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MERLIN'S ROLE AS NATIONALIST IN MONMOUTH AND MALORY

by

ASHLEY JOHNSON

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in English  
Department of Literature and Languages

David Strong, Ph.D., Committee Chair  
College of Arts and Sciences

The University of Texas at Tyler  
May 2018

The University of Texas at Tyler  
Tyler, Texas

This is to certify that the Master's Thesis of

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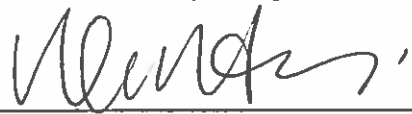
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Abstract

MERLIN'S ROLE AS NATIONALIST IN MONMOUTH AND MALORY

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May 2018

In Geoffrey of Monmouth and Sir Thomas Malory's medieval Arthurian texts, *History of the Kings of Britain* and *Le Morte D'Arthur*, Merlin is presented as a primary character with nuanced character traits and unique abilities. Merlin stands out because his often-analyzed secondary roles as magician, prophet, and counsellor culminate in a larger, primary role. Merlin is a nationalist. As such, he shows how legend and historical narrative can shape the history of a country. Through the texts, Merlin disseminates a distinct English identity based upon a shared lineage of valorous deeds and triumphant emancipations from foreign invaders achieved through unified action. Merlin's depiction as a historical figure in the texts positions him to offer the British hope for the preservation of English identity and self-governance in the future.

## Introduction: Merlin as Nationalist

“The intimate relation between the “objective” and the “subjective” or “ideal” and “actual” aspects of the problem of nationhood refuses the divorcing of such binaries as well as their ranking. To stress how medieval England was imagined in chronicles, for example, is to assert the historical agency of fantasy” (XVIII).

Kathy Lavezzo, *Imagining a Medieval English Nation*

“Nation building began without planning or design, and usually proceeded that way; it was not a continuous but an intermittent and sporadic process; and it still goes on” (42).

Boyd C. Shafer, “The Early Development of Nationality”

The character of Merlin is a key figure in establishing a sense of identity in medieval England. Because Merlin is crucial in the building of English nationhood, he is depicted as a primary character with nuanced character traits and unique abilities in Geoffrey of Monmouth and Sir Thomas Malory’s *History of the Kings of Britain* and *Le Morte D’Arthur*. An analysis of early medieval Arthurian texts reveals that Merlin is more than a white-bearded mystic in a pointy hat. He is the pivotal character in ushering in the Golden Age of Britain. Instead of placing him on a pedestal as the archetypal wizard, Merlin stands out because his often-analyzed secondary roles as wild-man, counsellor, prophet, and teacher culminate in a larger, primary role. Merlin is a nationalist. The Merlin character of medieval Arthurian tales, presented by Geoffrey and Malory from the twelfth to the fifteenth century, served as a perpetuator of national beliefs. Depicted as a nationalist, Merlin helped unite Great Britain and pushed the community to order under Arthur’s reign. Through the texts, Merlin disseminates a distinct English identity based upon a shared lineage of valorous deeds and triumphant emancipations from foreign invaders achieved through unified action. Merlin’s depiction as a historical figure in the texts positions him

to offer the British hope for the preservation of English identity and self-governance. His character shows how legend and historical narrative can shape the history of a country.

Medieval texts, whether written or repeated orally, often disseminated an idea of the community and the value of it in order to tighten bonds between already established communities and to offer hope to people that often felt detached. They spread the notion that unified communities were essential to survival and identity. These texts were promoting an early kind of nationalism that would bind the people within an English identity that valued unity, hope, and victory over invaders. A natural human tendency is to crave relationship and find value in oneself and one's people, so "sentiments akin to nationalism are possibly as old and as prevalent as man and society. Each people, from primitive tribe to modern nation, seems to regard itself as the center of the world, as somehow distinct, as 'real men,' and each seems to have evidenced some kind of group feeling" (Shafer 41). The medieval notion of nationalism is distinct because there was not yet a cemented, centralized nation to promote. Rather, smaller villages of people would unite under a common set of beliefs that perpetuated the notion that their system of living was superior to others. While a feeling of British identity through discourse began to develop, "what constituted 'England' during the Middle Ages was hardly fixed. The Middle Ages did not see the birth of a unified English community, but instead witnessed the construction of multiple, contingent, and conflicting 'Englands,' each geared toward the respective needs of different social groups" (Lavezzo xix). Because these sects were located within the same area and would have had many similar experiences, particularly related to faith and foreign invasion, the identities they developed were alike. These smaller sects eventually combined to create a larger identity of nationhood and the people

embraced it, disseminating it through stories. The Arthurian legend is an example of the perpetuation of medieval nationalism; it provides a distinct and authentic view of nationalism through its depiction of the bravery, unity, and victories of the English people. The Arthurian legend draws from historical developments to depict a community that aspires to move beyond feudalism. In tenth and eleventh century feudal communities, citizens depended on one another for survival and “there is evidence that medieval man was faintly stirred by the same sort of national impulses as we are. . .by the thirteenth century the fully developed medieval state had reached a momentary equilibrium, and if it was still ‘feudal,’ it was also, in its own way, a national state” (Galbraith 45). Feudal bonds through commitment to a lord were “the moving force of medieval society and determined political development” (Galbraith 47). As such, “Feudalism prepared the way for nationalism, alike by promoting the unity of those smaller aggregations which facilitated the growth of the national state and by bringing together the future nations under a common tie of obedience to an ultimate lord (Tout 62). Thus, a study of nationalism in Arthuriana increases our understanding of the belief that the practice of feudalism was limiting because it shows a society that found value and security when they were working together as one people under one king who embodied their collective beliefs.

In medieval England, nationalistic ideas similar to modern nationalism were rare because the political climate was characterized by the belief that all of mankind was one under a shared religion (Kohn 8). This belief informed the Arthurian legend because Arthuriana suggests that England is destined to be one society under a king who has been ordained by God. England was meant to be a unified people under one leader rather than sections of feudal lords. Arthurian legend, then, turns that political notion on its head and



uses it to distribute a nationalist worldview and set the foundation for building English nationhood. Because this was rare, any depiction of nationalism would have stood out. Hence, “pertinent and interesting utterances” of nationalism in early medieval texts “may have been preserved for the very reason that they expressed attitudes unusual for that time” (8). According to Hans Kohn, Benedict Anderson, and other like-minded scholars, nationalism akin to current definitions of nationalism were almost impossible in the Middle Ages because “the decentralization and differentiation within those bodies which were later to form the future nations in no way allowed the growth of that political and emotional integration which is the basis of modern nationalism” (7). Even though medieval nationalism did not look like modern nationalism, that does not mean it did not occur. National chronicles such as the *Brut* prove that there was indeed a shared past claimed by the nation, so it is possible to envision an essentially English identity among communities in medieval Europe.

Arthuriana proves that Britons acknowledged that they were a union of citizens with a shared history and wanted to preserve that history. Arthurian texts like Geoffrey and Malory’s chronicles offer tangible evidence of England’s past of noble kings, emancipation from foreign invaders, and loyal citizens. To assert that medieval English society did not identify with their fellow Britons or feel a kind of patriotism or pride for their country is folly. Johan Huizinga perceptively notes that:

The opinion is widespread among historians and political scientists that both patriotism and national consciousness, not to mention present-day nationalism, are cultural phenomena of a recent date. The chief basis for the opinion is the facts that the words and the formulated concepts are

themselves quite recent. The word “patriotism” first cropped up in the eighteenth century and “nationalism” only in the nineteenth. . .the conclusion that the phenomena of patriotism and nationalism are recent because the words and concepts are recent is easily drawn, but misleading. It stems from the age-old human habit of attributing existence to things only once they have names. . .medieval society made good use of the concepts *regnum* and *civitas* [“kingdom” and “union of citizens,” that is, commonwealth – Ed.] to express things political. . . On close observation the equivalents of patriotism and nationalism prove to have been present in earlier periods [than the eighteenth century], and more significantly, the only change in the two emotions in the course of time has actually been that they have become somewhat more delineated. For the rest, they have remained what they always were: primitive instincts in human society. (14-15)

Early nationalism was a crucial part of medieval political society. The concept may have been smaller and more localized than it was in the sixteenth century or even today, but it existed as society became unified through sects or location or under various lords. Thus, we can ascertain the Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History* and Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur* could be examples of the few texts that have survived because they articulated nationalistic themes deemed unusual for the period. These texts prove that an early national consciousness was present in medieval English society, and they use Merlin to spread ideas of English identity and unify the people.

In this paper, nationalism will be defined as promoting the interests of a specific nation with the goal of achieving and maintaining a unified self-governance and perpetuating the shared identity of that nation. Nations are simply “a group of people who possess a distinctive common culture—language, literature, history, and a common hope to live together in the future” (Schafer 41). Pertinent in this definition is the assertion that a nation possesses a shared culture and a “common hope to live together in the future.” This is essentially what constitutes ideas of nationalism. According to Vivian Galbraith:

A nation may be defined as any considerable group of people who believe they are one; and their nationalism as the state of mind which sustains this belief. Broadly speaking, the sentiment of nationality is much the same in quality at all times and in all places. Its minimum content is love, or at least awareness, of one’s country, and pride in its past achievement, real or fictitious; and it springs from attachment to the known and familiar, stimulated by the perception of difference—difference of habits and customs, often too of speech, from those of neighboring peoples. (45)

As a nationalist, Merlin’s actions as a prophet, teacher, and councilman point to the creation of a unified Britain. Merlin is unswervingly loyal to the leaders and citizens of the country. He wants to see the nation prosperous and self-governing because he believes that they are worthy of that position. As a keeper of national history, he knows that the country has been unified and wants to preserve that belief because he cares about the people. He is a staunch supporter of the nation and desires to keep the triumphs of Britain alive so that the citizens will seek to maintain unification and resist invaders. Merlin’s nationalist role first finds expression in Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain* (hereafter *History*)

and Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*. Drawing from early Welsh poems, Geoffrey and Malory develop Merlin from a legendary character into a historical figure with the emphasis on his role in the installation of Arthur as king of the Golden Age of Britain. They present a Merlin who is dedicated to the nation at a time when the general tenor of the political climate included disunity and foreign rule.

