

The Idea of Merlin: Artistic Depictions of Merlin and their Inspirations

Marina Painter
Fine Arts
Misericordia University
301 Lake Street
Dallas, Pennsylvania 18612 USA

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Elisa Korb

Abstract

Artistic depictions of the figure Merlin are numerous and varied, appearing as anything from an old wizard, a romantic youth, to a wild man. The surprising variety of representations appears, at first, to be convoluted and illogical, but there is a rationale and history to each depiction. Surprisingly, though, there has been very little analysis done of the Merlin figure in art history. Thus, this paper's goal is to fill this void by answering the following questions: how can these drastically different artistic depictions all be called by the one name Merlin? What led to their creation? And what idea unites them? To do so, this paper uses interdisciplinary sources to see what fostered the creation of each Merlin type, looking primarily to the influences of historical events and times, the literary instances of Merlin which inspired the artworks, as well as theological studies of Merlin. Specifically, sources employed will be twelfth-century writings, modern critical studies of Merlin, histories of symbolism, fiction of Merlin, and Arthurian legend scholarship. These sources are used in conjunction with representative artistic depictions of Merlin, from medieval times to the twenty-first century. Ultimately, it is this paper's goal to understand the different types of "Merlins," why this variety of depictions has evolved, and what idea unites them. Overall, this paper argues that the Merlin types are evolutions of the core idea of a pagan character with ultimate wisdom, who has been understood and represented through dualism. Each evolution of this idea, manifesting as a type, while a product of their time, is the result of old attempts to Christianize the Merlin character. Hence, when one sees Merlin, in any form, one is seeing a pagan character who has, throughout history, been morphed to fit a Christian dualistic structure. The resulting Merlin character, to this day, still influences artists and writers.

Keywords: Art, Merlin, Wisdom

1. Introduction

A typical depiction of Merlin tends to be of an old, cloaked wizard with a long white beard. But is it also not uncommon to see Merlin as a young man, a wild man, or even as a child prophet. The surprising variety of representations appears, at first, to be convoluted and illogical, but there is a rationale and history to each depiction. To understand this logic, one must look to the influences of history, the literary instances of Merlin which inspired the artworks, as well as theological studies of Merlin. Doing so will reveal that, throughout these depictions, Merlin contains a central idea of a figure who can hold seemingly impossible dualities together, revealing the complex power of wisdom he possesses. However, this dualistic framing of Merlin's power is the result of attempts to fit a pagan character into Christian understanding, which could not absorb the original Celtic character into its system without framing his power in dualism. To understand this, we must examine the variety of Merlin representations which can be placed into the following types: the wild man, the wizard, the religious figure, and the young romantic. These are the primary roles which Merlin has played, and continues to play, in art and literature.

2. The Wild Man, Myrddin Emrys

The wild man version of Merlin, or Myrddin Emrys, is a combination of Welsh, Breton, and Celtic sources.¹ These stories of Myrddin are much older than Arthurian legend and tell of a wild, insane man whom someone tries to capture.² Geoffrey of Monmouth, in his *Historia Regum Britanniae* (c. 1136), took figures from these Ancient Celtic tales and combined them with characteristics of the Briton king Ambrosius to create what we now know as Merlin.³ For example, Geoffrey recounts a mad bard fleeing to the woods where “he became a Man of the Woods, as if dedicated to the woods,” living there and “lurking like a wild thing.”⁴ Besides influencing Geoffrey, these stories are significant because they contain the idea of taming wildness, which is central to the wild Merlin. Specifically, because Myrddin is an embodiment of nature itself, by catching the wild Merlin, the captor tames nature and gains its power.⁵ This entrapment of the wild is especially important when one considers that Merlin is traditionally a member of a pagan religion, but then later converts to Christianity. In other words, Merlin’s religious conversion is paralleling Myrddin’s capture.

