

MERLIN THE MAGICIAN –
A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE
FIGURE OF MERLIN IN THE MEDIEVAL
ROMANCE PROSE MERLIN AND ITS
TELEVISUAL ADAPTATION BBC MERLIN
(2008)

Karolina Pasiut

Uniwersytet Jagielloński,
Wydział Filologiczny, Instytut Filologii Angielskiej
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-1490-2860

The legendary figures of King Arthur and the magician Merlin seem to be a lasting source of fascination that finds its numerous outlets in a variety of artistic forms throughout the centuries. The first, older and closest to the original stories, an anonymous medieval work *Prose Merlin*, inspired the latest BBC One (2008) medieval fantasy, historical and medieval drama “Merlin”. One of the most famous magicians of the literary world, a combination, or concoction, of medieval romance and magic, also a crucial and indispensable cornerstone to the kingdom of Camelot, merges the distant literary periods, via two different media, into two portrayals centuries apart. The comparison of the two artistic forms indicates how an archetype of a wizard, dwelling in the supernatural in its Christian form, as presented in the original version, is transformed into a humanized, servile figure century apart, in the TV series rendition.

Prose Merlin

Prose Merlin is the earliest English source of the life of Merlin¹, which discusses his history thoroughly, starting with the events preceding his conception. The straightforward translation from the French narrative, created in the middle of the fifteenth century, which predates Malory's famous work², belongs to the genre of medieval romances which constitute a group of writings in which magic and the supernatural play a crucial part. These romances are largely considered to be unrealistic because they portray supernatural objects and events, which are antonyms of the word "realism"³: castles, knights, dragons, witches, magic objects, and the quest, through which the romancers describe imagined adventures⁴. However, the romantic essence of such texts does not deny the reality and plausibility of the depicted world; indeed, the princess and brave warriors, together with architecture, clothing, food, musical instruments, pastimes and conversations are inevitable elements of the real, historic medieval landscape⁵. All in all, they remain strongly connected to the mythical past of the Middle Ages as there is no clear-cut division between real and unreal, possible and impossible. Fantastic events, unreal creations and magic are the emblematic features of the genre.

The TV series

BBC *Merlin* is a TV production from 2008 which utilizes the ongoing interest in the Arthurian world but focuses mainly on the magician whose adventures are inspired by the medieval work. Aired in the worldwide television since September 2008, until December 2012, *Merlin* not only attempts to recreate the regalia, customs or landscapes of the epoch, but also its atmosphere, attitudes of contemporary dwellers, character and the course of history. The audio-visual production derives from the fine tradition of Arthurian legends, adapts the classic form and fashions it into modern cinematic standards. The spirit of the Middle Ages can be transferred to our times thanks to cliff-hangers, special effects and a range of engrossing characters spanning from vil-

¹ J.W. Conlee, *Prose Merlin*, Kalamazoo, Michigan, 1998, p. 1.

² Ibidem, op. cit., p. 1.

³ H. Cooper, *When Romance Comes True*, "Boundaries in Medieval Romance" 2008, p. 13.

⁴ M.A. Doody, *The True Story of the Novel*, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1996, p. 184.

⁵ W.F. Bolton, *Alliterative Poetry*, London 1986, p. 268.

lains to heroes. All of these techniques were combined in the BBC One TV series *Merlin*, in which the figure of the eponymous character has been creatively reimagined.

The figure of Merlin in *Prose Merlin*

Prose Merlin depicts a newborn, youth and an adult always perfectly realizing his own potential, knowing his value: Merlin never ceases speaking his mind boldly, without fear or timidity. When confronted with the sage, people show him the deserved respect „Thow woste well that oure Lord hath yove me so moche witte”⁶. Distinguished from the moment of his birth by a mere appearance of a dark-haired infant, “This childe maketh me to have grete feer”⁷, but also by an ability to give defensive speeches (“Merlyne’s pletere”⁸): he is able to rescue his mother as a two-month-old toddler in front of the whole crowd⁹. In the *Prose Merlin* lets himself being known as a wise sage and prophet whose supernatural abilities are derived from God through his religious mother. His role of a magician is known, established but not particularly highlighted. The magic he dwells on is neither harmful or destructive nor has it any spectacular forms. Merlin’s abilities are disposed within the white¹⁰, good kind of magic: he can interpret signs, dreams and peculiar types of behavior, he has a gift of knowing the past, present and future, he can appear and disappear exactly in the right moments. Shape-shifting, magical potions or enchantments are other parts of his skills which decisively contribute to his worldwide fame. All of these abilities allow him to advise, aid and prophesy unmistakably about one’s fortune but only with God’s consent; therefore, his presence is always anticipated, valued and cherished. He is also presented as the source of prophetic writings which appear magically on different surfaces, though he does not write them himself¹¹. Assuming that only written facts may be taken as true and authentic, it is Merlin who constitutes the source of legitimatization of the whole Arthurian

⁶ J.W. Conlee, op. cit., p. 37.