In their efforts to encourage a sense of commonality, Merlin is used as an avenue for unity. The need for a common, preserved identity is embodied in the notion that the needs of the community should triumph over the needs of the individual, and this notion is personified in Merlin. Merlin is the voice of wisdom and hope for the Britons. His sole purpose is to ensure that the needs of the nation are met. The nation's history and beliefs must be preserved so that future generations can rely on that identity. Otherwise, the nation will become detached or succumb to foreign domination. In Geoffrey's text, the created Merlin character could offer information to a nation struggling under political unrest that had been divided by conflict and felt disparate. Anne Lawrence-Mathers says that Geoffrey's *History* filled an "urgent gap whilst Merlin's prophecies offered information" (25) for the future in a time when the history of Britain had been lost and the land was enduring political tension. During this period of foreign domination, achievements of the community are emphasized and any unity among the Britons would inspire a feeling of common identity amid difficulties. Often, writers would disseminate the hope that the English would triumph over foreign authorities to regain their dominion. Geoffrey's history follows this pattern as he attempts to legitimize the foreign Norman rule by connecting the current leader to early leaders, suggesting that the English will advance triumphantly. Merlin is at the center of this legitimizing because he serves as record keeper of that

national consciousness. Like Geoffrey, Malory delineates the deeds of King Arthur and his knights to show that the country proved itself triumphant in the face of invaders. Merlin is a key component in Malory's text because he serves as Uther Pendragon's, and then Arthur Pendragon's key council. As a councilman, he ensures that the actions taken by the kings will further conquests of Britain. Because Merlin is characterized as a record keeper who offers stories of the country's accomplishments, through the perpetuation of these national ideas, a kind of "Englishness" develops that characterizes the nation. In *England and its Rulers*, M.T. Clanchy asserts that the "sense of Englishness, transmitted like the English language as a mother tongue despite its disappearance in official circles, persisted as a powerful undercurrent throughout the twelfth century to emerge as a political force in the thirteenth" (3). Merlin epitomized Englishness through his continual assertion that England was essentially grander, older, and better than its invaders. Englishness as a political force continued well into the fifteenth century, and Malory employs it in his *Le Morte D'Arthur*. The idea of a shared Englishness is preserved through Merlin's characterization as proponent of national beliefs and history in all the texts as he maintains his role as bard and record keeper.

As a nationalist, Merlin serves primarily as a political figure who is noteworthy because no matter what roles Geoffrey and Malory confine him within, whether that be madman, enigmatical magician, or king's councilman, he holds unswervingly to his end goal of national unity. Although Geoffrey and Malory highlight distinct aspects of Merlin's personality, both authors present him as a record keeper whose mission is to preserve national beliefs and practices. His role as record keeper establishes him within the discourse as a force of national identity. As a primary character, Merlin is a driving force

behind the events that take place in these Arthurian stories and is a driving force behind the unification of the kingdom because he cares about the nation. Merlin's insistence to support the country's unification attests to his commitment to society. His obligation to the people whom Arthur rules illustrates his belief in the necessity of community above individual concerns. As Merlin fulfills his role to place Arthur on the throne in Geoffrey and Malory's texts, he can be characterized as both marginalized and a proponent of the community. He is both within and outside of society at once. This is a significant facet of the Merlin character because it attests to his commitment to the Britons. His desire to see the unification of the country supersedes his desire to remain outside of the social sphere. Merlin's commitment to England also supersedes his innate tendencies towards madness and wildness that would marginalize him from the community. He places the need for nationwide unity above his individual needs and natural predisposition. To accomplish unification, Merlin becomes characterized as a kingmaker, embracing the job of ensuring that Arthur fulfills his destiny to become king.

Merlin's desire to unify the nation is significant because, originally as a figment of legend, he helps create and document history, and greatly impacts the future of Britain, granting hope and unity. The character of Merlin is an example of how the fantastic or fabricated can serve as an agent of history. His influence and importance can be seen in the constant development of his character throughout the Middle Ages. Merlin endures transitions from text to text over centuries. Medieval authors add to and take away from his character to fit the society they are writing within. Even though his characterization changes, however, he maintains his role as nationalist and kingmaker. Merlin's part in the facilitation of King Arthur's rule as the ideal king of England establishes him firmly in the

historical legends uniting the country. While Merlin does offer the mystical characteristics we are familiar with from renditions of early Arthurian stories, in the Middle Ages, Merlin is less mystical and more practical, dedicated to ensuring that the nation survives as a unified entity.

To show how the characters of Merlin presented in Geoffrey and Monmouth's texts are reconciled into one nationalist Merlin character, I will examine what roles Merlin is given and explain how those roles lead to an evaluation of Merlin as a nationalist. In these depictions, both authors are offering what they believe will be most readily accepted by the community of readers to make Merlin credible so that readers will agree that the nation should be unified. Geoffrey offers a character who is a prophet and war-councilman imbued with magic, while Malory offers a character who is a seer, teacher, and councilman knowledgeable of science and religion. Although dissonant, these choices of depiction align to present Merlin as a nationalist. Merlin's actions, including his war council, love advice, and installation of Arthur as king, are for the glory of the nation and for the benefit of the community. To trace this transformation of Merlin from his wild origins to wise councilman and political figure, we must first begin with an examination of the Merlin character in the early Welsh narratives from which Geoffrey draws to cultivate the Merlin character that is eventually further developed by Malory.

## Chapter One: Merlin Before Monmouth

A Merlin character first appears in the sixth century in the Welsh tradition. Geoffrey bases his traditional Merlin character upon that Welsh Merlin character, who is actually an amalgamation of two characters from early Welsh poems: men named Lailoken and Myrddin combined with the Ambrosius Aurelianus figure from Nennius. According to Alfred Jarman, the familiar character of Merlin “descended from the medieval wild man of the woods tradition through the stories (now fragmentary) of Lailoken in Strathclyde, who became the forest prophet Myrddin in Welsh poetry” (qtd in Goodrich xiii). The Lailoken character becomes the forerunner for the Welsh Myrddin, who is a chief who goes “mad at the Battle of Arfderydd in 573 and [flees] to the Caledonian Forest in Scotland. . . [and] like many a medieval recluse, he was consulted about future events” (xiii). In addition to the Lailoken poems, early notes of Myrddin are found in the Welsh poems in *The Black Book of Carmarthen*, as well as in *Y Gododdin* and *The Book of Taliesin*. In these poems, the Merlin character is depicted as a possibly historical prophetic bard and a wild-man. Merlin’s roles in these poems are the starting point for an analysis of Merlin as a nationalist in Geoffrey and Malory’s texts. He reconciles his marginalization as a wild-man with his communal role as a recorder of history to remind the nation of its past battles and foretold unification.

The poems of Lailoken and Myrddin give evidence that the tales of King Arthur and his men, specifically Merlin, were embedded in the Welsh tradition long before the twelfth century. The Welsh poems offer “a glimpse of a society in which the realities of war were ever present. The most persistent images are those of blood, death, and grief” (Bollard “Arthur” 11). The society that the Merlin characters are situated within would



need to be reminded that there is hope for the future of their community if they rely on each other. These poems, then, “whether evoking figures of history or of legend, served in some measure to help both poet and audience to cope with those same fierce images as they occurred and reoccurred in their own war-torn lives” (11). Societies require some unifying force to survive, and Merlin serves as a unifier through his role as bard in the Welsh poems. His recitation of community triumphs would remind the people that there is hope for future union and victory. Merlin’s early characterization as nationalistic in these Welsh poems is significant because it paves the way for the birth of Geoffrey’s traditional character of Merlin even without Arthur. Karen Jankulak notes, “Myrddin was clearly a figure of importance before Geoffrey’s time. The very early Welsh poem, *Y Gododdin*, which contains what might be the earliest reference to Arthur, also contains what might or might not be the earliest reference to a figure named Myrddin” (88). Thus, while there are some Welsh and Druidic Celtic legends about Arthur, it is important to note that before Geoffrey, the Merlin character of early Welsh poems is almost wholly detached from Arthurian legend. These early depictions, however, are significant in this discussion because it is from these characters that Geoffrey created the Merlin of the medieval Arthurian cycle. Even though they are separate from the Arthurian tradition, the underlying foundation of the character supports a trend of nationalism, and as such, easily dovetails into his place at Arthur’s side.

Unlike the mostly level-headed character offered in medieval Arthurian tales, these Welsh men are wild, and lead lives of exile in the forest, often depicted as madmen muttering prophecies. In these texts, the Merlin character does not desire to involve himself in social activities—in fact, he cannot be involved due to madness—but he remains

committed to the preservation of a national identity through his characterization as a bard. Simply because he is not participating within communal activities does not mean that he does not believe in the value of community. Even though he is estranged from the community he still embodies communal beliefs because his role as prophetic bard obligates him to offer predictions and a record of the community's trials and triumphs. The Welsh characters' roles serve to support a later characterization of Merlin as a nationalist proponent of maintaining and recording national beliefs. He is a unique character because he reconciles being a madman with being a recorder of events. Rather than being a senseless bard, he merges the roles so that he can support the community. For example, in *Meldred and Lailoken*, Lailoken is presented as an oddity who speaks "marvels" (Thundy 9). King Meldred only summons Lailoken to his court for entertainment; he "wishes to hear some new marvels from Lailoken" (9). However, Lailoken uses his madness to prophesy and to reveal that the queen has committed adultery. This act serves to keep the nation safe from ridicule. Even in his lunacy, Lailoken recognizes that the king represents the unity of the nation. He recognizes the need to tell the king what has happened so that the crime may be dealt with and the king's reputation kept untarnished. Lailoken's ability to ascertain what should be done for the good of society supports the nationalistic notion that one should promote the interests of a specific nation with the goal of achieving and maintaining a unified self-governance rather than to protect oneself or one individual. To achieve his goal of unity and maintaining the reputation of the nation, Lailoken places his own comforts below the needs of the court. Lailoken asserts, "If I speak in plain language, my words will cause you pain and me mortal grief," but acknowledges that the king is "endowed with wisdom and [is] a good judge of character" (9). Here, Lailoken explicitly

says that the king, who is essentially the embodiment of the nation, is good and wise. In this explication, Lailoken asserts that the king should have final say in the matter and places his own grief below the needs of the king, and thus, the society. Even in these early models, then, the Merlin character embodies the medieval notion that the good of the community should be upheld above the good of the individual.

