

THE MERLIN MYSTERY



The Merlin that most people are familiar with is the spell-casting wizard who advises Arthur in everything from matters of the heart to matters of war. This mystical figure has come down to us through the labyrinthine reworkings of Arthurian material by writers such as Malory and Geoffrey of Monmouth. And as with many of the Arthurian characters, the Merlin archetype has changed and evolved through time as each generation of writers has drawn upon the last for their information and then added their own colours to the mix.

So where did Merlin come from? What other figures contributed to this archetype that is still very present to the esoterically minded? And how do they interrelate in this complex legendary character? Let us start with a tale of a Merlin child.

THE BRIGHT CHILD

The ninth century writer Nennius tells us of King Vortigern whose castle foundations kept sinking. As a remedy he was advised by his wise men to sacrifice a fatherless boy. Such a boy was found and brought to the hills of Snowdon. But just before confronting his death, the boy asked the wizards if they knew what lay under the foundations. He claimed there was a pool which held two containers, and on separating these they would find a wrapping or tent. Inside this would be two serpents, one white and one red.

This was found to be true, and furthermore the boy predicted that the serpents would fight. The white one would appear to win but the red one would finally drive out the white. The pool, he explained, was the world, and the tent was Vortigern's kingdom. The red serpent represented the British race who would finally defeat and drive out the invading hordes of Saxons. The boy's name was Ambros, which may refer to the historical figure Ambrosius Aurelianus. In



early Welsh literature he is called Emrys, and the hill, with its remains of a Roman cistern, still bears his name: Dinas Emrys.

Geoffrey of Monmouth took this tale and combined it with that of Myrddin, a figure called from early Welsh poetry, and thus began his own version of the story. Another character who becomes mingled with this boy prophet is Gwion, who inadvertently receives drops from Ceridwen's magic potion which confers wisdom. He flees the angry sorceress, and during the chase they both perform a series of shape-shifting feats. Finally Gwion becomes an ear of wheat, and Ceridwen becomes a hen and gobbles him up. She becomes pregnant and gives birth to him nine months later and sets him adrift on a river.

He is found by a prince and becomes known as Taliesin, 'radiant brow'. The rest of the story establishes his reputation for being bright and wise. Taliesin's ability for prophecy became an inheritance of the later Merlin, again added to the mix in Monmouth's *'The Prophecies of Merlin'*. Merlin also comes to share his propensity for shape-shifting, as we will see shortly.

Taliesin arises from a body of thirteenth century Welsh poetry with a sixth century setting. Some fragments may even be sixth century compositions. The *'Book of Taliesin'* contains poetry attributed to the hero in which he describes his powers of knowledge:

**I know what beasts there are at the bottom of the sea;
How many spears in battle; how many drops in a shower...**

Various medieval Welsh poems are also attributed to the authorship of the above-mentioned Myrddin, who was possibly a poet writing in North Britain in the sixth century. He is the central character in a legend of which the extant fragments of poetry include *Afallennau* and *Hoianau*, both found in the *'Black Book of Carinarden'* (c 1200). He is also connected with poems in *'The Red Book of Hergest'* (c 1400).

The historical Taliesin, court poet of Urien and Owain in the sixth century, grew in legend into a prophet like Myrddin. The Story of *'Taliesin'* - Ceridwen's cauldron - is an example of this later development. The Welsh Myrddin is frequently linked to Taliesin and the two become inextricably mixed.

THE WISE COUNSELLOR

"That know I well," seyde Merlyon, "as welle as thyselff, and of all thy thoughtes."



In later medieval material Merlin demonstrates his power and wisdom and it soon earns him a place by Arthur's side. According to Malory, he arranges for Uther's access to Igraine in order that the birth of Arthur can take place. He counsels Arthur in matters of war, helps in maintaining the kingdom, casts spells, arranges for Arthur to acquire Excalibur, and knows of the mysterious otherworld and the Lady of the Lake. He also advises on the round table and sets in motion the legend of the

Holy Grail.

In *'The History of the Kings of Britain'* Merlin uses his wisdom and abilities to move the stones of the Giants Ring from Ireland. As men tried moving the stones he burst out laughing and

“placed in position all the gear which he considered necessary and dismantled the stones more easily than you could ever believe... Merlin... put up the stones... in exactly the same way as they had been arranged on Mount Killaraus in Ireland, thus proving that his artistry was worth more than any brute strength.”

The wise-sage part of Merlin has continued to develop well into our time, and perhaps remains the most well known aspect called upon in esoteric circles. But, in what could be called a complementary opposite fashion, there is yet another side to Merlin.

THE WILDMAN

Twelve years after publishing *'The History'*, Monmouth published *'Vita Merlini'*. In this work Merlin reverts from wise mage to wildman.