⁷ Ibidem, p. 27.

⁸ Ibidem, p. 31.

⁹ Ibidem, pp. 28–29.

¹⁰ C. Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval English Romance*, p.117.

¹¹ K. Cawsey, *Merlin’s Magical Writing: Writing and the Written Word in ‘Le Morte Darthur’ and the English Prose ‘Merlin’*, p. 92.

literature: he ordains Blasé to act as his scribe and places himself in the position of the authority over the events¹². In general, his supernatural features are awe-inspiring but never threatening.

The great reputation and experience of Merlin are visible at a surprisingly early age, and transform the boy into a political, almost leader-like figure. The literary character is himself aware of the unique consciousness and importance of the events that are evolving around. Vortiger, Pendragon, Uther or Arthur consequently are prepared to give themselves up to Merlin's command, trusting everything in him and surrendering to his conditions. The value of Merlin perceived by others allows him to assume a position of an expert on whose shoulders rests the fate of many people. This "incredibly powerful, wise, far-seeing manipulator"¹³ oversees actions of others, directing them to the given tracks of which only he knows. The author of the *Prose* cunningly manipulates Merlin, originally from the French stories, into a national hero who is there to uplift the spirits challenged by various diversities at the end of the Middle Ages. The conflicts within British Isles, rebellious nobility, dissatisfaction of the lower classes or constant alertness in contacts with the French, had a tremendous impact on the role of kingship which began to weaken. The royal advisor acting on behalf of all social groups and connected predominantly with the most influential, was to strengthen the national bonds within the country.

Magic in *Prose Merlin*

It is important to bear in mind that the original, written version documents Merlin's life extremely meticulously, beginning with the early events leading to his birth. Upon seeing the devils' court which debates over possible ways to take revenge on God¹⁴, the reader is introduced to the religious context of the story, "a strong element of Christian morality" and Christian supernatural¹⁵ which are constantly evoked in the *Prose*. Christianity and God's supremacy shape the life of the young sage in the book, who is perfectly aware of the mercy he has been given. As an evil tool devised to interfere in the Almighty's plan, Merlin is miraculously rescued from the condemnation by the loving devotion

¹² Ibidem, p. 92.

¹³ Ibidem, p. 95.

¹⁴ J.W. Conlee, op. cit., pp. 19–20.

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 7.

of his own mother who manages to baptize him; “And therefore, oure Lorde wolde not lese that shulde be His”¹⁶. From the very beginning, the narrator highlights how Merlin will act as a God’s envoy on Earth, projected to serve with wisdom or divination from the very early age, still utilizing the remains of evil.

The act of devoting his life to God is reflected in his supernatural powers which are transformed into benevolent, good. The images of Merlin in *Prose* repeatedly highlight his readiness to serve the God Almighty, as the only “oure Lorde”¹⁷ to whom he owns the power, wisdom, the gift of prophecy and authority. His awareness of being born out of devil and simultaneously his strong willingness not to succumb to its evil powers demonstrate the failure of the devils whose potential representative turns into their sworn enemy. Merlin retains supernatural abilities but does nothing that would seem purposefully harmful, only sometimes displaying tendencies to some impish humour or “childish delight in playing pranks”¹⁸.

As a spokesman or agent of God who directs the events on earth¹⁹ on his behalf, Merlin is feared naturally by people and creatures around, however, since the sage never uses his gift to purely malicious or destructive ends, he is never perceived in terms of dark, cruel magic. His magical abilities are “frequently involved in prompting the actions of the other characters, orchestrating events, and heading off catastrophic situations”²⁰. He earns his trust by using his powers to the good causes, which is precisely how he cooperates with others and why they surrender to all his wishes. Also, whatever is created out of Merlin’s supernatural powers is naturally respected and taken as an ultimate sign of God’s approval because it is Merlin who already knows the past, present and future, as when Arthur takes the sword out of stone. Merlin’s Christian supernatural gift of magic perceived as innate, natural in him is not a focal point for the medieval writer who mentions different occurrences of magic but does not delve on them.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 244.