As noted earlier, within both the early Welsh and later medieval traditions, Merlin is a marginalized character. In the Welsh, Merlin always operates outside the popular social cycle, due to madness and mystical prophecy. Crucial to his characterization in these poems, however, Merlin's madness does not interfere with his nationalist tendencies. Although Merlin is portrayed as mad, he works to preserve and further national unity. Even though he is not present in the community, he still values it. For example, in the poem *Kentigern and Lailoken*, he embodies communal beliefs of religion, recording valorous deeds, and respect for the dead even though he is estranged from the community for his transgressions and has been sent to roam the wilderness, overcome with guilt:

Stopping in his tracks, the wild man said, 'I am a Christian, although I am not worthy of such a great name. I endure great torment in the wilderness for my sins. I am fated to live among the creatures of the wild since I am unworthy to perform my penance among men. It is I who caused the death of all those slain in that battle on the plain between Lidel and Carwannock; it is a battle well remembered by the people of this country. In the midst of that fray, the very sky began to gape open above my head, and I heard what seemed to be a great cracking sound, a voice in the sky saying to me "Lailoken, Lailoken, since you alone are guilty of the blood of all your slain

comrades, you alone shall suffer for their sins. You shall be handed over to the minions of Satan, and until the day of your death your companions shall be the beasts of the forest.’ (Gaylon and Thundy 5)

In this passage, he is characterized as both Christian (within the community) and wild man (outside of the community). Even in his madness, he recognizes that he is outside of the social order, and he offers the prophetic vision that contributed to his insanity, suggesting that he is sane enough to know how he has failed, and willing to offer a prophecy that might benefit the community in the future. The madness here is significant for two reasons: 1) it separates him from society and 2) it suggests that he has failed at preserving the victorious ideals of British national identity but maintains his role as prophet to warn the community. Intrinsically, he is designed to fight for unity, but he has failed in this instance and is remorseful. This guilt causes him to rave wildly in a “fit of frenzy” so that the monks of the forest wish to help him regain sanity; however, in his madness he begins to operate outside of their help, and he cannot be saved. His madness correlates to marginalization, and this holds true in Geoffrey and Malory. However, Merlin’s inability to overcome his lunacy in some instances in the Welsh poems is different from his characterization in the medieval legends. In Geoffrey and Malory’s texts, Merlin’s madness is less wild, and he almost always resists the madness in order to preserve national identity. Only at the end of Malory (and his medieval development) when he has successfully fulfilled his job as kingmaker and nationalist does Merlin’s madness finally lead him away from the center of the community. This creates an aura of otherness surrounding the Merlin character, which can account in part to the mystery and respect accorded to him. In the Geoffrey and Malory texts, his otherness is elemental as one of his character traits because it creates an avenue

for him to serve as counsellor to the British rulers. Even though he is a bit mad, he is respected as eccentrically odd and prophetic, which lends him credibility as an oddity or a marvel. Furthermore, his medieval ability to overcome his intrinsic madness suggests that although he does not naturally seek to be involved in the social activities, he pushes aside that inclination because he is dedicated to the unification of the nation, even if that means staying within the community.

Thus, in both the Welsh and later medieval traditions, we find that the Merlin character is labeled as a madman because of his tendency to live outside of society and his inclination to prophesy. He is also characterized as a person who desires to preserve national beliefs and practices. Though these roles seem dissonant, they work hand-in-hand. His unique characterization as a mad prophet positions him significantly as a credible source of information for the people, and as such, he becomes a perpetuator of national beliefs. His position as a wild prophet allows him to serve as a sort of master of the political or social environment of the society he is in. According to Peter Goodrich:

[Merlin's] chief means for [mastery of social environments] are knowledge and its tool, language, which shapes the phenomenal world to his will. This ability to order phenomena grows out of the lesser ability to foretell it, and to make this possible a fascinating development in the wizard's character occurs. Merlin's oracular inspiration and prophetic gift originate in the wild-man figure as a product of neurosis. Since the condition of the wild-man is "separation from wanted or due status" both socially and mentally, it is manifested schizophrenically (O'Rian, p. 184). But this figure is thereby initiated into the 'collective unconscious' or universal memory of

man; in literature the insight he gains evolves into the achievement of reintegrated personality, who thus becomes the servant of the divine will and the master of events rather than remaining at their mercy. This movement from neurosis to integration characterizes not just the wild-man figure, but the whole literary development of Merlin as he becomes the master wizard of English fiction. (xvi)

Goodrich's analysis of Merlin suggests that the wild Merlin character of Welsh poems is able to move between lunacy and sanity when he feels that the community would benefit from his prophecies. The Merlin character can prove his commitment to the nation because he is marginalized as mad but integrated in the community when he is needed. His marginalization is seen by the community as an oddity that can be summoned for entertainment or revelation. Thus, when he is called upon to prophesy as a madman, he can perpetuate national beliefs through recounting past events or foretelling future victories. These dual roles help to cement his characterization as nationalistic advocate for the unity of the country.

An example of the Merlin character's use of this dual role is in his characterization as a recorder of battles who desires to honor those fallen in the fight for the nation. In the above text from *Kentigern and Lailoken* the character makes a specific point to refer by name to the battle, reminding the citizens of "all those slain in that battle on the plain between Lidel and Carwannock" and notes that "it is a battle well remembered by the people of this country" (Gaylon and Thundy 5). Merlin's reference to the battle supports a reading of him as a nationalist because he is perpetuating the glories of the country. The battle serves as a unifier, and Merlin will be known as the character who wrote it down.

Merlin, then, will forever be associated with the battle, embedding him in the national consciousness. Merlin's assertion that the battle is well-known implies that Britons are familiar with the tale. Because they are familiar with the battle, they have a shared history that begins to create an intrinsic Englishness. That English identity serves as a unifying agent to lead the Britons to assume that the country has been triumphant in the past and can be in the future. This trait carries over in Geoffrey and Malory; in their texts, Merlin desires to support the unification of Britain and makes it his mission to do so through the installation of Arthur as king. Merlin's dedication to the preservation of national beliefs and practices is a significant trait because his insistence to support the country's unification attests to his commitment to society and supports his characterization as nationalist.

### **Analysis of the Lailoken Character**

As already discussed, Lailoken is a prophet found in the poems *Meldred and Lailoken* and *Kentigern and Lailoken*. These poems explain two different accepted traditions about the life and death of a historical prophet, and in the poems, Lailoken serves as the scribe of the tale as well as the central character. All of the action in the poem surrounds the deeds of Lailoken. Lailoken's position as the primary character in the poems affirms a reading of Geoffrey and Malory's Merlin as a significant primary character in the Arthurian tradition. If Geoffrey relied on the Welsh tradition to create Merlin, and Malory relied on Geoffrey, then it is right to characterize Merlin as a primary character rather than a secondary helpmate. Additionally, in the Lailoken poems, the man can be characterized as a prophet and riddle-maker as well as a wild madman. He follows the figure of the exiled wild man in a forest who eventually commits suicide which was common in Welsh stories (Goodrich 4). He serves as forerunner for Geoffrey's traditional Merlin character and fits

within the characterization of nationalist because he attempts to preserve national identity through recording events, and Geoffrey takes this idea to fully develop Merlin into a writer of history.

First, we can see that Lailoken is characterized as a prophetic madman in *Meldred and Lailoken*. These roles support his primary role as a unifier of the nation because he uses his label to establish his credibility as a reliable councilman. As a councilman, he can guide the king to keep the nation's reputation untarnished and maintain unity. In the poem, Lailoken is captured, bound, and held by King Meldred until he agrees to offer a prophecy for entertainment. Lailoken refuses and does not speak or eat for three days following his capture (Thundy 9). His silence is finally broken with laughter when the queen enters the court with leaves in her hair. Meldred asks about the laughter and promises to set the prophet free if he explains. Lailoken obliges by offering two riddles with dual meanings. In these riddles he offers information about the future of Britain and asserts that the queen has committed adultery (10). His prophecy serves to warn the king so that the nation is not caught off guard, suggesting that he desires for the nation to maintain its rule. When the riddles cannot be deciphered, Lailoken explains in plain language and the court believes his proclamation as "all the people [stand] in awe" (10). Lailoken, then, is established as a credible prophet. His madness has brought him to the court and is perpetuated by his maniacal laughter and enigmatic speech, but his truthful prophecy and record of events gains him credibility with the community.

Next, Lailoken exhibits tendencies of a nationalist when he uses his secondary roles as wild-man and prophet to predict his death and predict the nation's future. In the scene following his proclamation of the queen's adultery, Lailoken retreats to the forest,



preserving the tradition of the marginalized wild-man. Before his retreat however, he predicts his “triple death” and notes that after his death, “‘When the divided rivers meet at my grave, the architect of the united British nation will conquer the adulteress.’ By these words, he indicated that the British would soon be disunited and defeated and that later their division would be healed” (10). His prediction establishes his credibility. It characterizes Lailoken as proponent for unification of the country and establishes him as prophetic seer of the future unification just a Geoffrey’s Merlin. Although scholars note that Lailoken is talking about a future ruler other than Arthur, the bones of the character as a predictor of the future of Britain is found in the Arthurian Merlin character (10). Therefore, Lailoken is important to the creation of Geoffrey’s Merlin because he is a forerunner of political prophecy. Finally, to solidify the character as credible, the poem ends with a note that Lailoken’s prophecy came to pass; years after the encounter with Meldred, Lailoken is confronted by a group of shepherds, who attack him and he is killed as he predicted to King Meldred (10).