The wildman was a very popular medieval image. They were hairy human-like creatures following a harsh existence in remote forests, living on roots, berries and the raw flesh of wild animals. They were aggressive, powerful and understood only the rudiments of language. They also had a strong sexual appetite, and were often regarded as insane. Monmouth's Merlin is driven mad by the death of his friends in battle and retreats into the woods. Myrrdin, warrior as well as poet, has a similar experience. After the battle of Ariderydd, he is overwhelmed, sees a vision in the sky, and retreats to the forest where he becomes mad. The *'Afallennau'* contains some of the oldest Myrrdin material, and as with the Taliesin poems, although written later, some of it could be of earlier origin. In *'Hoianau'* he complains:



**Snow up to my hips among the forest wolves,
Icicles in my hair, spent is my splendour.**

The fate of Laloecen from Scottish folklore is very similar, and may have been the source for the Welsh legend. According to the twelfth century *'Life of St Kentigern'*, Laloecen was a prophet who lived at the court of King Rederech. In a fifteenth century manuscript he is met by St Kentigern, who describes him as a naked hairy madman. The story also states that this madman is thought by some to be Merlin.

Laloecen declares that he has to undergo punishment for his sins amongst the beasts. He is suffering from guilt at having caused people's death in battle, and had a terrible vision and heard a heavenly voice accusing him. He prophesies that he will die a triple death, which finally comes about when he is beaten and stoned before being thrown

into a river where he is pierced by a stake.

In most of his forms Merlin is also a prophet. Wild places and forests is often where either poetic inspiration or prophecy take place, and this is intimately connected to madness, as demonstrated in *'The Bacchae'* by Euripides. On this subject, Michael Senior quotes Giraldus Cambrensis:

There are certain persons in Cambria... called Awenddyon, or people inspired; when consulted upon any doubtful event, they roar out violently, are rendered beside themselves, and become, as it were, possessed by a spirit.

Senior adds: "It seems likely that this was the mode of prophecy undertaken by Taliesin ... in this, as in several other features, Myrddin is Taliesin's shadow."

Monmouth's Merlin is particularly known for this ability. In The *'Prophecies of Merlin'* in the *'History'* Monmouth refers directly to the Ambros story: "Alas, for the Red Dragon, for its end is near. . ." This is also reminiscent of prophecies uttered by Taliesin. Merlin then goes into obscure oracular ravings, and Malory's Merlin later also prophesies several events, as well as the nature of his and Arthur's death.



MERLIN'S DUAL NATURE

The *'Vulgate'* Merlin is a collection of Arthurian texts translated into English prose during the fifteenth century, twenty-five years before Malory. Here we learn that Merlin's mother, a simple girl, was seduced by a devil from hell. But the wizard Blaise saves the situation by christening the child, and although the boy can never hope to see paradise, the evil in him is nevertheless rendered the weaker part. Merlin can now use the powers of Hell against evil, and his purpose becomes to make way for the Holy Grail.

In Monmouth's *'History'* Merlin's mother becomes a nun, and his father an incubus in the guise of a handsome young man. Thus Merlin could be said to be the descendant of another great mythological lineage: the Virgin Birth.

This mixed parentage seems to be the origin of what is becoming Merlin's erratic behaviour, the Puckish combination of wizard and wildman. It explains the Trickster in him which is always present. Describing the *'Vulgate'*, Scudder remarks:



He is... a baffling personage. At times the Celtic strain asserts itself, as in his interesting feat of bringing over from Ireland the stones of the devil's dance, Stonehenge... But such capers as are cut in mediaeval nether regions are also in the blood; he jests with the knights till they roll off their seats with laughter, his rough horseplay making him a fascinating if awesome playfellow; he scares and amazes them by devices picturesquely conceived, for he is a shape-shifter.

Now he flees from court, impelled by that paternal ichor, to take refuge in wild forests far from human haunts. Again he appears as mentor, or prophet of disaster, terrifying yet beneficent in intent, making the court tremble by a flash of light from below.



We can find an example of Merlin's strange humour in the three laughs described in the *'Vita Merlini'*. He laughs when he sees Rodarchus pull a leaf from the Queen's hair, little realising that it signifies a meeting with her lover. He laughs again when he sees a beggar and knows that he is sitting on buried treasure, and a third time when he sees a young man buying new shoes, unaware that he will soon be

drowned.

SHAPE-SHIFTER

Malory's Merlin takes delight in making fun of the King, often disguising his appearance to confuse him. When Arthur rests from his chase of a deer, Merlin approaches the king in the shape of a youth and tells the king of his true parentage. He then exits and comes back into the scene disguised as an old man.