An example of Myrddin’s capture is a stained glass window in the Scottish church Stobo Kirk (c. 12th century).⁶ This window shows Myrddin’s conversion to Christianity by St. Kentigern.⁷ Here his appearance is Christ-like, the intent most likely to show his conversion as personal salvation. The backdrop also contains a lone tree, which is arguably a reference to his Druidic past. Overall, this work emphasizes the “cleansing” of Myrddin’s wildness and paganism, succeeding in “civilizing” where most attempted captors fail. This window is one of the rare Medieval visual depictions of Myrddin. There are, however, a few modern ones such as the illustration by Alan Lee (c. 1947).⁸ Here, Myrddin is shown as if he is part of the surrounding forest. This emphasis on tree imagery is again a reference to Merlin’s Druid past. He is also shown wearing clothes made of feathers, referencing Breton stories describing Myrddin as a kind of bird-man.⁹ Thus, both Merlin’s wildness and pagan Druidic beliefs are in opposition to his eventual conversion and the attempts of others to capture him.

This duality of the wild, natural, and pagan against caging and Christian conversion make up the central elements of Myrddin’s depiction in art. Given this, Myrddin represents a conflict of ideas that occurred in early Christian Europe. Specifically, the conversion of the Druid Myrddin into the Christian Merlin represents a case of Christian appropriation of pagan symbols and attempts at suppressing opposing religions. Thus, Myrddin depictions are inseparable from the opposition between naturalistic Druid symbolism and attempts to capture it. Myrddin is the oldest Merlin type by far and the closest to his Celtic origins. Yet, even in this old version, one still sees the attempts to morph the pagan Merlin character into a Christian framework. Eventually, due to Geoffrey, this representation of Myrddin evolved into the familiar wizard, a further alteration of the Celtic original.

3. The Wizard Scholar

The aged wizard is by far the most common depiction of Merlin. It shows an adaptation of Myrddin into the trope of the scholarly advisor in Arthurian legend. More than a wizard trope, Merlin is alleged to be an accomplished magician – an adept mage or alchemist. How this would have appeared to Medieval thinkers is significant. As historian Gareth Griffith put it, “as a term, ‘magic’ is fluid and frequently defies attempts to map modern categories of natural and supernatural onto medieval thinking.”¹⁰ In other words, Merlin’s magic to Medieval thinkers would have been seen as legitimate scholarship, so long as it did not derive from a demonic source.¹¹ Thus, Merlin’s immense power meant he was a scholar with great wisdom, an attribute traditionally represented in visual art through age. Art showing Merlin’s role as a sagacious advisor and conjuror will, therefore, more often show him as a very old man.

A significant reason for the legitimacy of Merlin’s magic in the Medieval era was the timing of Geoffrey’s revival of him.¹² According to historian Anne Lawrence-Mathers, the growing interest in scientific discoveries at the time meant that there was a receptive audience for Merlin’s magic.¹³ Combine this with Geoffrey publishing “before Church law and theology had been systematized and updated in ways very hostile to magic,” and we have a respected magician.¹⁴ This depiction of Merlin as a scholar was popularized primarily as a result of Geoffrey’s *Historia*. But it should also be noted that Geoffrey published his work as a *real* history, supposedly revealing “a long-lost historical figure.”¹⁵ Due to the political need in the twelfth-century for a new history to provide national solidarity in a time of political upheaval, Geoffrey’s history was taken as fact.¹⁶ Thus, Merlin was considered a *real person* then and for the next four hundred years.¹⁷ Indeed, this use of the Merlin character as a real figure represents a further example of the usage of a pagan character for Christian medieval needs.

The importance of this for visual art analysis is that if Merlin was considered a real person with respected magical

powers at the time, it would be logical to have his appearance be that of an old scholar. If Merlin was a real person, it would make no sense to depict him as a supernatural non-human like Myrddin. To do so would only undermine respect for his magical powers, his role as a prophet, and his purpose as a historical symbol of British identity. In other words, he would have been too pagan-looking to be used as a legitimate figure in the time. Thus, as with the wild man type of Merlin, we have a direct historical and literary reason for this depiction of Merlin. Indeed, a direct reason which shows further appropriation and adaptation of the original Celtic character.

