over and wrap his arms around him.”⁴⁴ He also reports feeling relaxed around him and has absolute confidence in his wisdom.⁴⁵ At the same time, he is immediately relieved to hear that Merlin has a plan even before any details of it are disclosed, and wants to give himself under the wizard’s control, knowing it is the best way to save the world. Meeting a friend who also comes from the old times gives Kay a semblance of normalcy he had not felt in decades as well as a sense of certainty that the battle was not lost. Questionable sanity aside, thanks to his connection to the natural order and his confidence in keeping humanity from the worst fate of extinction, Merlin remains the symbol of hope in times of existential crisis.

To sum up, Merlin in *Perilous Times* fulfills the function of a *Donor (Provider)* who plays a key role in the resolution of the whole story by ensuring the protection of land in peril by the legendary Knights of the Round Table. The book’s slightly futuristic setting allows for new perspectives and views concerning the wizard’s knowledge of the modern world and its issues. More than ever, his prophetic abilities are under strict scrutiny as the other characters

⁴³ Lee, *Perilous Times*, 220.

⁴⁴ Lee, *Perilous Times*, 320.

⁴⁵ Lee, *Perilous Times*, 324.

largely criticize Merlin's determination to stay secretive about the meaning of his actions in the grand scheme of events, reflecting archetypal Merlin's responsible approach to his visions.

The BBC TV series *The Adventures of Merlin* (or simply *Merlin*, 2008-2012), created by Julian Jones, Johnny Capps, Julian Murphy, and Jake Michie, has played a vital role in reviving the popularity of Arthurian retellings among young people in the 21st century. It tells the story of Merlin (Colin Morgan), who arrives at Camelot to live with the local court physician Gaius (Richard Wilson), and shortly after becomes a servant to young Prince Arthur Pendragon (Bradley James). Throughout the five seasons, set in a "genetically medieval setting [...] common to many modern Arthurian adaptations,"⁴⁶ Merlin experiences countless adventures by Arthur's side and meets many other classic characters like Guinevere (Angel Coulby), Morgana Le Fay (Katie McGrath), or Sir Lancelot (Santiago Cabrera). Although based on its source material only loosely, *Merlin* gives us an original take on the character.

It is important to note that the series introduced Merlin's alter ego, "Emrys" (also known as "Dragoon the Great"), who first appeared in Season 3, Episode 5 (The Crystal Cave) and has continued to influence events occasionally since then. Consequently, some characters view Merlin differently in his true form compared to when he is in disguise, thus unrecognizable to them. This is most apparent in his relationship with Morgana Pendragon (Le Fay), which began as a friendship but their dynamics eventually evolved into something much more complicated. Merlin joins forces with Uther's illegitimate daughter for the first time to save Gwen (the nickname used for Guinevere in the early seasons), who has been unjustly sentenced to death.⁴⁷ The eventual success of their collaboration brings them closer together. Their bond grows with yet another mission – to return Mordred, a Druid boy, to his family by smuggling him out of Camelot.⁴⁸ Seeing her dedication and bravery as she acts against the will of her guardian Uther, Merlin starts to hope that they can become allies. However, everything changes when the Great Dragon Kilgharrah shares an ancient prophecy with Merlin: "Once before I warned you of the druid boy. It is his destiny to bring about Arthur's doom! It may be that time is upon you. (...) The ancient prophecies speak of an alliance of Mordred and Morgana united in evil, but this

⁴⁶ Jon Sherman, "Source, Authority, and Audience in the BBC's 'Merlin'," *Arthuriana* 25, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 83.

⁴⁷ *Merlin*, season 1, episode 3, "The Mark of Nimueh," directed by James Hawes, written by Julian Jones, featuring John Hurt, Michelle Ryan, and Colin Morgan, aired October 4, 2008, British Broadcasting Corporation, 2008, DVD.

⁴⁸ *Merlin*, season 1, episode 8, "The Beginning of the End," directed by Jeremy Webb, written by Howard Overman, featuring John Hurt, Asa Butterfield, and Colin Morgan, aired November 8, 2008, British Broadcasting Corporation, 2008, DVD.

union must be stopped, whatever the cost.”⁴⁹ Knowing that Morgana is a threat to Arthur’s destiny, Merlin decides to do whatever it takes to stop her evil doings. Morgana, newly posing as the *Villain* in the series, begins to see Merlin as an obstacle on her path that needs to be eliminated, which she tries to do on several occasions, but does not see him as a worthy opponent. However, the latter does not apply to his alter-ego. Morgana is warned by Cailleach, the gatekeeper to the spirit world, that “the one they call Emrys will walk in [her] shadow” because he is her destiny and her doom.⁵⁰ Not knowing that Emrys is, in fact, Merlin under the influence of an aging spell, she fears the powerful wizard, protecting herself from him the best she can.

The previous paragraph reflects two situations described in Chapter III of Vladimir Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale*. The Great Dragon’s urgent insistence on the elimination of Mordred before he can ally with Morgana presents “an interdiction [that] is addressed to the hero” in the “inverted form [...] represented by an order.”⁵¹ After “the interdiction is violated” and Merlin, instead of letting the boy die, assists Arthur in the young druid’s rescue (upon Morgana’s plea), “the *villain* enters the tale ... to disturb the peace of a happy family, to cause some form of misfortune, damage, or harm.”⁵² In this case, it is not as explicit, because even though Morgana is newly recognized as the villain of the story, she does not immediately intend to inflict any sort of harm.

Merlin and Arthur Pendragon, on the other hand, have been a comedy duo since the first episode. The gradual shift in the first season from an antagonistic relationship to a friendship strong enough to withstand great challenges along with the sharp contrast in their social statuses influenced how Arthur saw the young warlock. The prince expresses his attitude towards Merlin very early on by stating that “[Merlin] may be an idiot, but he’s a brave one”⁵³ and admits seeing something special in him that he cannot explain. Despite the mild implication of admiration and curiosity, Arthur is utterly horrified when Uther appoints Merlin as his son’s servant.⁵⁴ While frequently growing annoyed with Merlin’s incompetence and clumsiness,

⁴⁹ Merlin, season 2, episode 11, “The Witch’s Quickening,” directed by Alice Troughton, written by Jake Michie, featuring John Hurt, Asa Butterfield, Katie McGrath, aired December 5, 2009, British Broadcasting Corporation, 2008, DVD, 00:16:36-00:17:04.

⁵⁰ Merlin, season 4, episode 1, “The Darkest Hour – Part 1,” directed by Alice Troughton, written by Julian Jones, featuring John Hurt, Katie McGrath, and Rupert Young, aired October 1, 2011, British Broadcasting Corporation, 2008, DVD, 00:12:03-00:12:06.

⁵¹ Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, 26.

⁵² Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, 27.

