

Merlin: Knowledge and Power through the Ages. Stephen Knight. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009. xvii + 275pp. ISBN 978-0-8014-4365-7.

True to its refreshingly lucid title, this study surveys the character of Merlin through literary and cultural history, and posits a thematic consistency to his portrayals. Arthurian literature's oldest and possibly most iconic persona, and likely the world's most famous Cymro as well, he is investigated by Cardiff University's Distinguished Research Professor of English Literature Stephen Knight, whose first book on Arthurian cultural history was *Arthurian Literature and Society* (1983), and who demonstrated his approach to long-term character study with *Robin Hood: A Mythic Biography* (2003). Like Robin Hood, Merlin is something of an anomaly among medieval figures in that he continues in the modern day to be more often fictionalized than analyzed; there are surprisingly few serious, full-length, and up-to-date studies dedicated to the wizard-cum-prophet (for lack of a better catch-all), especially in comparison with the likes of Arthur himself, Beowulf, Roland/Orlando, and, to a lesser extent, Merlin's fellow Arthurian-adoptee Tristan. The book-jacket endorsement by Alan Lupack claims that *Merlin* "should become the standard resource on the well-known wizard"—a weighty compliment when one considers how substantial an outline to literature on Merlin can be found in Lupack's *Oxford Guide to Arthurian Literature and Legend* (2005). Knight presents his material most often in term of a continuing story, and occasionally as a myth, though the distinction is never quite clear. One assumes that, by the latter, Knight is referring to the *mythos* of Merlin, which—as opposed to the entire corpus of often-contradictory developments and retellings—might be defined as the eclectic core-story of the character, composed of reconcilable elements from texts usually but not always deemed canonical.

Knight's *Merlin* approaches its eponymous figure from the earliest Celtic (primarily Welsh) literary sources, and traces its cultural uses and development through to 2008. This vast evolution and accretion Knight divides into four phases—and *Merlin* into four chapters—each characterizing a specific relationship Merlin's knowledge seems to manifest with respect to the nature of power. More specifically, the Introduction claims, "[t]his book will argue that when knowledge is most important, most close to taking control, that is when it is most vulnerable to some form of limitation or repression by power" (xi). In presenting this position as a continuum, Knight writes that

The story of Merlin, and in his first realization Myrddin, has been proceeding for about a thousand years, and to trace its recurrent realization of the conflict of knowledge and power will not only unearth a mass of intriguing detail [...] but more importantly will show how the texts explore the mechanisms by which knowledge and power both face and confront each other over time. (xii)

The terms of the thesis are vague, and necessarily so; one can hardly claim to encircle a millennium of growth with a small fence. Though the succeeding chapters do much to give 'knowledge' and 'power' more specific and contextual values, the difficulties of a project such as *Merlin* are made clear from the beginning. Simply put, there seems too much material to be easily subjected to the formal restraints of a single study; constant tension can be felt between the specifics of the line of argument and the imaginative diversity of the fictional character's development. Knight's ability to keep this tension from constantly distorting his thousand-year survey is one of the foremost triumphs of *Merlin*.

The book proceeds historically in terms of extant material. Chapter One begins with a consideration of the sixth-century British bard-figure Myrddin as presented in a small number of

manuscripts, and follows him into the character (and moniker) of Merlinus as reinvented and popularized by Geoffrey of Monmouth in *Historia Regum Britanniae* (c. 1138), as well as in the less-known *Vita Merlini* (c. 1148). The chapter argues that each of these early manifestations, although distinct in its own ways, portrays Myrddin/Merlin's knowledge chiefly in terms of wisdom—that is, knowledge possessing a power of its own—and that “the person who bears this knowledge can be useful to, often crucial to, the operations of the powerful and is actively courted by them” (2). The earliest material poses no connection between Myrddin and Arthur, and Knight argues that the figure is originally based on a Cumbrian nobleman—“conceivably historical” (6)—whose special knowledge causes him to reject his society's values, not to champion them. It is the later, post-invasion material—that on which Geoffrey draws most heavily—that portrays Merlin as a force for the Welsh reconquest of Britain, and sets the stage for almost everything the figure is to become. Despite this apparent schism, Knight stresses that portrayals of the early Myrddin/Merlin afford his knowledge consistent power over and sometimes above the social and natural worlds. Knight goes on to argue that little if any of this power is magical, however; even in *Historia Regum Britanniae*, Merlin's apparent miracles of moving the stones of the Giants' Ring from Ireland and disguising Uther as Gorlois can be read as feats of engineering and cosmetic skill, respectively. The chapter's consideration of *Vita Merlini*—a complex work—is especially illuminating. Apart from highlighting several Celtic episodes Geoffrey seems to have reworked, Knight sees in the *Vita* the seeds of a much later, more autonomous and disruptive sort of soothsayer than the royal counsellor Merlin remains for several centuries yet.

Chapter Two, “Advice”, looks at how medieval writers—primarily in French—harness Merlin's knowledge to the service of the powerful, and how the authority he represents ranges among the spiritual, military, and political spheres. Though Merlin experienced a sort of rebirth at the hands of Geoffrey, it is between the years of 1150 and 1485—those covered by this chapter—that Arthurian legend is most thoroughly recast, and its most recognizable characters and relationships come to be established. Nevertheless, the most famous Arthurian writer of the period, Chrétien de Troyes, had next to nothing to do with Merlin, and Knight takes the opportunity to press the influence of Robert de Boron, a Burgundian writer whose lack of poetic skill often overshadows his enormous contributions to the Arthurian mythos. Merlin becomes a Christian authority under Robert, “though still capable of looking after himself with the cunning of a true trickster” (57), while the expansive and consolidatory Vulgate Cycle (1215-35) finds new and beneficial applications for his knowledge, constituting a role which Knight calls that of a grand vizier. The eventual darkening of this ministry in the ‘post-Vulgate’ *Merlin* “looks forward to the isolated and vulnerable cleverness of the Renaissance mage” (80). For the final section of the chapter, Knight returns to England, and explores Merlin's supervisory, sometimes fatherly, and occasionally non-existent roles among such works as Layamon's *Brut* (c.1200), the alliterative *Morte Arthure* (c. 1400) and Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur* (1485).