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 245.

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 3.

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 95.

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 7.

Arthur and Merlin in *Prose Merlin*

The anonymous medieval writer describes Merlin the magician also in the context of the rise of Camelot – it is part of Merlin's planning that the role of the greatest ruler of Albion is ensured. The sage becomes Arthur's guardian and leads him through the events, fulfilling their mutual destiny. To become an ideal ruler, Arthur must be first of all conceived and later nurtured in the atmosphere removed from the courtly splendor, which the careful teacher chooses for the boy: he is brought up to a fair, just and genuine king, perfectly able to prove his worthiness without relying on his royal ancestry. It is only due to the struggle of confirming his inner value by patient work and weary dealings with distrustful and proud barons that Arthur becomes an exemplary king. Merlin, who does not need any bettering himself and only offers help to others, befriends the “Yonge a man, and of so base lyngngae”²¹ and ensures he overtakes the power due to God's decision.

The figure of Merlin in the BBC TV series

The screen version draws a picture of the young magician, who is first and foremost a sorcerer there. Born with supernatural abilities, Merlin is presented as the one moving objects and performing various deeds with his eyes from the early stages of his development – a very attractive, awe-inspiring feature enriched by various special effects and developments of the modern cinematography. None of the episodes transfers any information of Merlin's devilish origins; the element of Christian supernatural is completely removed to the point when his father is introduced as a dragon lord, who allegedly passed the magical abilities on the son. This supplement of the original story adds to Merlin's supernatural aura and enriches his authority among all the magical creatures of his kind in the world depicted by the TV series. His history begins with the mother who recognizes Merlin's powers and intentionally confides the boy into a well-educated king's advisor and physician in Camelot, Gaius, who takes up the challenge to help him grow up in the suitable environment. The producers also strive to present the great magician in the process of becoming, a trial-and-error process, hence one can see a teenager who already discovers his potential, and with an

²¹ Ibidem, p. 81.

aid of the guardian perfects it. Perceived as a father-like persona, Gaius watches over the boy's actions, teaching him the basis of his profession: we see how Merlin learns how to recognize, tame and govern his magical abilities. It is Camelot where he travels to discover the true destiny for which he has to prepare. Endowed with a great power, Merlin is going to be responsible for the lives of many people; the tremendous task will also include helping King Arthur to rule the kingdom.

Despite this significance and value of Merlin's presence in the kingdom, the TV series portrays him as a simple servant, insulted and abused by those around him. He is like an irrelevant creature, always underrated, disrespected and given menial, physical tasks. Uther Pendragon, Arthur's father, remarks that the servant-boy must suffer from "mental affliction" because of his peculiar behavior. In the meantime, it is the only way for Merlin to rescue Camelot: managing to defeat adversaries he has to act undercover and divert anyone's attention from the magic he performs. He must do magical deeds to save the kingdom but he also has to save himself from being executed because of such practices. The magician is presented as an important figure in Arthur's becoming the legendary ruler of Albion, but without disclosing his true face and motive, which devoids him of the deserved appreciation and gratitude. As a result, Merlin has to suffer teasing, ridicule and humiliation just to survive at the court and fulfill his and his king's destinies.

It may be assumed that the reason for such a portrayal of Merlin is devised to show his flaws which he cannot avoid as a human being but can correct them to earn his worth as a magician. The servant-like nature of his existence enables the audience of the TV series to see him as a positive figure, a fine magician, who only works for the good causes. The servile character of his development is the way to reach some greater goals: as an apprentice, he cannot relieve himself of the duties or evade from responsibilities, which is exactly how he betters his character. It is particularly highlighted how the years of hard work transform him into a better man, who will not abuse his great powers. He learns consequences of his actions which are never malevolent. Not being told or shown straightforwardly the ready answers, the challenges refine the young warlock's experience which becomes a process of trial and error: didactic, and even moral in tone. During his numerous adventures, Merlin, a servant at the court of Camelot as well as the most powerful magician of his times, gradually comprehends that his supernatural abilities cannot be utilized to win applause or respect

since they can easily corrupt their bearer. Even when provided with the occasional insights to the future, Merlin treats his supernatural gift like a curse. In that way the TV series focuses on the didacticism of the Merlin's presentation, which through the process of humanization and neutralization of his supernatural abilities young viewers can identify more with him and are taught about the merit of hard work. Moreover, Merlin is a likeable character, going through the process maturation in front of the viewers' eyes, sharing mutual experiences of a personal development with them. *Merlin* does not show a well-known, stereotypical figure of a mighty wizard, plotting in seclusion, but an average-looking boy who builds a network of friendships, which eventually enable him to acquire all of his power.