⁵³ Merlin, season 1, episode 1, “The Dragon’s Call,” directed by James Hawes, written by Julian Jones, featuring Colin Morgan, John Hurt, and Antony Head, aired September 20, 2008, British Broadcasting Corporation, 2008, DVD, 00:24:42-00:24:43.

⁵⁴ “The Dragon’s Call.”

Arthur's protests cease eventually, as he decides to keep the boy not only for amusement but also for his new servant's unwavering loyalty and companionship. Just as in the series' source material, Arthur views Merlin as an advisor, though Merlin's warnings or advice are not always heard immediately. To explicitly show his appreciation, he even goes as far as to offer Merlin a seat at the Round Table for his services.⁵⁵ Ultimately, it shows yet another approach to their relationship, where Merlin is less explicitly appreciated by Arthur than in the original Arthurian legends and often adopts the skepticism of his father Uther, or anyone else who might attempt to dispute the warlock's claims.

Once again, what is described in the previous paragraph is not applicable in the case of Arthur and Merlin's alter ego. The first time Merlin plans to drink the potion, Gaius shares his concern about Arthur recognizing him despite the disguise. The young warlock dismisses this possibility and remains committed to his plan of being 'caught' in Arthur's chambers while planting false evidence there. When Arthur sees the eighty-year-old mage, he asks the stranger if they have ever met, claiming to have recognized the eyes. Dragoon the Great (as he introduces himself) denies it, and in fear of his real identity being exposed by the prince of Camelot, he uses magic to throw a helmet on Arthur's head as a distraction so he can escape.⁵⁶ Merlin is forced to repeat this rushed escape technique on more than one occasion, the side effect of which was, unfortunately, the chances of Merlin confiding his secret to Arthur – and for his magical abilities to be accepted as part of him – diminished. Based on the few episodes where the two interact, it is safe to assume that Arthur perceives Dragoon to be powerful, at times slightly incomprehensible, but most importantly rude, as Merlin often uses the advantage of having a second persona to torment Arthur with comments he otherwise would have never dared to say or to outright insult him⁵⁷. These two eventually join forces and Arthur promises Dragoon that, after his coronation, Camelot will become a safer place for the wizard and the likes of him.

By implementing Emrys/Dragoon the Great, the BBC's *The Adventures of Merlin* series allowed its characters to create unique views of the wizard regardless of their initial relationships with the titular protagonist, sometimes to such an extent that Merlin's actions trigger a change in their role in the narrative. At the same time, the usage of the aging potion brought the appearance of Merlin closer to his appearance in the classic Arthurian legends. It is

⁵⁵ Merlin, season 3, episode 13, "The Coming of Arthur – Part 2," directed by Jeremy Webb, written by Julian Jones, featuring John Hurt, Rupert Young, and Katie McGrath, aired December 4, 2010, British Broadcasting Corporation, 2008, DVD.

⁵⁶ Merlin, season 3, episode 10, "Queen of Hearts," directed by Ashley Way, written by Howard Overman, featuring Colin Morgan, Bradley James, and Angel Coulby, aired November 13, 2010, British Broadcasting Corporation, 2008, DVD.

⁵⁷ "Queen of Hearts."

divergent from its source material mainly in the way it treats the young warlock's friendship with Arthur which is not purely founded in trust but occasionally exhibits signs of doubt (although, in the end, Merlin's words are often eventually accepted and appreciated).

Camelot (TV series, 2011), created by Michael Hirst and Chris Chibnall for the American network Starz, has received numerous award nominations alongside some negative criticism. Regardless of public opinion, it remains a valuable addition to the modern collection of Arthurian legend retellings. The series is set in Camelot shortly after the death of King Uther (Sebastian Koch), a time when the kingdom faces uncertainty. To prevent the dark future he has foreseen, Merlin (Joseph Fiennes) will do anything to place a new king on the throne – young Arthur (Jamie Campbell Bower), who until then had no idea he was Uther's illegitimate son and, therefore, the rightful heir to the kingdom. Unfortunately, his half-sister Morgan (Eva Green), empowered by dark forces, claims the crown and does not hesitate to oppose Arthur. This series is based on the events known from Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*, and with its emphasis on romance and passion, it is more suitable for 'teen and up' audiences.

When Arthur meets the magician for the first time in episode 'Homecoming,' he is immediately intrigued by him. It is Merlin who informs him about his royal biological parents and takes him to Castle Pendragon, which makes Arthur almost blindly devoted to him, as he has answers not only about his past but also regarding his purpose in this world:

"I know you've got questions but I will be at your side, and we will find the answers together. We are going to build a land full of hope and honor where fear is extinguished, to which people will flock from far and wide, seeking out our beacon of light."⁵⁸

Merlin's words about the plans for the future suggest that Arthur could create significant change as a king with the warlock by his side. Similar visions, painted in encouraging colors, accompany them through all ten episodes, reinforcing Merlin's role as Arthur's guide and advisor.

When peace is seemingly restored in Camelot, Arthur reflects on Merlin's good service. He recounts having a family that loves him unconditionally, realizing that he is more than he ever thought possible and that he has just begun to recognize his potential, all thanks to Merlin.⁵⁹ It is heartbreaking for Arthur to learn about the wizard's plans to leave Camelot. He tries to

⁵⁸ *Camelot*, season 1, episode 1, "Homecoming," directed by Ciaran Donnelly, written by Chris Chibnall and Michael Hirst, featuring Joseph Fiennes, Jamie Campbell Bower, and Tamsin Egerton, aired February 25, 2011, Starz, 2011, DVD, 00:27:02-00:27:22.

⁵⁹ *Camelot*, season 1, episode 10, "Reckoning," directed by Mikael Salomon and Stefan Schwartz, written by Terry Cafolla and Chris Chibnall, featuring Joseph Fiennes, Jamie Campbell Bower, and Tamsin Egerton, aired June 10, 2011, Starz, 2011, DVD.

persuade Merlin to stay, arguing that “if it were the other way around, [Merlin] wouldn’t let [Arthur] go,”⁶⁰ but the wizard insists on leaving the kingdom. Recognizing that there is nothing Arthur can say to change his mind, he reluctantly allows him to depart. This scene demonstrates how much Arthur respects his mentor and reflects how fond he has grown of him through their shared efforts to improve Camelot.

Igraine Pendragon, Arthur’s biological mother, falls in love with Merlin and thus perceives him as her lover. Their bond grows strong, even though it is Merlin who has taken the newborn baby (Arthur) away from her⁶¹ and indirectly caused some to rudely call her ‘Uther’s whore.’ In Season 1, Episode 7, ‘The Long Night,’ Igraine is kidnapped by Morgan, who assumes the identity of the former queen thanks to her shapeshifting abilities. When she returns, Merlin realizes that it was Morgan he got intimate with the other night, not Igraine. She forgives him, saying her only regret is not being there to hear him confiding in her about his insecurities and declaring his love to her.⁶² So, instead of tearing the two apart, Morgan’s wicked plan brought them closer together.