In the *'Livre d'Artus'* Julius Caesar is troubled by a dream, and Merlin comes to him in the guise of a stag. For Merlin is also associated with Cernunnos, the antlered Celtic god. Suibhne, the Irish equivalent of Myrddin and Laleocen, rides a fawn, and has a herd of stags which he uses for pulling ploughs.

Merlin's ability to shapeshift has survived to this day. In the book and film *'The Sword in the Stone'* Merlin tutors the young Arthur in the art of being a fish in the castle moat, a bird and a squirrel.

With these kind of characteristics, Merlin resembles Trickster in the folklore of the Winnebago Indians who is known for breaking society's taboos unconcernedly and laughing at the dismay of his victims. Anthropologist Paul Radin says:



Above left: An alchemical representation of the ventricular system with Mercury between two swordsmen

Above right: The 'Senex Mercurius' (Merlin) appears as mediator between a king and his son

Manifestly we are here in the presence of a figure and a theme or themes which have had a special and permanent appeal and an unusual attraction for mankind from the very beginnings of civilisation. In what must be regarded as its earliest and most archaic form, as found among the North American Indians, Trickster is at one and the same time creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others and who is always duped himself. He wills nothing consciously. At times, he is constrained to behave as he does from impulses over which he has no control. He knows neither good nor evil yet he is responsible for both. He possesses no values, moral or social, is at the mercy of his passions and appetites, yet through his actions all values come into being.



MERLIN'S ENTRAPMENT

Ultimately, however, Merlin comes to a bad end. Malory records that he shows Nimue an enchanted rock and by her 'subtle witching' she makes Merlin go under the stone whereupon she magically traps him there. Stone connects with the element of earth, and so it could be said that Merlin was undone by his failure to control that part of his nature - the earthly animalistic side. Malory tells us:

And always he lay about to have her maidenhood, and she was ever passing way of him and would have been delivered of him, for she was afraid of him because he was a devil's son.

It is also significant that Merlin teaches Nimue the very spells she uses to outwit him. Tolstoy draws on the North American Trickster myths to argue that Merlin's troubles are self-imposed:

Symbolic of Trickster's efforts to rid himself unavailingly of the crudely bestial aspects of his nature are violent struggles maintained within himself, as when his left hand struggles against his right. Frequently he is made the dupe of his own cunning, when he allows himself to be trapped in the fork of a large tree he was attempting to outwit... Merlin's tragic end, trapped in a magical prison of his own devising, closely reflects this pattern.



Just as Laloccen foresaw his triple death, Merlin also predicts his

own fate "... that he scholde nat endure longs, but for all his craftes he scholde be putte into the erthe quyk". But nevertheless he resigns himself to it and to the feminine power Nimue, who also made him swear that he should never do any kind of enchantment upon her.

In this prediction and acceptance of his fate, as in his virgin birth, Malory's Merlin can seem almost Christ-like. Perhaps one could read his fate not as a defeat, but rather as a sacrifice. This is the line taken by Tolstoy. He develops his argument by suggesting that the story of Kentigern and Lailoken is an allegory for the two sides of a single character. He points out that St Kentigern's mother, like Merlin's, was seduced against her will by a young prince, but in such a manner that despite her becoming pregnant she remained virgin. Furthermore, the girl's father bears the name Leudonus, "which is an undoubted derivative of the name Lieu, ie: the god Lug."

Taking this alongside various other arguments, he concludes:



At long last we may see the meaning of contradictory elements in Merlin's makeup... we have seen Merlin as a Celtic Lord of the Beasts; Cernunnos the Horned One, dwelling in the recesses of the forest, animal and master of animals... Wild Man and deceitful sprite, child of a devil from Hell. But in his dual role as Trickster he is also an incarnation of the eternally bright and youthful god Lug, born of a virgin birth, master of all skills and crafts, prophet who foresees and supervises the sacred kingship, and doomed to expiate man's stricken plight by the ultimate self-sacrifice on the World Tree.

Taking an esoteric overview of the Merlin archetype and all his different aspects, we can see the embodiment of a conflict or duality which can be interpreted on different levels. In moral terms, he represents the constant battle between good and evil. In historical terms, he represents the struggle between paganism and the encroachment of Christianity. And in psychological terms, he represents the struggle between the rational mind and the dark forces of the subconscious. In different times, and according to different needs, the shape shifting Merlin has been all these different things, and continues to be as strong an archetypal force as ever.

**I have been a blue salmon,
I have been a dog, a stag,
a roebuck on the mountain,
A stock, a spade, an axe in the hand,
A stallion, a bull, a buck,
A grain which grew on a hill,
I was reaped, and placed in an oven,
I fell to the ground when I was being roasted
And a hen swallowed me.
For nine nights was I in her crop.**

**I have been dead, I have been alive,
I am Taliesin.**