One example of this type of Merlin is a 19th century engraving by Gustave Doré.¹⁸ Here, he appears as an ancient man with a long beard, wearing simple robes. He is surrounded by books and scrolls, with his hand on his forehead in thought, all symbols and gestures attesting to his appearance as a traditional western mage. Doré's engraving also builds upon iconography of Chronos or Father Time, as in a pencil drawing by Edward Burne-Jones, also 19th century.¹⁹ Here the resemblance of Chronos to Doré's Merlin is obvious: both possess the wisdom and experience that is only gained with time, both appear as extremely aged men, both seem fatigued, and both have lengthy beards. Merlin is also a mage with seemingly limitless power, his abilities akin to Chronos.²⁰ It is logical, then, to depict Merlin and Chronos similarly because they possess nearly identical qualities of great power and wisdom. Thus, the most familiar art of Merlin draws from him as wise magician, his role as a real historical figure, as well as iconography of the Greco-Roman god of time. Furthermore, fitting Merlin's appearance within the existing iconography of Chronos further framed the old Merlin character in a more "respectable" and accepted framework than his pagan origins.

4. The Religious Roles of Merlin: Prophet, Antichrist, and Mentor

Possessing a history even more complex than his role as Myrddin or the wizard is Merlin's role as a religious figure. Artwork of this religious role begins with the story of his conception: his mother was raped by an incubus (or in some cases the devil).²¹ While artwork depicting this origin is scarce (for one, see *Council of Demons, from 'l'Histoire de Merlin'*), the mere fact that Merlin was half-demon impacted both artwork of Merlin and his role as a historical and religious figure.²² Merlin's demonic origin is essential if for no other reason than it is the source of his magic. The most important aspect of his magic during Medieval times was of prophecy.²³

Merlin as prophet occurs during his childhood when he was referred to as "the boy prophet" (see *The Battle of the Red and White Dragons*).²⁴ This 15th century work shows Merlin revealing to King Vortigern visions of wars between the Britons and the Saxons, symbolized here by the red and white dragons, respectively.²⁵ This famous scene is unique in Merlin's story because it is the first instance of his divination, as well as being one of the few instances where Merlin is a child. It also set the stage for Merlin as a prophet. For example, in the *Historia*, Geoffrey describes him recounting the "future of Britain from the fifth century down to the end of time."²⁶ After the publishing of the *Historia*, these prophecies became immensely popular and respected both for their similarity to the Bible and for giving "the people of Britain a central position in world affairs."²⁷ Ultimately, Merlin's prophecies became so known that they spread across Europe, cementing him as a political and religious figure in European history through Medieval and Renaissance times.²⁸ This religious Merlin and his supposedly true prophecies had, at this point, been nearly completely "cleansed" and Christianized of his pagan origins.

There was, however, a problem with Merlin's premonitions, "could the son of a demon have access to a genuine spirit of prophecy?"²⁹ Although his mother was a nun violated by the devil, supposedly it was the father's intention to create an Antichrist: the false prophet role forced on virtually every child in Medieval romance born of the supernatural.³⁰ Numerous justifications were made by theologians as to why Merlin's prophecies were valid, and most settled on Merlin being able to balance demonic and Godly power.³¹ Consequently, Merlin had become a powerful, yet morally dualistic, historical and religious figure. Furthermore, this moral dualism enabled Merlin to fulfill his role as Arthur's mentor in legend, since this dualism allowed him to unite religious forces in a time of political and religious confusion. Thus, in Arthurian legend, Merlin's dualistic powers made him able to link the pagan with the Christian, thus establishing Arthur as the true unifying king. One should note again that this understanding of Merlin's powers through dualism enabled Christian ideology to absorb the Merlin character into itself. Thus, this ability of Merlin to unite both the pagan and Christian to legitimize Arthur's mythical kingship was, again, an appropriation and adaptation of the pagan to fit Christian needs.

This role of Merlin as Arthur's mentor is, perhaps unsurprisingly, a favorite among artists, of which John Callcott Horsley's 19th century work is an example.³² Regardless of whether Arthur actually existed, like Merlin, the *idea* of him made him a source of identity and solidarity for Britain in a time of political confusion. But without Merlin's powers, Arthur would not have been able to be king. Hence once again, the figure of Merlin is powerful, complex, and historically significant; particularly for British identity and the history of Christian appropriation.