Additionally, Geoffrey borrows elements from another Lailoken poem, *Kentigern and Lailoken*, to build his Merlin. In the poem, Lailoken enters frenzied, deranged, and naked in the forest where “Blessed Kentigern,” a hermit, is living with his monks. Lailoken wants Kentigern to deliver the sacrament at his death and offers three different predictions of that demise; he asserts that in the same day, he will be “felled by stones and clubs,” “pierced by a sharp wooden spear,” and “swallowed by the waves” (Galyon and Thundy 6-7). The predictions are significant because they characterize the man as a credible prophet who speaks in riddles. Overall, in this account, we find Lailoken as a largely marginalized character, who is also aware of the society’s values, particularly related to

Christianity. He is significant in this conversation because even though he is pushed outside of the community, he upholds the communal values of religion. In the poem, Lailoken “opportuned the saint in a loud voice to help him become worthy to receive the Body and Blood of Christ before he departed from this world” (7). He recognizes that the sacrament and faith are important to the identity of the community, so even in his wildness, he seeks to uphold the religious customs of society. He moves between madness and integration because he must in order to sustain societal customs. When he does receive the sacrament and is accepted by the community of monks, he offers a prophecy about the future of Britain, saying, “Today my temporal life has reached its end. As you have already heard it from me, the most eminent of the British kings, the saintliest of the bishops, and the most noble of the lords will follow me within this year” (8). In his prediction, he maintains his role as proponent of the community because he is warning the monks that Britain’s rulers will die soon. However, to preserve his characterization as mad, the monks do not heed Lailoken’s warnings. Instead, the bishop responds, “Brother, do you yet persist in your madness? Are you still being irreverent?” (8). The bishop’s response suggests that the community has not yet reconciled Lailoken’s madness with his truthful prophecy. However, Lailoken fulfilled his role as truth speaking prophet and supports the community in his role as prophet, whether the people believe at first or not. The monks eventually recognize the importance and sincerity of Lailoken’s prophecy about the nation after his death, when he dies the triple death he had predicted. The poet says, “When Blessed Kentigern and his priests discovered that these things had happened to that deranged man just as he had foretold, they believed. They feared as well that the rest that he had predicted would also undoubtedly come to pass” (8). Lailoken’s roles as mad and prophet are

reconciled when the monks believe his predictions about the future of the nation. Thus, his roles both within and without the community help him fulfill the primary role of nationalist. Lailoken's commitment to uphold shared values attests to an early kind of nationalism in which the nationalist desires to perpetuate the belief system of the community and keep it safe from future harm. Like Geoffrey's Merlin, Lailoken tries to resist his wild tendencies to uphold the community's traditions.

Together, the *Lailoken* poems present the image of a man who is not all there but is committed to society. While he has the ability to prophecy, this seems to be correlated to his madness; he is either mad because he can prophesy or prophesies because he is mad, and this characteristic separates him from the community. Lailoken's predictions are described as "quite obscure" (6), and King Meldred complains that "whatever you do is surrounded by mystery" (9). These notations are important because they align with depictions of Merlin in the Arthurian cycle, who often speaks in riddles and is sometimes mischievous and mysterious in his dealings, particularly in Geoffrey's tales. In these poems, a character develops who is marginalized, but a part of community; mad, but a speaker of truth; and, enigmatical, but reliable. These character traits are significant because they are the traits that Geoffrey transfers to his Merlin character. Within these roles, a Merlin character can develop who is a credible proponent for the continued unification of the people.

### **Analysis of the Myrddin Character**

In addition to Lailoken, Geoffrey relies on the Welsh poems about a character named Myrddin to write the *History* and to create Merlin. Thus, he is a significant component of Geoffrey's Merlin. Before the *Lailoken* poems made their way into Wales

from the North, a Myrddin character already existed, but not much is known of him. However, “when the tale of Lailoken migrated to Wales during the seventh or eighth century it became attached to this shadowy figure and appropriated his name, while at the same time retaining its northern geographical setting” (Jarman 29). This appropriation would have been common because due to the many disparate narratives, the Welsh tradition often sought to link and combine originally unrelated tales (Lloyd-Morgan 6). A reference to this appropriated Myrddin can be found in what is thought to be the earliest story of Arthur, *Y Gododdin*. Here, there is only a brief notation about Myrddin, but it “indicates an early belief in the existence of a poet Myrddin connected with the tradition of the Old North” (Bollard “Myrddin” 14). In *Y Gododdin* and other Welsh poems, Myrddin is a central character, as well as a scribe like Lailoken. An example of his role as scribe is found in *The Conversation of Myrddin and Taliesin*, the first poem in *The Black Book of Carmarthen*. Here, Myrddin discusses the events of the Battle of Arfderydd with the poet Taliesin. This poem is significant because we learn that Merlin’s role in this text is as a historical recorder. As such, he fulfills the characterization of preserver of national identity; in his delineation of the battles, he is perpetuating the glory of the nation and its warriors. Furthermore, though there are not many prophecies offered, the poem ends with Myrddin’s assertion that his prophecy will be true, lending him credibility (Bollard 19). He says, “Since it is I, Myrddin, in the style of Taliesin, / my prophecy will be just” (“The Conversation” 37-38). Myrddin’s reliance on the community to accept his prophecies as reliable suggests that he is an important part of the community, and attests to his desire to preserve communal values. His credibility as a prophet suggests that it does not matter that he is mad because he still speaks truth. Because he is a truth speaker, he is valuable to the

community because his prophecies point towards the unification of the country. If the people can rely on his prophecies as true, then they have hope for the future. Hope serves as a facet of shared national identity. The people can hope together for the unity of the nation to be maintained. Thus in this short poem, the characterization of Myrddin as keeper and fortune teller of national history is preserved. This characterization is important because it is found in almost all Merlin stories within the Arthurian cycle. Merlin's role as keeper of national history must be significant because it is not lost in translation from the Welsh tradition to the legends found in the twelfth to fifteenth centuries.

### **Conclusion**

Through these early depictions, the characteristics that are most significant are that of prophetic madness and historical recorder. These are valuable to the development of the later Merlin character because they epitomize the tension between Merlin as both outside society and uniting society. His madness separates him, but his prophecy leads to unification. Through the endurance of these characteristics, we can conclude that the Merlin of the Arthurian cycle is based upon the wild prophet of Welsh legends. After an examination of the characters within these poems, it is clear Geoffrey borrows many themes for his Merlin tales, including madness, laughter, prophecy, politics, and the recording of history. Geoffrey also borrows and rewrites specific scenes from the Welsh tales, specifically the account of the triple death and the queen's adultery in the Lailoken poems. These repeated stories cemented Merlin in the nation's consciousness so that he was both a legendary character and historical recorder at once. We know that Merlin was cemented into Britain's national consciousness because his name "could be invoked to give authority to a prophetic expression of hope for eventual freedom from increasing English

domination” (Bollard 14). Merlin’s place in the national consciousness of Britain is a significant facet relative to his primary role as nationalist. He perpetuates ideas of hope and valor to build an English identity that the community will desire to maintain. These ideas, particularly that of hope for unity become prominent themes in Geoffrey’s texts and are later transposed into Malory’s tale.

## Chapter Two: Merlin in Geoffrey of Monmouth

To follow Merlin's transformation into primarily a nationalist character, we move from the Welsh tradition to Geoffrey's medieval *History of the Kings of Britain*, in which Merlin's secondary roles as prophet and mystical councilman support his primary role as propagator of Britain. Geoffrey offered his *History* in 1136 as a valid historical document delineating the nation's glorious past. At the heart of crafting the *History* was patriotism. The Britons were scattered and divided, so Geoffrey wanted to remind them of their united past and push them on to regain unity in the future (Thorpe 9-10). Geoffrey's text then, becomes politically useful in situating Britain as central in the medieval world. The *History* is valuable to medieval politics because it "demonstrates precedents for rulers of Britain to claim authority in and allegiance from continental nations, as Arthur does when Roman procurator Lucius demands tribute from him" (Lupack 24). Geoffrey's text itself is nationalistic because it calls for the propagation of English identity and maintains that the country should be in authority, while asserting that the country's identity as supreme is unsurpassed. For example, he begins the *History* with a description of the country, saying, "Britain, the best of islands. . . provides in unfailling plenty everything that is suited to the use of human beings" (Geoffrey 53). Geoffrey continues his praise of the land for a page and half before moving on to describe national battles and victories. He situates the *History* as a glorious chronicle of the goodness of the English land and its people. It makes sense, then, that Geoffrey would offer a central character that desired to preserve a national identity. Hence, the characterization of Merlin as primarily a nationalist becomes evident in the *History*. In the text, Geoffrey adopted a variety of sources to form a history that could credibly remind readers that Britain had and should continue to have a glorious, almost

predestined political reign. One maneuver he employs to achieve this is the inclusion of Merlin. According to Karen Moranski, “There is no question that Geoffrey deserves the lion’s share of the credit for popularizing Merlin as a seer and for promoting the development of political prophecy” (59). In Geoffrey’s text, the Merlin character is included in just a few short chapters but is cemented in the English consciousness forever as a proponent of Englishness. By connecting Merlin to history, Geoffrey shaped the way that legends or historical figures could perpetuate a notion and unify a nation.