Perhaps more importantly, she sees him as a protector of her only child. After the events of Season 1, Episode 4 ‘Lady of the Lake’ (which will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter), Merlin isolates himself from the other residents of Castle Pendragon to deal with his guilt and for four days, he orders anyone who might try to approach him, including Igraine, to leave him alone. However, that does not stop her from seeking the wizard out, knowing that he is the only one who can help Arthur make an important decision at a tribunal of justice.⁶³ It is also evident from their last interaction in the episode “Reckoning,” where Igraine suffers a lethal stab wound (inflicted by Morgan as a revenge for Igraine having sent her away from Camelot, not out of malice but rather to save her) and is eventually found dying by Merlin. Not only does she prevent him from attempting to sacrifice himself to save her from death, but she also tells him to take care of Arthur for her,⁶⁴ using her very last breaths to convey both her love for Merlin and her trust in him by placing her only son’s destiny in his hands.

Nonetheless, Merlin’s actions do not appeal to everyone – specifically, to Morgan, who can never forgive him for enabling Uther to seduce Igraine, thereby stripping her of her rightful

⁶⁰ “Reckoning,” 00:47:01-00:47:04.

⁶¹ “Homecoming.”

⁶² Camelot, season 1, episode 9, “The Battle of Bardon Pass,” directed by Mikael Salomon, written by Chris Chibnall and Louise Fox, featuring Joseph Finnes, Jamie Campbell Bower, and Tasmin Egerton, aired June 3, 2011, Starz, 2011, DVD.

⁶³ Camelot, season 1, episode 5, “Justice,” directed by Stefan Schwartz, written by Sarah Phelps and Terry Cafolla, featuring Joseph Fiennes, Jamie Campbell Bower, and Tasmin Egerton, aired April 29, 2011, Starz, 2011, DVD.

⁶⁴ “Reckoning.”

claim to the throne (see the following chapter for more information about this event). Although she is curious about Merlin's abilities and his reasons for refusing to use them, Morgan has no respect for him or his advice whatsoever and chooses to ignore his warnings about using dark magic.⁶⁵ Overall, Morgan prefers to do anything except what the magician suggests, stubbornly pursuing her goals regardless of the toll it takes on her body's vitality.

It is apparent from analyzing Merlin's relationships in *Camelot* (2011) that modern adaptations and their audiences honor the essence of their source material – such as keeping Merlin as Arthur's advisor – while also being open to experimenting with the lore, as seen in the depiction of Merlin and Igraine as lovers. This approach allows viewers to explore their favorite legendary characters from perspectives different than those presented by Malory or Geoffrey of Monmouth.

Merlin (two-part movie, 1998) directed by Steve Barron, serves as a creative expansion to the traditional Arthurian legends. The story follows Merlin's life through the most important events of the original tales, from Vortigern's tower through Uther's seduction of Igraine, the Sword in the Stone, and the Holy Grail to Arthur's death. It introduces new characters like Queen Mab (Miranda Richardson), her gnome servant Frik (Martin Short) or Merlin's aunt Ambrosia (Billie Whitelaw) but also revives classic characters, including Mordred (Jason Done), lady Nimue (Isabella Rossellini) or Guinevere (Lena Headey), giving Merlin (Sam Neill) new enemies along with old allies and unexpected alliances.

At the outset, it must be acknowledged that the story being presented to the viewer is not conveyed in an entirely objective manner since it is told by an aged Merlin who stopped practicing magic a long time ago and became an ordinary man. He offers his stories to all who are willing to listen, without the intention of spreading history as it occurred, but rather for financial gain.⁶⁶ His unreliability is supported by Frik when he reunites with the wizard. The gnome says: "It's not exactly the way I remember, Master Merlin. (...) I must say you tell a rather good tale... Terribly exciting and all. But I was intrigued that you chose to omit certain-" Whereupon Merlin interrupts him, explaining that: "Well, that's the way they like it. And besides, I didn't think they'd believe it if I told them the way it really was."⁶⁷ Should Merlin have deliberately chosen to withhold certain facts from his audience, it is not possible to guarantee the validity of the rest of his narration.

⁶⁵ *Camelot*, season 1, episode 3, "Guinevere," directed by Jeremy Podeswa, written by Louise Fox, featuring Joseph Fiennes, Jamie Campbell Bower, and Tamsin Egerton, aired April 8, 2011, Starz, 2011, DVD.

⁶⁶ *Merlin* (part 2), directed by Steve Barron (Sonar Entertainment, 1998), DVD, 01:25:20-01:25:36.

⁶⁷ *Merlin* (part 2), 01:26:06-01:26:42.

Queen Mab, the goddess of the Old Way, brings Merlin into existence for the sole purpose of destroying Christianity, a rising religion that is beginning to overshadow the worship of ancient deities and the practice of magic, rather than take care of him as of her son.⁶⁸ After he is born, Mab takes him away, letting his mother perish, for she deemed her no longer useful and saw no reason to prolong her life.⁶⁹ This example perfectly shows how Mab perceives everyone in her vicinity, including Merlin – as objects or means to an end. Although Mab refers to Merlin as ‘her son’, she harbors no deep feelings for him and sees him merely as the catalyst for the destruction of Christianity. What is more, she also calls him this to emotionally manipulate him as seen after her final battle with Merlin, shortly before the wizard successfully defeats her by swearing to forget her, when she calls out to his retreating back: “I love you as a son!”⁷⁰ It is reasonable to conclude that the familial relationship between Merlin and Queen Mab was doomed to failure before it even began and she never had any interest to make amends.

In contrast, a Pagan witch Ambrosia, affectionately referred to as “Auntie A” by Merlin, cultivated a profound relationship with the wizard despite the absence of any blood relation between them. A deep sense of kinship was experienced by both, with Ambrosia calling him “her boy” and Merlin regarding her as his maternal figure instead of Queen Mab.⁷¹ When it is time for Merlin to leave home and live with Mab, she even protectively claims that: “magic or no magic, if [Mab] harms [Merlin] in any way, [she’ll] have her guts for [her] boot laces,”⁷² threatening to the woman she is forced to serve. It is Ambrosia who explains his origins to him and plants a strong sense of morality into his mindset (for more details, see the next chapter). To Ambrosia, Merlin was not just a ward, but the son of her heart, cherished and guided.

