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Rationalizing the Irrational: Merlin and His Prophecies in the Modern Historical Novel

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Abstract

Merlin's magical powers are usually rationalized in modern historical fiction. His visions of the future, however, remain prophetic, even when they are aided by his own inspired guesswork and intervention in events. That Merlin's prophecies should so stubbornly resist the conventions of the genre suggests they have become a core element in Arthurian tradition.

Rationalizing the Irrational: Merlin and His Prophecies in the Modern Historical Novel

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Merlin's magical powers are usually rationalized in modern historical fiction. His visions of the future, however, remain prophetic, even when they are aided by heaven-inspired guesswork and interpretations in context. That Merlin's prophecies should so stubbornly resist the conventions of the genre suggests they have become a core element in Arthurian tradition. (R. U. T.)

The modern fascination with Merlin as a worker of magic sometimes leads us to forget that he has talents other than weaving spells.¹ To a large extent this is a consequence of the current popularity of fantasy as a literary genre, and it is reinforced by the ease with which special effects can be created in films, to say nothing of cartoons. Yet in medieval literature Merlin, despite his awesome reputation as an enchanter, spends most of his time dispensing wise advice, even if he does show a fondness for doing so in unexpected guises (see, e.g., Malory I: 38). In the prose romances, moreover, he also demonstrates considerable skill in military tactics, and it is by following his counsel that the young Arthur and his allies defeat the rebellious kings and other foes (see, e.g., Malory I: 77).

The authors of the modern historical novel, therefore, even though they are discouraged by the conventions of the genre from including supernatural elements, can still draw upon a well-established tradition of a figure widely respected for his wisdom. This wisdom, moreover, owes more to shrewdness and common sense than to supernatural powers, at least as far as modern readers can discern. In medieval literature, Arthur and his knights are preoccupied with honor rather than with military tactics, as indeed were their aristocratic audience. Superior enemy numbers merely offer an opportunity to exhibit heroic valor, a quality that was both the strength and weakness of European chivalry during the Middle Ages. On the one hand, it enabled them to endure desperate hardships and triumph over less dedicated foes; on the other, it rendered them vulnerable to a crafty enemy like the





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