

Merlin as Ubiquitous Experience

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It is one of the mage's many ironies that the man whose surpassing powers conventionally depend upon separateness, and who is most often conceived as an old man supposedly beyond sexual blandishment, should in the end fall victim to the love service that ennobles the Round Table society he helped to build. How did the autoerotic dynamic of Camelot come to be motivated and embodied in Merlin? (Goodrich 94).

Close your eyes. Picture Merlin in your head. In the darkness behind your eyelids the pictures spring out vividly, just as they do for Merlin himself in the first stanzas of Karl O' Hanlon's beautifully evocative poem, *Brocéliande*. In my imagination, Merlin is old; so very old. He has long silvery white hair and a long silvery white beard. He is wearing a robe of midnight blue (possibly embroidered with silver moons and stars, to simultaneously illustrate his mysticism and match his silver beard).

I am not original. The Merlin I see is ubiquitous. He's been that way since at least the 13th century. A quick search on Wikipedia or Google Images will prove this.



13th century illustration of Merlin for *Merlin* by Robert de Boron. (“Merlin” Wikipedia).



The Enchanter Merlin by Howard Pyle from *The Story of King Arthur and His Knights* (1903) (“Merlin”, Wikipedia)

It is difficult, as Peter Goodrich argues in his essay “The Erotic Merlin” to imagine this bearded geriatric as a locus for erotic imaginings.

Yet Merlin's downfall in popular legend, and as it is related in O' Hanlon's verses, is a tale of devastating sexual longing and thwarted desire. The story is as follows: Nimue meets Merlin when she is just sixteen years old. He falls immediately in love with her. He is so stricken by desire for her that he refuses to leave her side. Nimue agrees to accompany Merlin on a journey so that she can learn his magic. Nimue, perhaps, sees Merlin as we do: not as the romantic hero, but as the ancient instructor who can impart his wisdom to her. Realising that Merlin's magic threatens her, Nimue compels a promise from Merlin that he will not use his magic to make her lay with him. But as they travel, Nimue becomes increasingly afraid of this ancient Lothario and his increasingly insistent sexual advances. In some versions of the story, Nimue trades her love for lessons in sorcery.

Merlin knows that Nimue will be the end of him; but he is unable to forsake her. His desire, his love is too deep and too strong for him to break the spell of it. He has already fallen prey to her magic. There are different versions of the end of Merlin. In one, his spells are turned against him and he is imprisoned in a cave. In others, he is transformed into a tree or hawthorn bush, where the unwary wanderer may still hear his voice. In some of the stories, Merlin lives forever in his captivity; but other versions tell of his decent into madness and death. The stories all agree on one thing though: after his imprisonment/transformation/decent into madness and death, Nimue is free from both his relentless pursuit of her and to choose who she wants to marry herself. It's almost a happy ending. There's poetic justice in Merlin's fate. That's what comes from inflicting unwanted advances on girls young enough to be your daughter.



The Beguiling of Merlin by
Edward Burne-Jones
(“Merlin”, Wikipedia)

Here's another version of the tale. In this one, Merlin is young and handsome, much like Edward Burne-Jones's rendering of him (left). It's harder to feel so little pity for the younger, handsomer, eternally-doomed Merlin. How we feel about the ending of the story rests entirely upon our understanding of how Merlin is portrayed; and as Goodrich argues, this “rests upon a broad spectrum of representative texts, especially ones that have established the ‘ground rules’ of the legend by influencing other texts and popular conceptions of the mage.” (Goodrich 94)

O' Hanlon, in *Brocéliande* does not concern himself with Nieme's image; but solely with Merlin's post-imprisonment. O' Hanlon's Merlin feels much like Burne-Jones's Merlin. Young and handsome, he "[h]at[es] it at first his brow, nails/and whiskers grew like bark (ll. 9-10). It is a depressingly familiar story: who does enjoy growing old? Merlin, imprisoned within the bark of his tree, "mobbed" by "pipistrelles" (l. 12), is cognisant only of his own decay. It is a tale of magic, and yet it is morbidly ordinary. Everybody is cognisant of their own decay as they grow older. Merlin is once again ubiquitous in his fate: it is the fate of us all.

The mouldering away of Merlin's bones is not limited to Merlin. O' Hanlon's initial stanzas are also evocative of corrosion: this time of Camelot itself. The images of Merlin's thoughts are bright in the darkness, but soon fade into "pied gloom" as memory itself fades in old age (l. 8). The harvest rots upon the stalk, unharvested. The splendour of the legendary court is reduced to images of decomposing "ratskins" (l. 8). Time passes, Camelot is forgotten in the mists of the passing eons. Entombed within his tree, Merlin and his spiritual home becomes nothing more than legend in the modern imagination, just as he becomes nothing more than tree.

There is a curious ecology in O' Hanlon's poem which charts the evolution of Britain itself through our pagan past to the rise of the Christian religion. One version of Merlin, as Goodrich observes, is as the "wild man", the child of nature (Goodrich 95). His natural urges lead to his downfall, but once within the tree, Merlin evolves adapting to the landscape around him. He is literally cast into the wilderness (or cast *as* the wilderness, being as he comes to form part of it); an image which is pregnant with Christian allegorical imagery. Thus, the legend of Camelot with its pagan origins evolves in itself to adapt to the landscape of Christianity in Britain, which succeeded the ancient age of belief in magic and spirits.

In folklore, *Brocéliande* is the mystical forest where strange magical events occur and mysterious weather threatens. O' Hanlon's *Brocéliande* is much like many landscapes in fiction: it is no place and every place. Any wood, any forest, any tree could be the one described within the poem. Just as Ann Radcliffe could evoke a universally recognisable landscape of the sublime or picturesque in such tomes as *The Mysteries of Udolpho* without even visiting the Languedoc area she describes, O' Hanlon's wood is familiar to all readers even if they don't habitually visit woods. It is a literary landscape; a landscape of the imagination. It is as ubiquitous as the traditional image of Merlin himself.

Similarly, Merlin's experience of recovering from a failed relationship is one which is, again, depressingly familiar to all. There is the initial raw pang of loss which may lead to "Years [...] conjuring with her name," (l. 13). Yet the pain inevitably fades with time. Eventually, the person missed loses

“her reality” (l. 17). Finally comes the realisation that the loss of the loved one is regretted no more. Life continues, even in the guise of a tree “limbs searching the sun” (l. 20) in attempts to grow within the landscape.

O’ Hanlon’ s evocation of landscape, legendary locations and figures, but most of all lost love, is a moving one, mainly because it speaks to us all. The shapes within the poem may hint at magic and mysticism, but they are ones which we are all familiar with. His poem presents a ubiquitous, and consequently heartfelt, experience.

Biographical Information

Val Derbyshire is a WRoCAH supported AHRC Competition student researching the works of Charlotte Turner Smith (1749–1806) in the School of English, University of Sheffield.

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