The storyline of Nimue and Merlin differs radically from Malory’s version. In *Le Morte d’Arthur*, Merlin becomes infatuated with Nimuë, the “benevolent lady who gave Arthur his sword Excalibur, protected Sir Pelleas all his life, and, in one account, served as Lancelot’s foster-mother”⁷³ but, unfortunately, his love is unrequited by the damsel:

And always Merlin lay about the lady to have her maidenhood, and she was ever passing weary of him, and fain would have been delivered of him, for she was afeard of him because he was a devil’s son, and she could not beskift him by no mean. And so on a time it happed that Merlin showed to her in a rock whereas was a great wonder, and wrought by enchantment, that went under a great stone. So by her subtle working she made Merlin to go under that stone to let her wit of the

⁶⁸ *Merlin* (part 1), directed by Steve Barron (Sonar Entertainment, 1998), DVD, 00:03:47-00:04:33.

⁶⁹ *Merlin* (part 1), 00:06:53-00:07:44.

⁷⁰ *Merlin* (part 2), 01:24:24-01:24:26.

⁷¹ *Merlin* (part 1), 00:28:59.

⁷² *Merlin* (part 1), 00:16:30-00:16:36.

⁷³ Gordon S. Haight, “Tennyson’s Merlin,” *Studies in Philosophy* 44, no. 3 (1947): 550.

marvels there; but she wrought so there for him that he came never out for all the craft he could do. And so she departed and left Merlin.”⁷⁴

Malory’s Nimue slowly becomes wary of Merlin’s true intentions and his power, and so in order to protect herself, she learns magic from the wizard she fears and uses his spells to entrap him forever under a rock (in Knowles’ *The Legends of King Arthur and his Knights*, the same character is known the Damsel of the Lady of the Lake⁷⁵, who also ensures Merlin’s ultimate demise). Conversely, in *Merlin* (1998), Nimue reciprocates his feelings, and their bond endures for a lifetime even when fate keeps them apart. She does not see him as a dangerously powerful wizard and does not show any signs of fear or repulsion when witnessing Merlin using his gift.

Arthur sees Merlin in a traditional way as his educator, mentor, and advisor. The wizard fostered the young boy with Sir Hector, teaching him ethics and morals. His influence is most apparent in the scene where Arthur and Merlin discuss the boy’s right to the throne and his plans should he become the king. Arthur says: “I’d do all the things that you taught me. I’d build a golden city devoted to peace and charity,” to which Merlin replies with yet another wise piece of advice: “What the world needs is justice and compassion, more than charity.”⁷⁶ The wizard also cultivates a respect for nature in Arthur, which is analogous to the manner in which Merlin is depicted in T. H. White’s *The Once and Future King*.

When considered as a whole, these findings illustrate how uniquely *Merlin* (1998) elaborates on the lore surrounding the wizard’s origin story by introducing two original maternal figures into his life – each representing polar opposites of virtue and vice. The movie provides a positive resolution for the character of Merlin, who is reunited with his love, Nimue, instead of being deceived and imprisoned for an indefinite period. Furthermore, due to the ambiguity of Merlin’s purportedly dishonest narration, the audience is left to conclude that the events may not have occurred in the manner in which they were previously presented.

⁷⁴ Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, vol. 1.

⁷⁵ Sir James Knowles, *The Legends of King Arthur and His Knights* (Arcturus Publishing Ltd, 2021), 220.

⁷⁶ *Merlin*, part 2, 00:07:31-00:07:50.

Merlin As a Symbol of Morality

Because Merlin's main role is to mentor Arthur, a very strong sense of morality tends to be automatically ascribed to him. However, the truth is that his actions and decisions often blur the line between right and wrong, putting him in a figurative grey area. As the messenger of a higher power, Merlin must place fate and the natural order above all else, which forces him to take morally questionable steps. This ambiguity in decision-making is a recurring theme that appears across different types of media. This chapter is expected to contribute to our understanding of the wizard's moral compass.

Although some of the supporting characters in Tony Bradman's *Young Merlin* express signs of conflict between their morals and their duties, the main characters fit more into a black-and-white world, where we can easily distinguish between good and bad. The former can be illustrated by a subtle hint in the warrior's behavior when he is confirming the fatherless boy's identity to Vortigern. The narrator says that "[the warrior] glanced down at the boy beside him, and Merlin saw a quick flash of pity in his eyes."⁷⁷ His loyalty will not allow him to disobey his king's orders, nor to express his disapproval, even though he is sorry for the cruel death that awaits the young boy. The latter applies to both Vortigern and Merlin, even though they represent two opposites. When Merlin recounts everything he has heard about the ruler of Britain, it is mentioned that:

'The King was a great man, of course, but no one liked him. He had taken power when the Roman Empire in the west had fallen. The Romans had left the Britons to look after themselves and King Vortigern had promised to protect the people from the raiders and pirates who had attacked the Romans and at last sent them back to Rome.'⁷⁸

Keeping the promise in mind, Merlin later frowns at Vortigern's comment about the necessity of building the fortress to protect himself from the Saxons. – "*You should protect your people, thought Merlin, not yourself.*"⁷⁹ It demonstrates both Merlin's moral strength and Vortigern's deficiency in that area. While the boy believes that keeping his promise to the people and prioritizing their protection over his own life is of utmost importance, the king selfishly considers his own salvation as the top priority.

It is not uncommon for children to be portrayed as virtuous in art and literature, and Tony Bradman's Merlin is no exception. His pure morality and King Vortigern's selfishness

⁷⁷ Bradman, *Young Merlin*, 17-18.

⁷⁸ Bradman, *Young Merlin*, 14.

⁷⁹ Bradman, *Young Merlin*, 23.

create a contrast that further implies corruption in adults, much like what is seen in Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*.

In *Perilous Times* (novel, 2023), the first indirect indication of Merlin's immorality emerges at the early stages of the narrative. In Chapter 3, Kay expresses his dissatisfaction with the unending cycle of death and resurrection in which he finds himself entrapped. He would much rather be reunited with his wife in Heaven or, at the very least, rest buried in the ground beside her and regrets sealing his fate by consuming Merlin's enchanted resurrection stone.⁸⁰ In addition to this, it is later revealed that the wizard "never explained anything he didn't need to" but that he also "never did anything without a good reason." In consideration of the aforementioned factors, it is safe to assume that Kay had limited awareness of the nature of the service to which he was committed, simply because Merlin did not find it important to provide the knights with the details of the deal. This absence of clarity was accompanied by a strong sense of peer pressure as "none of [the knights] wanted to seem the weakest"⁸¹ which discouraged him from questioning the arrangement. Overall, Merlin's manipulation of others is facilitated by his status as a seer, a figure of trust and omniscience in the Arthurian legend.