5. The Young and Romantic Merlin

Far more common than his religious role are visual depictions of Merlin as a romantic youth. Some show him before he goes to Arthur's court, such as him overseeing the construction of Stonehenge, or visiting his mother (see *Building of Stonehenge* and *Merlin and his mother*).³³ However, the majority of art showing a youthful Merlin are from the 19th century, whose artists based their depictions on romances of the 13th century.³⁴ Indeed, such artists were more interested in him as a character in Medieval chivalric fiction, than in his prophetic roles or Celtic origins. While the story of the chivalric Merlin has been adapted numerous times, such as by Tennyson, the primary texts Romantic artists drew from were Medieval, particularly what we now call *The Vulgate Cycle*.³⁵ In the *Vulgate*, Merlin is entranced by Nimuë, a sorceress, and gives her his power knowing she will betray him.³⁶ Thus, in the chivalric fiction that inspired the Romantics, Merlin was a tragic romantic hero and doomed lover.³⁷ The story ends with Nimuë tricking Merlin and trapping him for eternity in a hawthorn, a tree, or under a rock.

With this plot as the basis for almost all romantic depictions of Merlin, the central idea in all art of this type is that even the most powerful magic cannot resist love.³⁸ This idea is unique to the romantic Merlin type, and it is easy to see why such a story would be compelling for artists of the Romantic period who had little interest in a prophetic or historical Merlin.

Aubrey Beardsley's 19th century illustration exemplifies the romantic Merlin.³⁹ Notably, Beardsley traps Merlin under a rock rather than in a tree or hawthorn, using Sir Thomas Mallory's version of the story that removes both Druid connotations as well as the more blatant Christian imagery.⁴⁰ Edward Burne-Jones also famously epitomizes the romantic Merlin in *The Beguiling of Merlin* (also 19th century), this time showing him in a flowering hawthorn.⁴¹ Here Merlin's eyes are locked with Nimuë's as she drains his power, leaving him to spend eternity in the enchanted forest. It is important to note that Merlin knew Nimuë would trick him and steal his power. This raises the question of whether this event is the inevitable outcome of a doomed love. Thus, the romantic Merlin, as with the other types, contains duality: fate and choice; love and power. Burne-Jones' work reflects this in how each figure's eyes reveal no hostility, and the way Nimuë seems to hesitantly stare as she leaves with his power. Thus, the young and romantic Merlin draws both from the Medieval chivalric story, as well as referencing Merlin's ability to maintain dualism. As with the other types, this dualistic understanding of Merlin's power is still a continuation of the Christianizing of the pagan character into such a dualistic structure.

6. The Modern Merlin: Interpreting the Types

Overall, 20th and 21st century depictions use these types, however, they often prefer to use the types in combination. The most common composite type is between the wizard and the romantic. The wild man is the rarest to find in modern depictions, thus showing that the older Celtic history of Merlin has been overshadowed by his later roles. One also rarely sees an Antichrist Merlin, hence the main interpretation of Merlin is as a respected mage.

A modern cinematic example is the BBC series *Merlin*.⁴² In this series, Merlin is a young man. And while he is a romantic type throughout, he often uses his magic to transform himself into the old wizard type.⁴³ Furthermore, the Merlin in this series is also a prophet of the coming of Arthur as the true king to save Albion. This references Merlin as both a prophet of Britain's future and as Arthur's mentor. The series also makes reference to Merlin's Druidic background by having Merlin be the link between the Arthur's family and the Druids, once again uniting opposing forces in tenuous political times. Notably, in an apparent acknowledgment of Merlin's Druidic pagan importance, the series represents the Druids as a persecuted and oppressed people; evidently referencing the oppression of pagan culture and Christian attempts at conversion of both pagan people and their character, Merlin.

If Merlin had not been considered a real historical figure in the 12th century, such a character would not exist in this series. And without the Romantic's fondness for chivalric fiction in their art and literature, the story of Merlin in this series would never have been romantic. Thus, the BBC series is an example of how modern representations of Merlin are aware of the different Merlin types and the history and literature surrounding them, hence they prefer a composite of such types, as well as reference Merlin's pagan origins.

