

Merlin



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And when they came to the sword that the hand held, King Arthur took it up

Origins: 1

- Nennius tells us that Vortigern found a young seer named Ambrosius
- He had no human father
- Based on legend of a seer, Myrddin, who was driven mad by the horrors of war
- Myrddin then prophesied the defeat of the British by the invading Saxons

Origins: 2

- Geoffrey of Monmouth blends Nennius with Welsh folklore:
 - The boy without a father; captured by Vortigern
 - The native-born seer
 - Collaborator with Uther Pendragon but **not** with Arthur
 - Creator of Stonehenge
 - Geoffrey may actually have written *The Prophecies of Merlin* before his *History*; afterwards writes a sequel, *The Life of Merlin*

Geoffrey...



- Involves Merlin in the story of Arthur's conception
- Has Merlin involved in arranging Arthur's fosterage
- Has Merlin involved in legitimating Arthur's succession

Origins: 3



- Robert de Boron's romance *Merlin* c. 1190
- Merlin begotten by demon but baptised immediately at birth and becomes servant of God
- Shapeshifter
- Jestful personality
- Connected to Grail quest

Sequels/Adaptions to Robert de Boron

- *Estoire de Merlin* (a/k/a Vulgate or Prose *Merlin*), late 12th c
- Vulgate *Suite du Merlin* (Arthur's early years & military campaigns) (first half of 13th c)
- *Lancelot-Grail* describes Merlin as being a pagan and "never did any good, only evil" (1210-1230)
- Huth *Merlin* or Post-Vulgate *Suite du Merlin* c. 1230-1240 (more adventures & Arthur's struggles with his barons; getting Excalibur from the Lady of the Lake; more shapeshifting; Gawain & his brothers)
- *Of Arthur & Merlin* (1250): first English Merlin story
- English *Prose Merlin* (first half of 15th century): Kay's rudeness, Morgan's antagonism to Guinevere; Arthur's innocence in begetting Mordred

Additions to Merlin's story

- Often in disguise; sometimes Arthur recognizes him, sometimes not until after the encounter
- Eventual downfall comes from involvement with the huntress/wood nymph Nimue (Niniane, Viviane, etc.) who learns his secrets & uses them against him
- Role in Arthur's education & in the founding of Camelot are later additions



Jumping ahead in time



- Not much change in tradition from Malory through Tennyson (1832 on...)
- Victorians used Arthur as model for gentlemen
- Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood artists and poets began to re-work and reshape the tradition
- Sidney Lanier, *The Boy's King Arthur* (1880) (will inspire Twain's *Connecticut Yankee* satire)

Post-WWI Britain

- Reeling after effects of WWI (gas, carnage, PTSD, death tolls)
- Asking question “What should Britain be? What should it stand for?”
- Also the period of *The Waste Land*
- Political upheaval—rise of fascism, Nazism, Edward VII’s abdication
- Led to a number of novels of utopia/ dystopia



The golden age of utopias & dystopias

- Kenneth Grahame, *The Wind in the Willows* (1908)
- A. A. Milne, *Winnie the Pooh* (1926)
- A. A. Milne, *The House at Pooh Corner* (1928)
- Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (1932)
- P. L Travers, *Mary Poppins* (1934)
- J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (1937)
- T. H. White, *The Sword in the Stone* (1938-39)
- Eric Knight, *Lassie Come Home* (1940)
- Gertrude Chandler Warner, *The Boxcar Children* (1942)
- George Orwell, *Animal Farm* (1945)

T. H. White (1906-1964)



- Born 1906 in Bombay
- Son of civil servant
- Educated at British public schools & Cambridge; wrote thesis on Malory (1928)
- Became schoolmaster

Genesis of the novel

White wrote that in Autumn 1937, "I got desperate among my books and picked [Malory] up in lack of anything else. Then I was thrilled and astonished to find that (a) The thing was a perfect tragedy, with a beginning, a middle and an end implicit in the beginning and (b) the characters were real people with recognizable reactions which could be forecast[...] Anyway, I somehow started writing a book."



White's version



- Much revised from 1938 to 1958* versions
- Wart, not Merlin, is shapeshifted
- Learns lessons from being fish, hawk, ant*, goose*, and badger

How does White use the Tradition?

- Commentary on chivalry (jousting, King Pellinore & the Questing Beast, Sir Grummore Grummorson)
- “Fox-hunting mentality”
- Commentary on what (at that time) constituted a “gentleman’s education”
- Contrast between court, Sir Ector’s castle, and Robin Wood’s court in the woods
- Use of humor, satire, snarky remarks

Genre and Purpose

Malory

- Mirror for Magistrates
- Educate by inspiring discussion about proper roles for leaders



White

- Education novel
- Concern for the political development of a young leader
- Very formulaic plot:
 - Loss separates hero from family
 - Hero undergoes maturation and education
 - Hero leaves safe haven for “real world”

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The Hero

“[The Wart] is willing to learn, idealistic, and receptive to the truth, though he does not accept every word from Merlyn unquestioningly. Instead, he carefully considers everything and weighs its value” (Adderly 60).



How does White's young Arthur resemble and differ from Malory's Arthur??

The Hero's Quest



- He is left with Sir Ector to be raised
- He must be educated in preparation for his future
- He must prove his abilities through a series of tests & challenges
- He must grow into leadership; remember, “he was a born follower.”
- He fulfills his destiny when he pulls the sword from the stone and is acknowledged king

How is this different from what Malory shows us of Arthur's preparation?

The Wise Guide

Merlyn tells Wart that “Education is experience, and the essence of experience is self-reliance” (Chapter 5).

How does Arthur gain self-reliance in Malory? In White?