Kay's account of the Battle of Hastings and the description of Lancelot's distress demonstrate that the service to men that was forced on the knights had a significant impact on their mental well-being. After remembering the first occasion on which he had succumbed to fatal injuries sustained from being trampled, Kay recounts his memories of the dreadful battle, much like a soldier who went to war:

'It's the shouting, that you remember.' [...] 'More than anything else. All the confusion. Nobody's got a clue what they're doing. You just keep fighting as best as you can, and you keep standing, until you realise that it's all over. One way or the other.'⁸²

Finding out that Sir Galehaut's burial place was turned into a restaurant and the ancient oak tree cut down triggers a stress reaction in Lancelot comparable to his "episodes" during the First World War when "his limbs [were] shaking and his teeth [were] clenched together. Breathing ragged. Something wrong with his throat. Unable to speak, other than in braying shouts. Very embarrassing for everyone concerned." The narrator then proceeds to report the knight's hopelessness as he's reminded once again that his friend, the one who always knew how to calm him down during these episodes, who "tried to drape something over him and make sure he

⁸⁰ Lee, *Perilous Times*, 44.

⁸¹ Lee, *Perilous Times*, 154.

⁸² Lee, *Perilous Times*, 148-149.

didn't harm himself, was gone forever.⁸³ Given Merlin's prophetic abilities, it is inevitable that he must have been aware that the knights would inevitably experience a state of trauma following years of resurgences and confrontations with peril, yet he decided to ignore this reality. To him, the fate of humanity is of greater significance than the collateral damage in the form of impaired mental health of those who were selected for the task of protecting it.

It is evident that Merlin is referenced in the book under two different aliases, the first one of them being Ambrose, his name in Latin, which he uses when interacting with humans, especially those of low socio-economic status to whom he sells musk, a psychoactive substance. His motivation to do so makes the reader question the wizard's morality, especially considering the body alternation musk's usage results in. The drug negatively affects the proper functioning of the brain as well as causes physical harm to the body, resulting in the manifestation of mycological properties in its users. They seem to spread rapidly after the host's death. When Kay finds the camp in ruins after the attack of The Army of Saint George, he describes the dead bodies as "not quite corpses, and not quite mushrooms, but some ungodly union of the two,"⁸⁴ providing horrific direct testimony to the consequences of long-term musk use. It is unclear how this exact thing fits into the unspecified "delicate schemes"⁸⁵ Merlin claims to be setting into motion. The second of Merlin's nicknames, Emrys, is used mainly by the fay, whom he bound to do his bidding.

This complex portrayal of Merlin shows the wizard operating with morally grey devices in pursuit of noble ends such as the prevention of the end of the world. His declaration: "I foresaw all of this two thousand years ago. It has been my life's work to try and stop it! To save everyone from destruction,"⁸⁶ reveals his self-perception as a savior and guardian of humankind and its future. His methods often convey the impression of a disturbing nature, whether for the gruesome consequences of the drug distribution to vulnerable populations or for the mental anguish of those individuals who imprudently engaged with Merlin's visions, often without due discernment. Compassion is overlooked for success while exploitation is justified as collateral damage. Merlin's depiction in *Perilous Times* is significantly divergent from the traditional depictions of heroes and highly contrasts with Bradman's moral and innocent *Young Merlin*.

In the BBC series *The Adventures of Merlin* (or simply *Merlin*, 2008-2012), service to Arthur Pendragon, and consequently to destiny itself, is central to the young warlock's life,

⁸³ Lee, *Perilous Times*, 120.

⁸⁴ Lee, *Perilous Times*, 291.

⁸⁵ Lee, *Perilous Times*, 321.

⁸⁶ Lee, *Perilous Times*, 325.

however, service brings with it morally complex situations where one must wisely weigh what is right against what is necessary. It has already been suggested that Merlin ultimately violates the interdiction addressed to him by the Great Dragon and instead of trying to harm Mordred, he opts for a solution he deems to be the most ethical and lets the druid boy safely return to his people at the cost of the prophesized tragedy being fulfilled.⁸⁷ Ultimately, it marks the beginning of the end, and everything that happens after, every weighed decision, will lead to Arthur's bane.

On the other hand, Merlin sometimes finds himself caught between the Devil and the deep blue sea because of the choice he has to make, and the outcome of both options is revealed to be equally negative. The best example of this phenomenon is found in an episode called *The Disir* where a judgement is passed onto Arthur Pendragon who allegedly “[has] wedged war on the people of the Old Religion.”⁸⁸ Merlin visits Kilgharrah to consult the judgement with him and leaves with a new interdiction: “You had a chance to kill the Druid boy once before. If you have another, you must not fail.”⁸⁹ The opportune moment to ensure Mordred's death arises soon when he is wounded protecting Arthur from one of the Disir. His condition slowly worsens. Merlin is the only one who could save his life, but despite Gaius' urging, he chooses not to, having learned “the meaning of duty.”⁹⁰ When Arthur asks him for advice, Merlin uses the moment to persuade Arthur to sacrifice Mordred, instead of returning magic to the land. Arthur listens and, upon his arrival to Camelot, is surprised to find Mordred healed. Instead of letting him die, the seers revived Mordred as a punishment so that he could fulfill his destiny and kill the King. Thus, the decision did not matter in the end as both options would very likely mean Mordred's survival and his consequent betrayal.

In summary, *The Adventures of Merlin* is about a constant struggle to do what is ethical but at the same time ensures the protection of King Arthur Pendragon and the birth of Albion through a series of choices between non-favorable – or rather merely an illusion of choice, because the options may not always result in the change of fate. The young warlock's compassion is inconvenient and has the ability to trigger a chain of events with a tragic ending.

⁸⁷ Merlin, season 1, episode 8, “The Beginning of the End,” directed by Jeremy Webb, written by Howard Overman, featuring John Hurt, Alun Raglan, and Asa Butterfield, aired November 8, 2008, British Broadcasting Corporation, 2008, DVD.

⁸⁸ Merlin, season 5, episode 5, “The Disir,” directed by Ashley Way, written by Julian Joes, featuring John Hurt, Frances Tomelty and Sian Thomas, aired November 3, 2012, British Broadcasting Corporation, 2008, DVD, 00:11:50-00:11:53.

⁸⁹ “The Disir,” 00:20:39-00:20:47.

⁹⁰ “The Disir,” 00:32:35.

It is set in a world in which individuals may find themselves required to relinquish their individual moral principles for the sake of the good of a collective cause.

The ambiguous morality of Merlin from *Camelot* (TV series, 2011) is closely tied to his magical abilities. His attitude towards magic is apparent, for instance, when he refuses to “perform tricks” for Morgan for he claims to be “strong enough to choose not to.”⁹¹ He delves into the topic of his powers later on, explaining to Kay that using them always has a cost “[o]n the body. The soul. And those around [him]. It’s an addiction. One which [he denies himself] every waking hour.”⁹² In other words, Merlin claims to be insistent on not exploiting his magical abilities for the sake of protecting other people.