Although Geoffrey may not draw heavily from earlier depictions, what he does rely upon from past incarnations of Merlin prove to be the defining traits of the character. His use of the Welsh Merlin unites the Welsh and English traditions, supporting the characterization of Merlin as supporter of one national identity under the title of Great Britain. Other character traits that are appropriated are as a record keeper, history maker, prophet, and councilman. A trait that Geoffrey drops from the Welsh Merlin character is madness. In these medieval texts, Merlin is not raving. He is simply an oddity because he is a mystical prophet. Geoffrey uses the appropriated traits to develop Merlin so that he could fulfill his goals of creating a history for the country. Furthermore, Geoffrey’s decision to combine two well-known characters (Myrddin and Ambrosius Aurelianus) allowed him to offer Merlin as a trustworthy prophet, steeped in years of mystic and mysterious tradition. Together, Merlin’s appropriated character traits and already established credibility with the nation, allowed Geoffrey to offer a new Merlin. This Merlin is a historical person whose primary role is to unify the nation through Arthur.

The establishment of Merlin as a legitimate historical figure emerges because Geoffrey wrote him as historical and the public believed him. Because there were so few



written accounts of history, the Britons willingly accepted the fantastical characters and events offered by Geoffrey. Geoffrey asserts that he is offering translations to lend authenticity to his works. He includes prefaces praising significant political figures such as Robert, the Earl of Gloucester, and the Archdeacon of Oxford to create legitimacy to the partially fabricated chronicle. For example, the “Prophecies of Merlin” included in the *Historia* “were originally conceived as a separate volume; and they have a short preface of their own, in which Geoffrey praises Alexander, Bishop of Lincoln, the churchman who had asked him to make this part of his translation” (Thorpe 11). Furthermore, in Geoffrey’s “Prophecies of Merlin” section of the *History*, the Merlin character offers prophecies that were actually supposedly translated from the wild Welsh Myrddin character (Barron 12). Geoffrey, then, relies on the prevalence of Myrddin to add legitimacy to his new Merlin. Thanks to these maneuvers, Geoffrey’s *History*, especially Merlin’s prophecies, was widely accepted as fact, even by those such as King Henry I who helped quickly publicize the new history of Britain. Geoffrey’s timeline was so readily accepted because it was extremely comprehensive, and it depicted a dynasty that gave the people of Britain pride, hope, and promise of a bright future of rule and unity. The history seemed legitimate and was appealing because it suggested that “those who held the isle of Britain were heirs to a dynastic succession which linked them with the heroic civilization of Troy and bridged the centuries between, passing from conqueror to conqueror whatever their race or origin” (Barron 11). In the *History*, Geoffrey adeptly links the Britons to noble historical figures and courageous (though sometimes fictional) kings of old. In this, Geoffrey begins a distinctive Arthurian tradition, and places Merlin centrally within it, ensuring that he would be included and referred to in later British histories and chronicles. This tradition is rooted

“in chronicle format embodying a dynastic theme with every appearance of historical conviction” (11). Merlin becomes a reliable character to the people of Britain, and his role serves as historically significant because he is placed within the telling of a glorious, hopeful history. Amid political tension, Geoffrey reminds the nation that their foundation is based upon the valorous deeds of kings like Vortigern, Aurelius, Uther Pendragon, and the legendary Arthur. Although the accounts are fictional, at the center of the *History*, Monmouth “presents the prophecies of Merlin that point obscurely to a restoration of British rule; centuries later, these prophecies would help launch the Tudor dynasty” (Loomis 60). Geoffrey’s *History* was readily received because it offered the nation hope for a bright future, evoking a love for the country and its past, and Merlin was situated at the center of that nationalistic legend.

Merlin contributes to English identity because he is presented as a tangible facet of history rather than a legendary character. As such, he is someone that the Britons could emulate. If the famed Merlin of history was a nationalist, then the country could follow suit. In this role, Merlin is the driving force behind the perpetuation of the nation’s unity and paves the way for Arthur to achieve kingship. Without Merlin, Arthur would not have been. Nationhood would not have been achieved without Merlin because the great era of British rule might not have been. Like previous depictions, Merlin is characterized as prophet and record keeper or writer of history, and this characterization is a constant throughout medieval development, even into Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur*. Because of this characterization, Merlin takes on the role of historical storyteller, and is a central figure (just like Lailoken and Myrddin) in legendary works that deal with the early history of the nation (medieval Wales and Britain) and their political struggles against invaders. Merlin’s

role as a central figure in these works set him up as a nationalist because the narratives are essentially about how the Britons remain a unified nation against invaders. Geoffrey, therefore, chose to further Merlin's characterization as keeper of history and chose to make Merlin a unifying agent. To achieve this unity, Geoffrey believed it would be best to appeal to a national heritage of glorious unity—fabricated or not. As “Tatlock pointed out, in Geoffrey's time 'the lack of accounts of British history was notorious’” (Tatlock 430; qtd in Thorpe 10). Geoffrey drew on the need for a comprehensive history to offer his narrative. And in this narrative, he offers a “historical” Merlin, re-imagined from the original Welsh legends. Key to chronicling the development of Merlin's character is the fact that he is supposed to have transitioned from fabrication to real person. Even though Geoffrey essentially created a new Merlin character, he was presented as fact to the public and is situated in history as a single, real person. This is significant because in Geoffrey's text, Merlin becomes a unique character, set apart from the knights and ladies of the Arthurian tradition. He is a central character that assists Vortigern in maintaining his kingship, offers a prophecy about the future triumph of the nation in the form of the warring dragons, and helps Uther Pendragon seduce Igera, which leads to the conception of Arthur. He is pivotal, then, because he orchestrates the battles, kings, love affairs, and national landmarks that will culminate in the installation of Arthur on the throne and unify the nation.

Furthermore, the Merlin of Geoffrey's *History* serves as a prophet and writer of history just as his Welsh predecessor. A characteristic that never changes through the evolution of Merlin from early Welsh character to Medieval legend is the character's role as prophet and advocate for anti-invader (specifically anti-Saxon) policies. This even carries into Malory's text as Merlin helps the various kings, including Uther and Arthur, to

devise battle plans that successfully quell attacks from other lands. Merlin's characterization as a prophet and record keeper, then, is intrinsic to his larger role as nationalist. As the sole keeper of British history and seer of the future of the nation, Merlin is the perfect preserver of history and perpetuator of future unity. Moreover, both Myrddin and Merlin are storytellers and central figures in legendary works that deal with the early history of their nation (medieval Wales and Britain) and their political struggles against invaders (Jarman 20). Geoffrey uses the popularity of the original Welsh seer to create a prophet that is now reliable, while remaining a little mystical, so that he can maintain his characterization as a marginalized character. It is important for Merlin to maintain a sense of otherness to achieve his goal of unity because, as noted earlier, his position outside of society allows him to come into the community and offer prophecies that will be accepted because they are marvels.

Geoffrey's Merlin had a specific, patriotic purpose. He could use this character to offer information to a nation struggling under political unrest. England had been divided by conflict and felt disparate, so Geoffrey uses Merlin as an avenue for unity. He is a character worthy of attention because he offers prophecies that point to a unified future in which Britain ascends as the greatest nation. Lawrence-Mathers asserts that without Geoffrey's *History*, the character of Merlin would not have been as convincing, and that "this mediaeval Merlin was not a figure of legend but an apparently documented, long-lost maker of British history" (15). Geoffrey's use of Merlin was an intentional, significant maneuver. He uses a character already established as historical and credible to perpetuate a shared national identity. We know that Merlin was established as credible because the public had already been introduced to him via Geoffrey's "Prophecies of Merlin,; a

document that was published on its own in 1130 before the *History* was published in 1136 (Lupack 26). These prophecies, dedicated to Merlin's foretelling about the glorious future of Britain, are supported as historical through Geoffrey's decision to address the writing to Alexander, Bishop of Lincoln. In a preface to the "Prophecies," Geoffrey says, "My admiration for your noble behavior leaves me no other choice but to translate the 'Prophecies of Merlin' from the British tongue into Latin, before I have finished the history which I had already begun of the deeds of the kings of the Britons" (170). Significantly, Geoffrey places Merlin's prophecies as worthy of the highest respect and notes that they are even more important than the chronicles of the kings' deeds. Geoffrey adds credibility to the *History* by re-publishing the "Prophecies" within the *History*.

Geoffrey's specific emphasis upon Merlin's prophecies were crucial in establishing him as a reliable, historical figure. Geoffrey implies that Merlin should be regarded as more important than even Arthur, who will come to unite the kingdom once again. This is noteworthy because it places Merlin at the center of the unification of Britain. He is the avenue through which Arthur is established as king and he is the overseer of Arthur's fate. Merlin's role as the conduit for Arthur's reign helps characterize Merlin as a nationalist. He desires to preserve the national beliefs through Arthur and unite the nation through the future king. While Arthur is remembered as the reason for the unification of the nation, it is really Merlin at the center—the medieval wizard behind the curtain pulling the strings to bring England to ascension.

### **Analysis of the Merlin Character in Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain***

Merlin's specific roles in Geoffrey's *History* are as a prophet, councilman, and magician. Through these depictions, Geoffrey establishes Merlin as a trustworthy historical

figure and firmly embeds him in the history of Britain. In the text, Merlin enters the narrative as an advocate for perpetuating British rule. He helps kings such as Vortigern, Aurelius, Uther, and Arthur, among others, maintain rule through his prophecies and otherworldly abilities. These depictions also uphold Merlin as a nationalistic supporter of the unification of the country. His roles assist in helping him achieve his desire to bring Britain to the forefront and achieve freedom for the nation from outside invaders.