Magic in the BBC TV Series

In comparison to the source text, the motif of magic is rendered differently in the TV series as it is portrayed as a hostile force. Continuing the medieval tradition of a romance, the episodes portray magic as, on the one hand, existing naturally in the world, but, on the other hand, as hostile and dangerous. The main source of terror against any magical practices comes from Uther, a relentless ruler hunting for dwellers of magic, who hates the otherworldly force as unexplainable, threatening his position. The fact that his only beloved son was conceived with the help from a magical trickster is concealed because Uther's attitude towards people who possess unnatural abilities is downward hostile, he keeps condemning magical creatures: "But for the crime of sorcery, there is but one sentence I can pass: death". In the end his foster daughter Morgana despises him for the unreconcilable hatred. The TV series portrays magic as a central force which shapes the world depicted there. It is not only Merlin, but the whole kingdom together with its adjoining lands too, that seem to be soaked with supernatural qualities, which are predominantly dark, threatening. To illustrate, Camelot is constantly haunted by various magical guests, assailed by terrible deceptions, mined with scary traps. Therefore, sorcery resented thereby is constantly fearsome, cruel and almost exclusively dark, shady. The cursed beetles, secret weapons, tainted herbs or adversaries summoned from the graves are displayed to bring revenge, death and destruction for Camelot and its inhabitants.

The televisual rendition definitely and firmly departs from a religious context by removing any motives connected with Christianity,

God or devils. No aspect of Merlin's conception and thus none of his Christian roots are shown in the TV series, which would rather refer to magic as the so-called old religion. There is no room for Christian supernatural interpretation, which seems utterly unnecessary in the televisual Camelot because magic has no need to be rationally explained: it is treated as inherent in the world and must be taken for granted. The viewers can see how magicians, sorceresses, fairies and others exist simultaneously or even preside, and very often appoint, events in the real, earthly world, constantly interfering with its inhabitant: the people of Merlin's kind, realms filled with creatures, monsters and personages who dwell on magic appear, interfere and coexist with humans. The removal of the Christian doctrines from the adaptation concentrates the viewer's attention on the presentation of the black magic portrayed as always malevolent, deceitful and prohibited. The TV production uses them willingly to create the atmosphere of suspense, terror and tension. It may also have its reasoning in the popular and entertaining appeal of the magical practices which attract the contemporary viewers, rather than following the original and the original Christian spirit of the source text. It teems with unexpected, surprising but also tragically anticipated scenes which keep the audience motivated to continue the series.

Arthur and Merlin in the BBC TV series

In contrast to the written source, the producers of the medieval TV drama decided to equal the age of Merlin and Arthur so that they can undergo similar maturation processes. Living in the kingdom of Camelot ruled by a severe king Uther, they are put in completely different circumstances: on the one hand, a servant boy coming from the outside of the community, and on the other, a prince with an established respect, strong and bold. It is only Arthur who already has his privileged position and uses it against Merlin. Exposed to the cruel actions of a stronger, more powerful prince, the young sorcerer has to learn how to endure difficult tasks which test his perseverance. Although Merlin first hates the future king who treats him with superiority and scorn, their constant companionship makes them both attached to each other. Due to the threatening environment surrounding the kingdom, they are forced to ally, which benefits both: Arthur matures, and Merlin develops his skills. Consequently, a genuine friendship is

formed, leading them to the acts of mutual sacrifices, constituting an important stage in the growth of both of them, as well as a crucial element for the prosperous future of Camelot.

Conclusions

Centered on the presentation of Merlin, both texts differ in certain details and manners of presenting his life since they strive to appeal to the cultural milieu of the current public. Arthurian legends have been reinvented, deviating and adapting to different times²², but all in all we can still identify with medieval heroes because “their actions tell us something about ourselves, something we can identify with”²³.