However, his words are contradicted on several occasions. In Season 1, Episode 1, “Homecoming,” Merlin informs Arthur about a deception he orchestrated to ensure the fulfillment of destiny – using his powers, he disguised Uther as the Duke of Cornwall, an enemy to the king, allowing him to infiltrate the duke’s castle and seduce Igraine, whom he eventually makes his queen (in this case, the showrunners retold the Merlin and Uther story⁹³). In Season 1, Episode 4, “Lady of the Lake,” Merlin pays a visit to Caliburn, an exceptional swordsmith, to get a new sword for Arthur. Although the two have never met before, it is evident that Caliburn has prior knowledge of Merlin and his previous actions, and so, in the meantime of working on the weapon for the King, he ponders Merlin’s gift and the feelings that must be connected to it. As if this conversation had stirred in the sorcerer a desire to relive these old feelings, Merlin approaches a campfire and uses magic to turn it into a ferocious blaze, unintentionally scaring Excalibur, Caliburn’s daughter. When the sword is finally forged, Caliburn insists on presenting it to the king himself, however, Merlin’s plan with the sword clashes with the swordsmith’s wish and they begin to argue. The warlock is eventually angered by a biting remark about his family, and the sudden surge of wrath causes him to momentarily lose control – he amplifies the flames, setting Caliburn alight. Excalibur connects her father’s burned body with Merlin’s ability to manipulate the forces of nature, takes the sword, and flees in a rowboat with the intention of drowning the weapon in a lake. The warlock partially freezes the water, so that he can walk on it but, unfortunately, she loses balance and falls into the lake before he can reach her. Moreover, the ice traps her under a solid surface, above which only the

⁹¹ “Guinevere,” 00:27:09-00:27:14.

⁹² *Camelot*, season 1, episode 6, “Three Journeys,” directed by Stefan Schwartz, written by Chris Chibnall, featuring Joseph Fiennes, Jamie Campbell Bower, and Tamsin Egerton, aired May 6, 2011, Starz, 2011, DVD, 00:20:13-00:20:25.

⁹³ C. Scott Littleton and Linda A. Malcor, “Some Notes on Merlin,” *Arthuriana* 5, no. 3 (Fall 1995): 88.

arm holding the sword remains. It is too late for Merlin to save her. When he returns to Camelot, the story he tells about the new sword significantly differs from the truth:

‘When I got there [Caliburn] was dead. I rode many miles until I came to a lake. And everywhere, there was a mist. I had to stop, and when I did, out of the mist, a woman called to me like a siren. From within the lake, she stretched out her arm with this sword, clutching it. I took the sword and thanked her. She smiled and slipped back into the water. And as she did, she said: This is the sword of King Arthur. This is Excalibur.’⁹⁴

Merlin’s actions speak clearly. He is not opposed to the use of dangerous and corrupting abilities if they serve his purposes and tends to act ruthlessly when he is aggravated. However, as it was expressed in the previous chapter, Merlin feels profound remorse after the events of “Lady of the Lake,” which is an indicator that, even after centuries, the mage cannot detach himself from the negative feelings induced by the collateral damage of his magic. Based on the facts presented in the last two paragraphs, it is safe to assume that throughout his ages-long life, Merlin stood by, watching his loved ones being hurt at the cost of his powers, until, eventually, he decided to give up his gift unless necessary.

From the viewpoint of morality, Merlin from *Camelot* (2011) might be the most ambiguous character in this paper. With the show’s focus on destiny and the price of magic, the warlock struggles to find a balance between the wise usage of his abilities to keep the natural order and dealing with guilt that often arises from his actions. To achieve what he believes to be the greater cause, he often resorts to deception of people around him, manipulation of certain events, and breaking of ethical rules. At the same time, Merlin is capable of regret, even though his moral compass seems to have gotten hazy.

The two-part movie *Merlin* (1998) is set in a fantastical realm populated by magical creatures such as fairies and gnomes, where the practice of wizardry holds a pivotal role. Consequently, a comprehensive grasp of the fundamental principles governing magic is imperative to comprehend Merlin’s moral code. Queen Mab sets Friar to be Merlin’s mentor and his teachings from the first part of the movie provide insight into the following:

‘There are three classes of magic, three stages of progression to full wizard status. The first and lowest stage is wizard by incantation. Abracadabra. Devonshot. The second-stage wizards are hand wizards, whose magic is performed by gestures of the hands and fingers. The third and highest stage of wizardry, the supreme exponents, are wizards of pure thought, who need no words nor gestures but by

⁹⁴ Camelot, season 1, episode 4, “Lady of the Lake,” directed by Jeremy Podeswa, written by Chris Chibnall and Louise Fox, featuring Joseph Fiennes, Jamie Campbell Bower, and Tamsin Egerton, aired April 15, 2011, Starz, 2011, DVD, 00:47:40-00:49:02.

their will alone pierce the heavens. Of course, only the most supremely gifted personages become wizards of the third stage.”⁹⁵

It is anticipated that Merlin, as a spawn of an almighty fairy queen, born and destined to return people to the old ways, will achieve the highest stage, but this ultimately proves not to be the case as his skills remain on the second level, much to Mab’s disappointment, and he never shows any desire to improve, although he would easily be able to.

Merlin’s dislike for magic was supported by the death of Ambrosia, who raised him as her son. When the young wizard’s powers let themselves be known for the first time, he had no choice but to go to Mab’s apprenticeship to be taught how to use his gift. Ambrosia assures him that: “magic has no power over the human heart,”⁹⁶ and sends him off, knowing that ‘her boy’ wouldn’t let Mab corrupt him. Later, Merlin is contacted by the Lady of the Lake who reveals that Ambrosia is ill, he immediately rushes to visit his aunt’s home, only to find her lethally wounded by Mab for refusing to obey an order to persuade Merlin to return to the Queen. It results in a fight between Merlin and Mab, but the latter is impossible to defeat. Meanwhile, Ambrosia dies, and Merlin decides to make the following blood oath, in which he also remembers his deceased birth mother: “I swear on Ambrosia’s grave, and the grave of my mother, I’ll only ever use my powers to defeat Queen Mab. On this, I swear.”⁹⁷ Unfortunately, a vow with such restricted conditions is impossible for Merlin to keep.

Ultimately, Merlin breaches his oath when he uses magic to save Nimue, the woman to whom he is romantically attached, from a fatal fate, and consequently redefines the purpose of magic. Mab joins forces with King Vortigern in order to regain control over Merlin, their scheming reveals the true nature of how the magical realm works. When the Queen requests that Vortigern sacrifice Nimue to the Great Dragon, Vortigern shows reluctance not because of ethics but because such an act would be deemed unwise from a diplomatic perspective.⁹⁸ This suggests that the world is not driven by morality but rather by politics. Yet, when Merlin breaks his oath and uses magic to save Nimue, he does not do so for the sake of gain or strategy, but rather as a gesture rooted in love. It shows that magic can be used as a means of expressing one’s humanity rather than as a weapon in a political game. However, it does not mean that Merlin strictly keeps to the new standard his actions created.