7. The Idea of Merlin: Wisdom and Dualism

One question remains, what binds all of these Merlin types together? In short, what defines Merlin as a character is the idea of wisdom with the power to do what is supposedly impossible: to hold dualities together and maintain them within himself. For example, Myrddin has a direct connection to nature, thus possessing an essential wisdom so powerful that kings try to capture him. In the end, though, they all fail because Myrddin is connected to a power they cannot claim or even understand. One can find similar impossible wisdom in each type, such as the ability to balance choice and fate or to be both Godly and demonic. Each of these powers resides in Merlin because he possesses true wisdom, so much that he can manifest it in the physical world and control it. Thus, dualism manifests as a perception of him, an attempt to understand the extent of his wisdom and power. However, it should not be misunderstood that dualism was inherent to the old Celtic Merlin before Christian attempts to appropriate the character. Indeed, dualism manifests as a way to understand the wisdom and power Merlin had in a pagan ideology, which could not fit in to a Christian structure. Thus, he was adapted to fit a dualistic narrative. No Merlin representation lacks this quality, no matter how different they may appear, as they have all been translated through the same lens of the appropriator.

8. Conclusion

Thus, each depiction of Merlin represents a core idea of someone so wise that their mind is limitless, producing true magic. All art of Merlin is an expression of that idea, with each type manifesting it differently according to their historical influences. Such as with the religious type, who without the influence of political tensions, a need for British identity, and the growing power of Catholicism, could never have existed. Merlin types are, therefore, evolutions of the core idea of a character with ultimate wisdom, and each evolution is a product of the ideas and events of their time. Yet one should not forget that this character who, to this day, still influences artists and writers, was appropriated and altered through a Christian framework. Thus, any Merlin type one sees in art is one which has been altered throughout history to fit the conquering belief system's narrative. Such alterations resulted in the recurring idea of dualism in Merlin as an attempt to absorb this pagan character's power into the Christian ideological structure. Merlin is, then, in all his complex and remarkable variety, a relic of Christian conversion and appropriation.

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11. Notes

1. Gareth Griffith, "Merlin," in *Studies in Medieval Romance*, vol. 16, *Heroes and Anti-Heroes in Medieval Romance*, ed. Neil Cartlidge (n.p.: D. S. Brewer, 2012), 101, accessed April 5, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7722/j.ctt81fr9>; Mary-Ann Constantine, "Neither Flesh Nor Fowl: Merlin as Bird-man in Breton Folk Tradition," in *Arthurian Literature*, vol. 21, *Celtic Arthurian Material*, ed. Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan, Keith Busby, and Roger Dalrymple (n.p.: D. S. Brewer, 2004), 96, accessed April 5, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7722/j.ctt820dt>.

2. Constantine, 96.

3. Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. Lewis Thorpe (London: Penguin Books, 1966), 187, 169; Constantine, 102.

4. Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Vita Merlini, Life of Merlin*, ed. and trans. Basil Clarke (Cardiff: Univ. Wales Press, 1973). 53, 57.

5. Constantine, 96.

6. See "Stobo Kirk," Scotland's Churches Trust, accessed April 20, 2015, <http://www.scotlandschurchestrust.org.uk/church/stobo-kirk>; "Stobo Kirk," The Ram's Horn Studio, accessed May 8, 2015, http://www.ramshornstudio.com/stobo_kirk.htm. These sources were used only for their information regarding the church itself and as an image source.

7. See "Stobo Kirk," The Ram's Horn Studio; Reginald B. Hale, *The Beloved Saint Mungo, Founder of Glasgow* (Canada: University of Ottawa Press, 1989), Google eBook. This first source is dubious, so I only analyzed the work and used the website as an image source. However, this is not an issue since the stained glass work primarily speaks for itself, especially considering its included subtitle of "Kentigern Myrddin," the positions of the figures, and their clothing. Also note that "Mungo" was another name for Kentigern and that Hale's book was used here to confirm that Saint Kentigern/Mungo actually existed.