The first role Merlin takes in Geoffrey's *History* is as a prophet. As such, he has the nation's ear. He can speak with the kings and their people and offer predictions about the future of the nation, as well as warn them of coming discord. This secondary role as prophet supports his primary role as nationalist because it gives Merlin credibility with the people and is an avenue for perpetuating national beliefs. Merlin's prophecies were significant influencers on the public in their acceptance of him. Lawrence-Mathers says,

Book Seven of the *History* tells of how Merlin, having had the hidden dragons released to fight one another in the pit excavated in front of the king, went into a prophetic trance and recounted the whole future of Britain from the fifth century down to the end of time. It was the success of the great series of prophecies that established Merlin immediately as a trustworthy figure for almost all patrons and scholars. (19)

Merlin's prophecies gain him trust in the fiction and in reality because he is reliable. He gains the trust of the leaders and people in the *History*, which gains him trust with medieval readers of Geoffrey's chronicle. Merlin's characterization as a reliable character allows him to connect to the nation because people are more willing to listen to someone who is truthful. Merlin uses his role as prophet to propagate the idea that Britain will remain

supreme just as it has in the past. Thus, his secondary role as prophet serves as a significant facet of his characterization. If he did not possess the ability to foretell the triumphant future of Britain, then he could not create a unifying identity for the people to assume. As a prophet, Merlin fulfills his primary roles as nationalist because in his predictions about the future, he promotes the interests of the nation. To ensure that the nation is preserved, Merlin offers the people and their leaders hope through prophecy. Because the goal of nationalism is to maintain a unified self-governance and is based on the common hope for citizens to live together in the future, Merlin must use his ability to prophecy to remind leaders that England has successfully quelled invaders in the past and can do so in the future.

An example of how Merlin uses his role as prophet to support his primary role as nationalist is found in the chapter entitled “Prophecies of Merlin” within the *History*. In this chapter, Merlin explains the significance of the dragons to Vortigern, explaining that they embody the future of Britain and delineating a long history of triumphs and troubles for the British people through a series of enigmatical animal prophecy. Furthermore, Merlin is characterized as a prophet in his encounter with Aurelius. When Aurelius summons Merlin to tell him about his future, Merlin refuses, answering, “If I were to utter [prophecies] as an entertainment, or where there was no need at all, then the spirit which controls me would forsake me in the moment of need” (Geoffrey 196). In his refusal to prophesy on command, Merlin maintains the reconciliation between his natural inclination to prophecy and his devotion to the needs of the community. He must uphold his credibility as a prophet and he cannot do that if he serves as mere entertainment. Here, Merlin is characterized as a prophet because he can foretell the future, yet magical because he is

controlled by some unearthly spirit. Geoffrey's assertion the Merlin is both prophet and magician is significant in characterizing Merlin as a supporter of the community because he uses his roles to help the nation triumph over others, perpetuating the future authority of the country.

Next, Geoffrey characterizes Merlin as mystic prophet when Uther Pendragon summons him to prophecy about a series of confusing stars before the conception of Arthur. His prophecy supports a primary role as nationalist because he instills the shared belief that the nation will triumph as supreme above neighboring countries. When Uther asks about the stars, Geoffrey says that Merlin:

burst into tears, invoked his prophetic spirit, and said: 'O irreparable loss! O bereaved people of Britain! O the passing of a most noble king! The glorious king of the Britons is dead, Aurelius Ambrosius, by whose death we shall all die unless God brings help. Hurry, noble commander! Hurry, Uther, and do not put off fighting the enemy! Victory will be yours, and you shall be king of all Britain. For that star signifies you, as does the fiery dragon under the star. But the beam that is extended to the region of Gaul is the sign of a future son of yours who will be supremely powerful and whose might will control all the kingdoms that this beam covers. (63)

Here, Geoffrey upholds Merlin as prophet, but he offers him as mystical in the notation that Merlin "invokes a spirit" to achieve his prophecies. In the prophecy, Merlin praises the nation by extolling the dead King Aurelius Ambrosius as "most noble." He perpetuates the shared notion that Ambrosius has led to a glorious time for the Britons, and this must be continued. He urges Uther to take up the mantle of nationalism to ensure that the nation



will maintain its place of unified self-governance. Merlin offers hope for the present by noting that Uther will reign as king and offers hope for the future of the nation through Uther's son. Merlin is able to offer this hope for the people because he places the needs of the community above his own when he invokes the prophetic spirit. He knows that the mysticism marginalizes him, but he reconciles the marginalization with inclusion in the community as he calls forth his natural ability to prophecy. Merlin's prophecy itself is noteworthy because it supports the idea that Merlin's sole purpose is to instate the Golden Age of England through Arthur. Merlin's explanation that Arthur's might will control all of Britain offers support for Merlin's role in assisting in Arthur's conception that will come later.

Merlin's next role in the text is of that as a good and wise councilman to the kings of Britain. His role as wise councilman is a diversion from earlier versions of Merlin stories. Geoffrey adds this layer to the Merlin character and it builds Merlin's credibility. If the nation's kings would seek Merlin's advice, then surely the public can rely on his prophecies and follow his guidance. We know that Geoffrey desired for Merlin to be characterized as counsel because Vortigern praises Merlin's ability to speak with kings. Geoffrey notes:

When Merlin had made these prophecies, and others too, he filled all those present with amazement by the equivocal meaning of his words. Vortigern, who was even more astonished than the others, himself spoke highly of the young man's wit and his oracular pronouncements, for that particular period in history had produced no one who was ready to speak his mind in this way in front of a king. (186)

Merlin is not only a famed prophet but also the only man alive brave and wise enough to offer the kings of Britain blunt, just, and informed counsel. His courage in offering straightforward counsel to Vortigern gains him the king's endorsement and establishes him in a position of leadership. As such, Merlin can fulfill his nationalist agenda in counseling the kings to propel the nation to unity. Nationalism is important to cultivating nationhood because "in times of fear and discontent, nationalism is able to provide reassurance to a society anxious about its identity and cohesion." (Lavezzo 341). As a councilman to kings, Merlin fulfill his primary role as nationalist because he can offer reassurance and counsel to the country in times of need.

Vortigern's proclamation about Merlin's wisdom and credibility establishes him as a reliable source of wisdom within the political realm of medieval England. As a political figure, he is in a position to disseminate the belief that England can achieve a unified nationhood. Merlin's decision to offer candid counsel to Vortigern creates an avenue for him to address the nation and other leaders. Impressed with Merlin's ability, Vortigern asks Merlin how he might die. Merlin obliges with a prophesy noting that Vortigern will die one of two ways and that the sons of Constantine will return to reclaim Britain from Vortigern and the Saxons. Merlin says, "It is not easy to see which of the two [deaths] you will avoid. On the one hand the Saxons are ravaging your kingdom and will try to kill you. On the other hand the two brothers Aurelius and Uther are landing, and they will do their utmost to take vengeance on you for their father's death" (Geoffrey 186). Merlin then offers counsel as to what Vortigern should do and what will happen in the coming days:

Look for some refuge if you can: for tomorrow they will steer for the shore  
at Totnes. The Saxons' faces will be smeared with blood; and when Heingst

is killed Aurelius Ambrosius will be crowned king. He will restore peace to the people and build up the church again; but he himself will die of poison. His brother Utherpendragon will succeed him, but his days too will be cut short by poison. Your own descendants will play a part in this dastardly act, but the Boar of Cornwall will eat them up. (186-87).

This episode shows how Merlin is both a councilman and a prophet. Vortigern follows Merlin's counsel but is eventually killed. Merlin, then, is deemed reliable because his counsel and prophecy prove to be true. Furthermore, this episode is significant in characterizing Merlin as a nationalist because even in his role as counsel to a king that is not British, he upholds the good of England. Merlin offers hope in the coming of Aurelius and maintains that his coming will bring peace to the Britons. Geoffrey notes that "As soon as the news of [Aurelius'] coming reached them, the Britons, who had been scattered with such great slaughter, gathered together from all sides, reassured as they were and made more optimistic than they had been before the coming of their fellow countrymen" (187). Merlin's perpetuation of a national unity is fulfilled and his role as nationalist supported when Aurelius lands on the island and the people are imbued with hope for unity under one British king.

The final role that Merlin takes is that of magician. His secondary role as magician upholds his primary role as nationalist because he uses his magical abilities to prophecy and to ensure that England survives as a nation. The first example of Merlin's characterization as a magical being is found the very first time the character is referenced in the *History*, so Merlin enters the scene as a magical being and retains this persona throughout the text. Here, Vortigern searches for a solution to fix his falling tower and is

directed by magicians to find Merlin. Geoffrey prepares for the entry of Merlin by noting that Vortigern summons his magicians for advice, which is the first mention of magicians at all in the *History*. After Vortigern is quelled by the advancing Saxon army, he flees to Wales, and not knowing what to do, “in the end [he] summoned his magicians, asked them for their opinion and ordered them to tell them what to do” (166). Significantly, Geoffrey shifts the emphasis here, leading up to the entrance of the greatest prophet and magician to ever exist. Up until now all the kings of the *History* have relied on their own human knowledge to quell invaders and keep the land safe, so this first address to the magicians serves as a turning point. Here, Vortigern, who is essentially the embodiment of the nation, puts his trust for the preservation of the country in the hands of a famed magician. That role positions the magician Merlin as a source of national identity and a source of counsel for the nation. At this point, Vortigern’s counsel says that he must find “a lad without a father, and that, when he had found one, he should kill him so that the mortar and stones could be sprinkled with the lad’s blood. According to them the result of this would be that the foundations would hold firm” (167). Geoffrey’s introduction to Merlin commences steeped in mystery and serves a dual purpose. As a magical character, Merlin’s blood is alleged to hold the foundation of Vortigern’s castle together. Merlin, then, is a unifying agent. If he can hold the foundation of the tower firmly, then allegorically, he could hold the foundation of the nation together as a perpetuator of the English identity.