Analogously to many of his counterparts in this paper, Merlin from the 1998 movie is also capable of taking a life if he deems it to be in the best interests of the greater good. King

⁹⁵ *Merlin* (part 1), 00:22:33-00:23:34.

⁹⁶ *Merlin* (part 1), 00:16:12-00:16:16.

⁹⁷ *Merlin* (part 1), 00:31:45-00:31:56.

⁹⁸ *Merlin* (part 1), 00:53:29-00:53:50.

Vortigern is introduced to the audience as the first Christian king of England and the cruelty of his rule is apparent from the opening sequence of the movie. Dissatisfied with the ruler, the wizard eventually takes on the task of killing him in favor of a better king, whom he believes to be Uther Pendragon. It represents a step back from the new standard Merlin has established by his actions described in the previous paragraph, towards immoral decision-making based on politics. There are also personal undertones to Vortigern's death that cannot be ignored. It was he, after all, who indirectly caused Nimue's suffering and thus fueled Merlin's hunger for justified revenge.

Once again, the seduction of Igraine by Uther in disguise was incorporated into the movie's plot. Uther falls in love with Igraine's beauty upon their initial encounter. When he shares his sudden desire with Merlin ("Igraine, she's beautiful, isn't she?"), the wizard immediately points out the immorality of such lustful thoughts ("Beautiful, and someone else's wife."), however, these warnings are unfortunately disregarded ("But still beautiful. What does the rest matter?").⁹⁹ Following Uther's suggestion that either magic should be employed to make the woman of his dreams fall in love with her or that he should remove the only obstacle to their love, the Duke of Cornwall (Igraine's husband), Merlin feels profound disappointment as King Uther turns out not to be the virtuous king he longed for. With the vision of ensuring the birth of a new ruler whom Merlin could shape to suit his needs, the wizard assists Uther in pursuing Igraine by casting a shape-shifting spell on him.¹⁰⁰ Despite acknowledging that the wrongness of this event "haunted [him] for the rest of [his] life,"¹⁰¹ particularly in light of Uther's decision to betray his promise to spare the Duke of Cornwall, the actions that were undertaken cannot be reversed, and so this dirty trick continues to cast a permanent shadow over the wizard's conscience.

Merlin's approach to Arthur as the good king he used to only dream about also exhibits signs of amorality, yet it contributes to the character's psychological depth. His treatment of the heir follows a pattern similar to the approach adopted by Mab regarding the education and upbringing of the wizard. It is evident that both Merlin and Arthur were created for a purpose, predestined by blood to achieve a greater task, and were sent to a foster family to take care of the parenting (Merlin to the pagan witch Ambrosia, Arthur to Sir Hector). The primary distinction is that, despite not being Arthur's parent, Merlin played a pivotal role in shaping the boy's personality during his formative years (this role encompassed Merlin's function as

⁹⁹ *Merlin* (part 1), 01:15:07-01:15:20.

¹⁰⁰ *Merlin* (part 1), 01:22:36-01:25:58.

¹⁰¹ *Merlin* (part 1), 01:26:21-01:26:24.

Arthur's teacher and mentor, a subject that was previously explored in the preceding chapter). The result of Merlin's guidance was the establishment of a strong healthy bond that bore a striking resemblance to the one forged between Ambrosia and Merlin.

In addition to the immorality displayed by Merlin, it is also useful to take into consideration the immorality exhibited by others, which is closely linked to the wizard's hasty actions. In pursuit of whatever goal Merlin has set for himself, his mind and focus are frequently narrowed to a single path, ignoring other possibilities. The most notable illustration of this phenomenon is Merlin's journey to the realm of Joyous Gard, where, according to the Lady of the Lake, lives "a man pure in heart" who can protect Camelot while Arthur is away on the quest for the Holy Grail.¹⁰² There, he encounters Lancelot in the company of his wife, Elaine, and his son, Galahad. Convinced that he had identified the ideal candidate, Merlin accompanies Lancelot to Arthur's kingdom. Lancelot subsequently competes in a jousting competition, wins, and is proclaimed to be "the best and noblest of the knights."¹⁰³ Unfortunately, his skill and handsomeness attract the attention of Guinevere and the two eventually end up having an affair despite both of their marriages. Upon discovering the unfaithfulness of her husband, Elaine dies of a broken heart.¹⁰⁴ In order to maintain his reputation as a king, Arthur is obliged to punish his unfaithful wife for treason, even though he does not personally perceive her as a queen who committed treason, but as a wife who betrayed her husband. He pleads with Merlin to save the former Queen and let her flee with Lancelot.¹⁰⁵ Following the realization that Lancelot may not be as honorable as he had been led to believe, Merlin pays a visit to the Lady of the Lake and accuses her of providing misleading information. "I told you the answer was at Joyous Gard," she defends herself, implying that she had not explicitly indicated the name Lancelot. This, in turn, prompts the wizard to reach the correct conclusion – "That's where I found Lancelot. It wasn't Lancelot, was it?" on which she says: "It was the boy, Galahad."¹⁰⁶ Before saying goodbye, the Lady of the Lake reminds him that "it's human to make mistakes," and that "part of [him] is human. The best part."¹⁰⁷ The quote provides a comprehensive explanation for the imperfections observed in both Merlin and the human characters surrounding him.

By expanding the theme of motherhood, *Merlin* (1998) effectively captured the profound influence that the possession of human traits can have on an individual's identity and

¹⁰² *Merlin* (part 2), 00:35:39-00:35:55.

¹⁰³ *Merlin* (part 2), 00:39:04-00:39:40.

¹⁰⁴ *Merlin* (part 2), 00:49:04-00:49:40.

¹⁰⁵ *Merlin* (part 2), 00:57:46-01:03:54.

¹⁰⁶ *Merlin* (part 2), 01:18:24-01:19:02.

¹⁰⁷ *Merlin* (part 2), 01:19:04-01:19:13.

behavior. The titular character remains the same almighty wizard as portrayed in the legends, however, he exhibits several notable differences. Firstly, he displays a rebellious attitude towards the established power hierarchy. Secondly, he demonstrates a preference for love and justice over morality. Thirdly, he is haunted by his past wrong actions. Fourthly, he is portrayed as a flawed mentor to Arthur. Most significantly, he is shown to make mistakes.

Conclusion

When considered as a whole, the findings in this document emphasize the central theme that contemporary retellings of Arthurian legends uphold the traditional archetypal depiction of the wizard Merlin, while simultaneously introducing novel concepts to broaden the lore or adapt the narrative to suit its audience, setting or medium.