8. See "Other Works," Alan Lee Painting, accessed April 20, 2015, <http://alan-lee.narod.ru/Other.htm>. This source was used for the image and the information on White's book only.

9. Constantine, 104.

10. Griffith, 104.

11. Ibid.

12. Anne Lawrence-Mathers, *The True History of Merlin the Magician* (n.p.: Yale University Press, 2012), 118.

13. Ibid., 118-119.

14. Ibid., 119.

15. Ibid., 17, 22.

16. Ibid., 23, 25, 29.

17. Ibid., 17.

18. See Gustave Dore, *The Enchanter Merlin, from 'Orlando Furioso' by Ludovico Ariosto (1474-1533)*, published by Hachette in 1888 (engraving) (b/w photo), 1888, Bibliotheque des Arts Decoratifs, Paris, accessed April 20, 2015, Bridgeman Images, image no. CHT164261.

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19. See Sir Edward Burne-Jones, *Saturn, from 'The Planets' a series of window designs (charcoal & chalk on paper)*, C19th, Torre Abbey, Devon, accessed April 20, 2015, Bridgeman Images, image no. TOR89381.
 20. Griffith, 105.
 21. Geoffrey *The History*, 168; Neil Cartlidge, "Sons of Devils," in *Studies in Medieval Romance*, vol. 16, *Heroes and Anti-Heroes in Medieval Romance*, ed. Neil Cartlidge (n.p.: D. S. Brewer, 2012), 225, accessed April 5, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7722/j.ctt81fr9>.
 22. See French School, *Ms Fr. 95 fol.113v Council of Demons, from 'l'Histoire de Merlin', c.1280-90 (vellum)*, C13th, Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris, accessed April 20, 2015, Bridgeman Images, image no. XTD69818.
 23. Cartlidge, 225.
 24. Lawrence-Mathers, 83; See English School, *Ms.6, f.43v The Battle of the Red and White Dragons with the King and Merlin Looking on, illustration from St Alban's Chronicle (vellum)*, C15th, Lambeth Palace Library, London, accessed April 20, 2015, Bridgeman Images, image no. LAM140291.
 25. Lawrence-Mathers, 73; Geoffrey, 169.
 26. Geoffrey *The History*, 171; Lawrence-Mathers, 19.
 27. Lawrence-Mathers, 19-20, 172.
 28. *Ibid.*, 185, 19, 191.
 29. *Ibid.*, 141.
 30. Cartlidge, 222, 225.
 31. Griffith, 110, 107-108.
 32. See John Callcott Horsley, *The Boyhood of Arthur, 1851*, 1851, Private Collection, accessed April 20, 2015, Bridgeman Images, image no. WGH84026.
 33. See *Building of Stonehenge*, n.d., British Library, London, accessed April 20, 2015, Bridgeman Images, image no. BL748771; See *Cott. Jul. A V f.53 Merlin and his mother, 14th century*, C14th, British Library, London, accessed April 20, 2015, Bridgeman Images, image no. XTD70069. Notice that Merlin's mother in the second illustration is clearly depicted as a nun.
 34. Lawrence-Mathers, 197.
 35. *Ibid.*; Vulgate version of Arthurian romances. Archive.org
 36. Lawrence-Mathers, 202-203.
 37. *Ibid.*, 192, 208. Note: Nimue is also often called Vivienne.
 38. *Ibid.*, 208.
 39. See Aubrey Beardsley, *Beardsley's Illustrations for Le Morte Darthur*, arranged by Edmund V. Gillon Jr. (New York: Dover Publications, 1972), 31.
 40. Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur* (New York: The Modern Library, 1994), 103; Lawrence-Mathers, 209.
 41. See Sir Edward Burne-Jones, *The Beguiling of Merlin, 1872-77 (oil on canvas)*, 1872-77, Lady Lever Art Gallery, Liverpool, accessed Bridgeman Images, image no. WGL11883.
 42. See "Merlin," BBC One, accessed April 20, 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00mjlxv>.
 43. See general images of Merlin BBC show; See "Merlin: Series 4, The Wicked Day," BBC One, accessed April 20, 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00qskzz/p00qskvw>.