Geoffrey’s depiction of Merlin as trustworthy magician is supported by the ensuing scene with Vortigern, in which Merlin miraculously ascertains the cause of Vortigern’s foundation troubles when none of the other magicians can. As a magician, Merlin can see beneath the stones and finds that there are sleeping dragons beneath the tower causing the

trouble, not the need for his blood as mortar (168). To create credibility as a magician, Merlin calls the other magicians liars and asks them to explain what is “preventing [the tower] from holding firm” (169). Merlin’s maneuver in calling the other magicians liars sets him up as the only trustworthy magician. He must build his credibility as a magician so that he can fulfill his primary role as nationalist. The nation must be willing to listen to him if he is going to unite them. To further build his credibility as a magician, he accurately foretells what is beneath the tower and offers a course of action to fix the problem, positioning him as a source of counsel: “Merlin. . . went on, ‘My Lord King, summon your workmen. Order them to dig in the earth, and underneath, you will find a pool. That is what is preventing the tower from standing.’ This was done. A pool was duly found beneath the earth, and it was this which made the ground unsteady” (169). To add insult to injury, and further establish his credibility, Merlin offers another example of his magical foresight when he explains that there are dragons beneath the water. Geoffrey says:

Merlin went up to the magicians a second time and said: ‘Tell me, now, you lying flatterers. What lies beneath the pool?’ They remained silent, unable to utter a single word. ‘Order the pool to be drained,’ said Merlin, ‘and at the bottom you will observe two hollow stones. Inside the stones you will see two Dragons which are sleeping.’ The King believed what Merlin said, for he had told the truth about the pool. He ordered the pool to be drained. He was more astounded by Merlin than he had ever been by anything. All those present were equally amazed at his knowledge, and they realized that there was something supernatural about him. (169)

Because Vortigern believes Merlin and can prove that he is accurate, Merlin is established as the supreme magician, capable of anything. Therefore, Geoffrey's characterization of Merlin as a commanding, unique magician, unequalled by any other person, embeds Merlin in Britain's national consciousness. Although depicted as supernatural, Merlin's mythic prophecies about the future of Britain were readily accepted as fact. The medieval nation of Britain had a voracious thirst for marvels, and perhaps this is why Geoffrey's decision to depict the history-maker as mythic was accepted quickly (Parry 72). Because the nation accepted a narrative in which Merlin is characterized as a magician as history, Geoffrey succeeded in presenting a nationalistic Merlin character. Merlin is not only a credible source of national identity in the text but becomes a credible source of Englishness in reality.

Another example of Merlin's magical powers can be found when Merlin suggests that Aurelius bring the Giants' Ring from Ireland to England as a monument for dead English noblemen. The detailed description of this seemingly magical event is intrinsic to a characterization of Merlin as nationalist. At the heart of Merlin's role as magician is a desire to perpetuate the victories of the Britons. Merlin again uses his secondary role as magician to fulfill his primary role as preserver of national identity. Merlin explains that the Giant's Ring will "grace the burial-place" as a "lasting monument" (196). This monument eventually becomes a facet of national identity. The community will recognize that the Giant's Ring marks a place where noble Britons gave their lives, perpetuating the English identity of triumph in battle and nobility (195). The Ring also stands for the Briton's victory over the Irish. From a nationalist stance, defeating the Irish and miraculously taking their landmark disseminates the notion that Britain is superior to other

nations. Aurelius and his men take Merlin's advice, and travel to Ireland. There, they encounter the Irish king Gillomanius, who calls for war, but the Britons were "successful almost immediately" (197). After their victory, the Britons begin to move the stones, enlisting Merlin to help "so that all the problems which had to be met could have the benefit of his knowledge and advice" (197). In this scene, Geoffrey's notation that Merlin was brought to Ireland with Aurelius and his men is noteworthy because it establishes Merlin as a source of counsel and as a source of otherworldly knowledge. This establishes his credibility with the people of Britain. Merlin's extensive knowledge supports the notion of him as magician while also supporting the notion of him as a scholar. Next, when Aurelius' men have trouble moving the stones, Merlin, "places in position all the gear which he considered necessary and dismantled the stones more easily than you could ever believe. Once he had pulled them down, he had them carried to the ships and stored on board, and they all set sail once more for Britain with joy in their hearts" (198). Here, Merlin easily develops a solution using tools which might have been deemed magical because of their modernity, solidifying his characterization as a magical presence and wise councilman. Merlin's use of innovative magic characterizes him as an orchestrator of the valor of Britain. With Merlin's assistance, Aurelius' army successfully removes the stones from Ireland as victors, and the Giants' Ring stands as a monument to the courage of the Britons. After his prophecies, this is the first of a series of events Merlin is involved in that will work to establish Britain, and later Arthur, in a Golden Age of unity as the strongest realm, fulfilling his role as a nationalist.

Merlin intertwines the roles of magician and nationalist by ensuring that England reaches its status as self-governing, unified nation under the rule of Arthur, which will

usher in the Golden Age of the nation. As a magician, he transforms himself and Uther to go behind enemy lines and trick Ygerna into a relationship with Uther so that Arthur is conceived. This episode can be found in almost all of the Merlin stories, and represents Merlin's involvement and organization of Arthur's birth, and in turn, his organization of the unity of Britain. This example of Merlin's characterization is ultimately significant because Merlin combines his roles as magician, prophet, and councilman to support his nationalistic agenda. In Book Eight of the *History*, years after the erection of the Giants' Ring, Uther Pendragon has become King and begins to yearn for Ygerna. Merlin is summoned in this time of need. Merlin resorts to magic, asserting that Uther must "make use of methods which are quite new and until now unheard-of in your day. By my drugs I know how to give you the precise appearance of Gorlois, so that you will resemble him in every respect. If you do what I say, I will make you exactly like him" (207). Merlin is presented as cunning alchemist, supporting the notion of Merlin as magician in Geoffrey's text. Merlin's plan is successful and "that night [Ygerna] conceived Arthur, the most famous of men, who subsequently won great renown by his outstanding bravery" (207). In his plan, Merlin sets in motion the culmination of what his role as nationalist will be in the Arthurian tradition. By assisting Uther with his magical knowledge, he ensures the coming of Arthur, and thus, the creation of an English identity. After helping Uther win Ygerna, essentially coordinating the conception of Arthur, Merlin disappears from the *History*. He is referred to later in the text when his prophecies come true, but the final time he is physically present is when he orchestrates Arthur's birth. Due to his triple roles as magician, prophet, and counsel, Merlin can begin to bring unity and hope to Britain through Arthur, even though he is not present in the remainder of the text. Although Merlin is not



physically present in the text, Geoffrey concludes the *History* by indicating the accuracy of Merlin's prophecies. Here, Merlin begins his reign as leader and has become an important figure in the history of Britain. Merlin's departure is a signifier that Merlin has fulfilled his primary role as nationalist. Arthur will be born because Merlin used his role as magician and now Arthur can take up the mantle of nationalist to unite the nation.

### Chapter Three: Merlin in Malory

While Merlin can thank Geoffrey for his medieval popularity, he has Sir Thomas Malory to thank for his surviving popularity into modern times. Where Geoffrey ends Merlin's story, Malory picks it up and ends this discussion of the development of Merlin as a nationalist with his *Le Morte D'Arthur*. Although the character of Merlin continues to develop in later romances, Malory's tales of Merlin ends the medieval expansion of the character. By the time Malory is writing, an English identity is becoming fully developed and an established idea of nationalism can be found as the nation becomes more centralized and powerful as "national states began to take shape, and the first foundations for the future growth of nationalism were laid" (Kohn 8). Boyd C. Shafer provides a historical account of the relationship between monarchial rule and nationalist beliefs:

By the close of the medieval period the English monarchy had strengthened their central government, established national institutions, begun English national law, and created a class of lawyers and officials who were always interested in protecting and advancing the interests of the royal nation-state. More important here, it had taught the English people to look to the central government rather than to lord or priest for protection and security. (44)

In Malory's narrative, Merlin is an official who is solely "interested in advancing the interests" of the land. To achieve this, he develops into primarily a prophet and counselor who points the people to look to the central king (Arthur) as their source of unity, security, and identity. Within these roles, he fulfills a primary role as nationalist because it is his job to make sure that Arthur becomes the good and just king he is supposed to be and must assist in making decisions that will lead to unity for the kingdom. In the text, Merlin

continues to fulfill the characterization of nationalist and embodies the idea that the good of the community or the nation must come before his own needs.

Merlin, then, becomes a counselor to fit within the later medieval society's idea of what someone who is going to counsel the nation and its king should be. As Merlin strives to lead Arthur to be a good king, advice becomes a part of his psyche. Medieval audiences expected kings to rule with some form of counsel and "Arthur follows this trope closely, allowing himself to be ruled by counsel in the form of the perfect counselor: Merlin" (Boyle 52). Merlin's role as skilled counselor establishes him as a reliable leader, who is worthy and competent enough to establish Arthur as an avenue for English identity. Malory's characterization of Merlin is based upon those medieval advice texts to establish credibility and Merlin develops from Geoffrey's prophetic magician to councilman, while maintaining the primary role of nationalist.

Merlin employs many abilities to be a reliable councilman to Arthur; one of these abilities is as a wise prophet. Merlin is the only person in *Le Morte D'Arthur* that can see the future. Seeing the future is an essential element of promoting nationalist beliefs because it allows Merlin to disseminate the hope that England will survive foreign invaders and allows him to effectively counsel Arthur. His ability to see the future also allows him to organize Arthur's conception and placement on the English throne. As a unique character, Merlin is the sole reason that a national identity can be maintained through Arthur because he alone has the ability to see what will happen to the nation. Malory recognizes Merlin's unique role, and tweaks Geoffrey's Merlin to make him fit within later medieval society. Malory shifts the emphasis from magic and prophecy to wisdom, diverging from Geoffrey's mythic character, and extensively distancing himself from the madman stories

offered in early Welsh legend. Merlin is still otherworldly in his knowledge without being mystic. As Malory makes this transition, Merlin retains some mystical elements so that he can sustain his characterization as marginalized. Merlin must maintain his role as both included and excluded to reconcile his duties as prophet and counsel. As Eugène Vinaver notes, “While in Malory, there are fewer marvels and more realistic detail, the feeling of the marvelous is not lessened, but intensified” (547). Therefore, Merlin’s development has both decreased and increased. By the time Malory is writing about Merlin, he no longer fits the magical description of Geoffrey’s *History*, but does remain the historical counselor and loyal friend that he has always been. He also maintains his role as keeper of national consciousness, perpetuating the idea of Englishness through the establishment of Arthur.