Concerning the question of Merlin's origin, when the issue is addressed, the selected primary sources typically follow the 'fatherless boy' path, with a human mother and a second supernatural parent – such as an incubus, an unspecified force, or a fairy queen – who is either absent from the wizard's life or left Merlin to be brought up by someone else. In instances where this is not explicitly stated, it can be hypothesized that it was the second parent from whom Merlin inherited his gift, whether it manifested in the form of magical powers, the ability to foresee the future, or both.

Merlin remains portrayed as an advisor, a guide, and a mentor in all of the sources. This assertion is made more overtly in some than in others. For instance, it can be assumed with confidence that Bradman's *Young Merlin* eventually became a valuable ally to King Vortigern and, in due course, potentially to Uther and Arthur Pendragon as well, while in *Merlin* the wizard is seen directly interacting with all three kings. Interestingly, there is a noteworthy change in the degree of discreetness Merlin is required to operate with when it comes to his powers. In most adaptations, magic is a well-known aspect of the character, however, in *The Adventures of Merlin*, the young warlock is depicted as being thrust into a world where such abilities are severely punishable, which means he must maintain a high level of caution, not to reveal the extent of his knowledge and abilities.

His function in the story largely depends on the extent of his presence within the narrative. In general, if the wizard is used as a major character, he is the *Hero*, and as such, he may receive aid from a *Donor* or be the cause of the *Villain's* arrival. Then there are instances, where Merlin may be a titular character, however, only serves as a *Sender* or a *Helper* (the original function of Merlin in the Arthurian legends) to another main character. His importance is no less significant when he is merely used as a supporting character, for he fulfills the function of a *Donor*, who provides the *Hero* with an agent necessary for the elimination of misfortune (the covenant in *Perilous Times* helps *Kay* to save the world from peril).

The extent to which the wizard is integrated into society is determined by the personal acquaintance he has with others. Whilst the general public may perceive him as dangerous (as illustrated by the villagers in *Young Merlin*), those who become emotionally close to him – whether it is Arthur, Merlin's mother, Kay, Nimue, or Igraine – accept and respect him,

remaining loyal to him even through hardship. This is further complicated by the usage of disguises and alter egos he frequently uses to deceive or confuse his enemies (or to humorously criticize Arthur, parodying Merlin's 'trials' from the source material).

The second chapter revealed that, with the exception of Bradman's *Young Merlin*, it is much more popular among writers and creators to play with the character's ambiguity and, among other things, placing the character in moral dilemmas, rather than keeping his path clear of difficult decisions. *The Adventures of Merlin* and the two-part movie series *Merlin* demonstrate that, in some cases, destiny is unavoidable, regardless of any attempts to alter it, whether due to errors or unanticipated occurrences beyond the individual's control. The analysis also pointed out how inconvenient an excess of compassion or the lack thereof can be when there is something much greater at stake. In addition, despite often having made immoral decisions, Merlin is shown to feel deep shame or regret as that is the cost of his unique gift.

This study contributes to the area of Arthurian legends and their evolution throughout time. It benefits from the fact that the legends are still popular even in the twenty-first century thanks to the ideals and the timeless themes they explore, which allowed them to infiltrate modern entertainment industries. The strength of this work lies in its comparative textual analysis of retellings and adaptations across three types of media at once through a character typology and can be valuable mainly to Arthurian legend enthusiasts.

Future studies could concentrate on the modern depictions of other iconic, emotionally complex characters to explore their development and struggles. Should a female character be chosen, themes like female empowerment and gender equality could be addressed and reviewed through the male and female lenses. In case Mordred or Morgana becomes the subject of additional research, they have the potential to be studied from the perspective of villainy along with other similar characters like Grendel or Grendel's mother from *Beowulf*.

Resumé

Autorka se ve své bakalářské práci s názvem *The Image of Merlin in Modern Versions of Arthurian Legends* (česky: *Obraz Merlina v moderních verzích artušovských legend*) soustředí na charakteristické rysy postavy čaroděje Merlina v původních artušovských legendách – zejména tedy čerpá z děl *Artušova smrt* (Thomas Malory), *Dějiny britských králů* (Geoffrey z Monmouthu) a ze sbírky příběhů s názvem *The Legends of King Arthur and His Knights* (Sir James Knowles) – aby je následně porovnála s rysy vyzorovanými v novodobých knižních, filmových a televizních adaptacích. Do těchto rysů zejména spadá Merlinova role a funkce v příběhu, jeho vztahy s ostatními postavami, okolnosti jeho zrození a smysl pro morálnost, které je věnována celá jedna kapitola. Jejím následným cílem je potvrdit, či vyvrátit teorii, že i několik století po publikování prvních artušovských legend moderní autoři a tvůrci ctí tradiční atributy, které byly postavám prapůvodně přisouzeny. Výsledky této práce jsou pak přínosné zejména pro komunitu nadšenců do artušovských legend nebo fanoušků rozebíraných knih, filmů a seriálů. Jako nástroj k analýze svých primárních zdrojů používá teorii typologie postav za pomoci terminologie z děl *Strukturální sémantika: metoda a výzkum* (Algirdas Julien Greimas) a *Morfologie pohádky* (Vladimir Jakovlevič Propp). Ve finále zjištění získaná z jednotlivých kapitol porovnává a hledá v nich podobnosti a odlišnosti, které dopomáhají k potvrzení, či vyvrácení její počáteční teze. V závěru práce dochází k finální verifikaci, že se autoři či tvůrci skutečně drží tradičního pojetí čaroděje Merlina a pouze upravují jeho charakteristické rysy podle toho, kam je děj díla zasazen, tedy do jakého místa v čase i prostoru, komu je dílo určeno a skrze jaké médium je příběh vyprávěn. Objevuje pravidelně se opakující tendence, i zcela nové inovace a náhledy. Z jejích otázek ohledně morálnosti jasně vyplývá závěr, že Merlinův úděl je cokoliv, jenom ne jednoduchý a nese s sebou rizika ve formě (mnohdy zbytečných) ztrát. Na jedné straně vah balancuje proroctví a zodpovědnost s ním spojená, zatímco na druhé soucit zápolí s povinností a nezáleží na tom, která z misek nakonec klesne níže, protože výsledkem jsou téměř vždy smrt, výčitky a lítost, jak to dokazují zejména seriál *Merlinova dobrodružství* a dvoudílná filmová minisérie *Merlin*, kde se i přes veškerou snahu naplní ono proroctví o Artušově smrti. Merlin totiž svými rozhodnutími často spouští řetězec nenadálých událostí, které vedou k následkům takřka katastrofických rozměrů. Tato práce slouží jako odrazový můstek pro širší výzkum, jak ostatních postav jako jsou královna Guinevere, zrádce Mordred nebo udatní rytíři Kulatého stolu, tak širších principů rytířství, oddanosti a záchran dam v nesnázích, které se, díky neutuchající popularita artušovských legend, stále znovu a znovu objevují na knižním i filmovém trhu.

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