Chapter Three surveys the portrayal of Merlin from the Renaissance to the Victorian periods. It involves a long and inclement stretch of cultural and political history which, despite an upshot in the nineteenth century (largely at the hands of Tennyson), might altogether be characterized as the nadir of Arthurian development. For the most part, the interval lacks the dignified literary cornerstones with which the first two chapters are built; as Knight observes, “up-to-date European intellectualism [...] had little time for Merlin” (102). Nevertheless, it is during this time that Merlin's special abilities are gradually refitted with the emerging scientific knowledge, and he comes at times to appear as a sort of Daedalus—clever and inventive, but

neither omniscient nor invulnerable. Beginning with a cross-section of declining attitudes towards Merlin's prophecies and medieval modes of knowledge in general, Knight largely goes on to consider the propagandist-satirical back-and-forth of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century appropriations of Merlin, the most enduring of which remains the Tom Thumb material popularized by Henry Fielding. Perhaps surprisingly, the Romantics did not appear to find Merlin appealing enough to adopt, and Knight attributes this purported rejection to the figure's intricacies:

Michael the road-mender or the experience-scarred Ancient Mariner represented their idea of natural wisdom and—the key value which clever, complex, possibly diabolic Merlin could hardly represent—simple morality. (130)

Tennyson of course took up the wizard in his *Idylls of the King* (1833-85), as well as in some of the shorter Arthurian poems he wrote before and afterwards. The *Idylls*'s "Merlin and Vivien" is the weightiest of these treatments, and, Knight argues, amounts effectively to a dismissal of Merlin in order to clear the way for the "moral focus and the world-engaged faith represented by Arthur" (145). Whereas much of *Merlin* proceeds on cultural history, Knight's analysis of "Merlin and Vivien" is based on close reading, and emphasizes Vivien's successful seduction of the magus as an indictment of both the man and the humanistic rationalism he is suggested to represent.

The fourth chapter characterizes the twentieth-century Merlin as overwhelmingly an educator, and Knight can hardly be debated in this position. As is so often the case with the modern sections of historical surveys, however, the pace and focus of *Merlin* sometimes reel beneath the sheer volume of material, as well as the absence of a thorough enough retrospection to winnow and process it. In tracing Merlin's maturation into a teacher, Knight finds an independent path on each side of the Atlantic, arguing that the magus was originally ridiculed in America, but came to be seen as "realizing a central role of knowledge and its social application, whether academic, democratic, or merely self-constructive, as a substantial feature of American life" (177). On the British side, the Merlins of Charles Williams and C.S. Lewis are figured, the latter much more fully. Though Williams has been called "among modern English poets, the foremost reshaper and recreator of Arthurian mythology," and one whose work "has not yet found the appreciation it deserves" (Göller and Thompson, 515, 517), it must be recalled that in his works he confers much of the traditional role of Merlin on Taliessin (sic). As a result, the hamadryad-like Merlin of Lewis's *That Hideous Strength* (1945) takes precedence, though Knight finds that the message—and possible influence of the book on George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four* (1948)—has been obfuscated by publication issues (200). Knight sees Lewis as a sort of successor to T.H. White, whose work, like Williams's, "has yet to receive a critical analysis of the subtlety and range that he deserves as a major Arthurian" (198). It is in White's *Sword and the Stone* (1938) that one finds the basis for the Disneyfied wizard many children still meet first among Merlins. After touching upon numerous young-adult and fantasy incarnations of Merlin, the chapter concludes with attention to the postmodern and individualist recastings of the wizard that have come to appear in film, television, and international New-Age spiritualism.

*Merlin* is above all a pleasure to read. Knight's discussions are gentlemanly, his prose flawless, and his assessments lucid and engaging. His use of secondary literature is succinct yet ungratuitous, and his attention to the primary sources displays a felicitous balance of conventionality and novelty. It is because the thesis is uncontroversial that *Merlin* serves so well as a survey, as well as a future resource for more specialized studies. As is inevitably the case with imaginary characters, most difficulties are conceptual and methodological; a British study,

*Merlin* shows no sign of the theoretical self-consciousness that characterizes and sometimes paralyzes much North American literary scholarship. Though likely part of its appeal for some readers, this absence has its own effects and assumptions, causing Knight to represent Merlin as a constantly-reappropriated object—as a restless spirit occasionally incarnate—rather than as a select combination of readers’ conceptions and writers’ performances, most having no acquaintance with one another. There are issues of epistemology as well, especially where the Merlin material seems ill-suited to form its own context; Myrddin’s “querulous” isolation and ageing, for example, is part of an early Welsh literary tradition (Bromwich 423), while the absence of Merlin from the alliterative *Morte Arthure* can also be seen as part of that text’s portrayal of a more naturalistic world than the prophet stood to represent. Any such concerns must answer to the project’s scope, however, and one feels that the book could easily have surpassed a thousand pages or more should Knight have opened any more doors. This is particularly the case in the last chapter, which covers a period where Merlin seems to pop up everywhere (he is even in an episode of the original series of *Star Trek* [“Requiem for Methuselah”]), and Knight is forced to cover an average of five texts per page. Overall, however, *Merlin: Knowledge and Power through the Ages* is an admirable, professional study, and belongs on the shelf alongside other major studies of Arthuriana.

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