The BBC TV series *Merlin* is created along with the medieval tradition of the history of the famous magician, incorporating a medieval romance *Prose Merlin*. Even though Sherman says that “the program creators aimed at the younger audience (...) [who] may not know the references to literature”²⁴, it can be seen how it appeals both to the old and young viewers. The former derive enjoyment from recognizing the traditional elements, figures from literature or Old English vocabulary, and the latter can learn all that, while appreciating visual effects, the “modern electronic substitutes for knowledge”²⁵. The BBC creators decided to spark interest in the medieval times, promote English historical and cultural heritage, and satisfy those adventurous viewers with magical tricks.

All in all, regardless of the renditions, both “Merlins” present the richness of motives connected with Merlin’s life, as a human being as well as a magician, transfer him throughout the centuries and allow this character to outlive the fifteenth century source. With thousands of years apart, in a written or televisual form, rooted in the Christian supernatural or governed by mysterious magical practices, a master or an apprentice, the book and the TV series highlight the universal values and appeal of this character who changes lives of those around him in his magical way.

²² J. Sherman, *Source, Authority, and Audience in the BBC’s Merlin*, p. 91.

²³ Ibidem, p. 108.

²⁴ Ibidem, p. 82.

²⁵ S. Knight, *Merlin knowledge and power through the ages*, p. 217.

Bibliography

- Bolton W.F., *Alliterative Poetry*, London 1986.
- Cawsey K., *Merlin's Magical Writing: Writing and the Written Word in 'Le Morte Darthur' and the English Prose 'Merlin'*, „*Arthuriana*” 2001, n° 11 (3).
- Conlee J.W., *Prose Merlin*, Kalamazoo 1998.
- Cooper H., *When Romance Comes True*, „*Boundaries in Medieval Romance*” 2008.
- Doody M.A., *The True Story of the Novel*, New Brunswick, NJ 1996.
- Knight S., *Merlin knowledge and power through the ages*, Ithaca, NY 2009.
- Saunders C., *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval English Romances*, Cambridge 2010.
- Sherman J., *Source, Authority, and Audience in the BBC's Merlin*, „*Arthuriana*” 2015, n° 25 (1), pp. 82–100.

Analiza porównawcza postaci czarodzieja Merlina
w średniowiecznym tekście *Prose Merlin* oraz w jego adaptacji
serialowej BBC *Merlin* (2008)

Abstrakt

Legendarna postać króla Artura oraz czarodzieja Merlina są niewyczerpanym źródłem inspiracji, które znajduje swoje odzwierciedlenia we wszelkiego rodzaju formach artystycznych od średniowiecza po współczesność. Piętnastowieczny, anonimowy romans *Prose Merlin*, mający swe źródło we wcześniejszych opowieściach z Brytanii, stał się punktem wyjścia dla nowoczesnej adaptacji w postaci serialu telewizyjnego BBC One *Merlin* (2008), gdzie sylwetka jednego z największych czarodziei w historii literatury, połączenie magii, romansu i słynnych legend Arturiańskich, pokonała barierę czasową, podległa procesom technologicznym i została odtworzona w nowej odsłonie. Porównanie i interpretacja najważniejszych różnic w przedstawieniu czarodzieja Merlina, pozwoliła zaprezentować wieloaspektowość jego działań, postrzeganych i docenianych w zależności od epoki.

Słowa kluczowe: magia, czarodziej Merlin, od średniowiecza do współczesności, legendy Arturiańskie

Abstract

The legendary figure of King Arthur and Merlin the magician have been an endless source of inspiration and fascination for artists since the Middle Ages till the twenty-first century. *Prose Merlin* as the first English translation, is an anonymous medieval work which influenced the production of a modern fantasy drama, a BBC One “Merlin” (2008). One of the most prominent wizards in the literary world, Merlin, has undergone technologization, overcoming the time barrier, and found its outlet in the televisual version. Interpretation and comparison of the book and TV series shall help to present Merlin’s multifacetedness and a variety of roles he undertakes across two different epochs.

Keywords: magic, Merlin the magician, medieval vs contemporary, Arthurian legends

Nota o autorze

Karolina Pasiut – doktorantka na Wydziale Filologicznym Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego w Krakowie. Jej zainteresowania badawcze to literatura, nie tylko angielska, oraz średniowiecze.

Adres e-mail: karolina.pasiut@doctoral.uj.edu.pl