#### **Analysis of the Merlin Character in Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur***

In Malory’s text, Merlin’s secondary roles are of that as a kingmaker and councilman. These roles are intertwined and often overlap in Malory’s depictions of Merlin because, essentially, as a kingmaker Merlin will have to offer counsel to the kings so that the nation will remain safe and be propelled to unity. In these roles, Merlin is characterized as a leader, non-magical prophet, devoted supporter of Arthur and the nation, and recorder of national history. As such, he fulfills his role as nationalist when he promotes the interests of Britain with the goal of achieving and maintaining a unified self-governance through disseminating the grandeur of Arthur, King of England, and thus, the magnificence of the nation.

The first mention of Merlin in Malory’s text is offered without explanation. When Uther falls sick in the first pages of the text, Sir Ulfius says, “I shal seke Merlyn, and he shalle do yow remedy, that youre herte shal be pleasyd” (Malory 4). Malory relies on

Merlin's fame to introduce Merlin in his narrative. In doing this, Merlin is able to maintain the role he occupied as a renowned prophet, notably famous due to Geoffrey. This suggests that Merlin has endured from the twelfth to the fifteenth century as a credible, historical figure who can be called upon to save the nation. Malory's decision to include Merlin as counsel to Uther sets Merlin up as a central figure to the narrative, so it is acceptable to characterize Merlin as a unique, primary character even though he supports Arthur. After Merlin is summoned to heal Uther, he is called again to assist Uther in winning Igraine, which leads to the conception of Arthur, who will unify the nation according to Merlin's plans. Merlin is essential in these scenes, and for the rest of Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*, Merlin will continue in this role as kingmaker as he helps Arthur win battles to establish the kingdom of Great Britain. Merlin's already established role as prophet and counsel in Geoffrey's chronicle allow him to transition into Malory's role for him as kingmaker and teacher. As such, Merlin will be able to fulfill his primary role as nationalist because his roles literally lead to the unification and perpetuation of the British nation through Arthur. Merlin exists in Malory's text to ensure that Arthur will reign over England.

The first role that supports a nationalist Merlin is that of kingmaker. Through an examination of the structure of Malory's text, we find that Merlin is established from the start as facilitator who will help Arthur ascend to kingship. This is significant because in *Le Morte D'Arthur*, Merlin is immediately established as the reason for Arthur's conception; he orchestrates Uther and Igraine's meeting. When Merlin meets with Uther, Malory suggests that Merlin is aware of the child to come because he says, "This is my desire: the first nyght ye shal lye by Igrayne ye shal gete a child on her; and whan that is borne, that it shall be delyverd to me for to nourisshe there as I wille have it—for it shal be

your wirship and the childis availle” (5). This introductory meeting sets Merlin up as the one who will mold Arthur to become the effective, noble ruler that he is meant to be. Merlin’s assertion that Uther and Igraine will conceive Arthur (“ye shal gete a child on her”) establishes him as kingmaker and as author of Arthur’s reign. He knows the future and as a seer, can plan for the unity of Britain through Arthur. In facilitating Arthur’s conception, Merlin supports his nationalist agenda because he is ensuring that the nation will be able to continue as it has, if not more successfully. Furthermore, because Arthur has been accepted as a historical king, Merlin’s role in his creation cements Merlin in England’s national consciousness. Without Merlin, Arthur could not have been.

Significantly, Merlin’s knowledge of the coming child establishes him as a prophet. His characterization as prophet falls within his roles of kingmaker and councilman. Merlin knows the future, but Malory abstains from explicitly noting that Merlin is magical, unlike Geoffrey. Here, Malory moves away from Geoffrey’s characterization of Merlin as magical, and instead emphasizes Merlin’s “apparently chance appearances at convenient moments, but with understated realism rather than an emphasis on the exotic” (Saunders 236). Merlin, then, is no longer characterized as magical, but extremely intelligent and sly. Malory’s seemingly conscious maneuver to remove magic from the narrative supports the notion that the text was meant to support a shared identity as English by recounting the history of Arthur. Magic is less prevalent in this society. Merlin, then, no longer needs magic to make him credible; rather, he needs to be a wise and perceptive councilman who has learned from the past.

Merlin’s next role in Malory’s text is of that as counsel, which supports his role as kingmaker. Merlin must offer counsel to the kings to ensure that Arthur will be instated as

king. At the heart of his job as kingmaker and counsel is the job of creating an identity for England. His role is encompassed by physically making sure that Arthur becomes the good and just king he is supposed to be and assisting in making decisions that will lead to unity for the kingdom. This differs from Geoffrey's narrative, because Merlin is not physically present to help Arthur become a legendary king. His role in the *History* is simply to set up the climate for Arthur's reign and make sure that Arthur is available and ready to take his rightful place. Thus, Malory emphasizes Merlin's tangible role as present advisor to embed Arthur as a good king because it is "fundamental that a king should be ruled by counsel, and Arthur follows this trope closely, allowing himself to be ruled by counsel in the form of the perfect counselor: Merlin" (Boyle 52). If Arthur follows this outline for kingship, then the people will accept him as legitimate.

Merlin's role as counsel to the nation is extensive, and there are many examples offered in the following discussion. Merlin offers three kinds of counsel: war council, personal counsel, and prophetic counsel. Merlin's role as counsel is a noteworthy facet of his identity as a nationalist because it suggests that Merlin has a deep personal relationship with the kings of England, based upon devotion to the king and to his people. As noted earlier, nationalism springs from "love, or at least awareness, of one's country, and pride in its past achievement, real or fictitious" (Galbraith 45). Merlin's attachment to the nation and its king stems from a devotion that is based upon a shared identity of familiar experiences and beliefs. As nationalist, Merlin uses his secondary role as knowledgeable councilman to offer the shared practices and history that England has experienced in the past to these contemporary kings and their people.

First, Merlin fulfills the role of war councilman when he urges Uther to fight for the glory of the nation. Malory's decision to develop Merlin as war council is noteworthy because he is affirming Geoffrey's Merlin as the historical architect of the Golden Age of Britain. In Geoffrey's *History*, Merlin assists Vortigern, Aurelius, and Uther Pendragon in their war efforts to establish what will be Great Britain, and Malory offers an enhancement of this characteristic in his depiction of Merlin. Merlin continues in this vein as war councilman for much of *Le Morte d'Arthur*, and assists in the victory of numerous battles, gaining Uther and Arthur land, valor, and a reputation as a wise and worthy leaders. In this example, Merlin assists in Uther's victory over the North by offering an effective plan of action. Malory makes Merlin more active here. Rather than simply urging Uther to fight as he had in Geoffrey's text, Malory's Merlin gives a specific battle plan. Merlin says, "Yoomay not lye so as yoo do, for ye must to field...for ye shall never have the better of your enemyes but yf your persone be there, and thenne shall ye have the victory" (7). In Malory's text, there is no magical spell—no enigmatical advice—just an intelligent battle plan. Uther follows Merlin's counsel and his army is triumphant. Without Merlin, Uther would have failed and the nation might have been lost.

Next, Merlin's role as personal counsel is found in Malory's version of how Uther will win Igraine. Merlin tells Uther, "This night, ye shall lye with Igrayne in the castle at Tyntigayll; and ye shalle be lyke the duke her husband...soo this was done as they devysed" (Malory 5). Here, Merlin does not discuss magic or enigmatic devices as he did in Geoffrey's version. Rather, "the begetting of Arthur is foretold through matter-of-fact dialogue...Merlin's shape-shifting needs no ingredients. He makes explicit his purpose" (Saunders 237). Then, when Igraine realizes she is pregnant, Uther explains, "I am fader



to the child.' And ther he told her alle the cause, how it was by Merlyns counceil" (6). Malory emphasizes that Merlin's role in the plan to conceive Arthur is based on his intelligence as an advisor, rather than as his abilities as magical prophet, differing from Geoffrey's depiction. However, even though Malory changes Merlin's character, he remains in line with the standard that Merlin's purpose is for Arthur to be conceived so that he can fulfill his destiny as unifier of Britain.

Malory chooses to further develop Merlin as significant counsellor who has numerous, personal interactions with the kings, more than he has been given in past legends. Merlin's abundant interactions with the leaders of the country establish him as a proponent of the people. If he is committed to the kings and their well-being, then he must be committed to ensuring that the well-being of society is preserved. To do this, Malory leans on the shared medieval belief of divine kingship and asserts that Arthur is ordained to become king. But, the community is only reminded that Arthur is ordained by God through Merlin. When Uther falls ill, Merlin reminds Uther that God has ultimate sovereignty, saying "God wil have his wille... be bifore Kynge Uther tomorne, and God and I shalle make hym to speke" (7). Merlin's plan to make Uther speak involves the establishment of Arthur as king. The next day Merlin meets Uther and asks, "Syre, shall your sone Arhtur be kyng, after your dayes, of this realme?" (7). Uther gives Arthur his blessing and God's and then "yelde up the ghost" (7). Malory's decision to emphasize divine kingship also places Merlin in line with the will of God, which is a significant element of society. As a wise councilman, Merlin acknowledges that God is the authority, and in doing so, places Arthur directly in the will of God. Now Arthur is destined and ordained by God to rule thanks to Merlin. Merlin's role legitimizes Arthur. In this example

of Merlin's personal counsel to Uther, Malory emphasizes that Merlin's advice will lead to the coming of Arthur, just as Geoffrey had done in the *History*. However, to achieve this goal, they highlight distinct aspects of Merlin's personality. Geoffrey presents Merlin's advice through the lens of magical prophecy, while Malory emphasizes that Merlin is a wise sage, establishing God's plans, rather than a magical being. The choice to highlight distinctive characteristics within their shared nationalistic Merlin was an important move in ensuring that Merlin would be accepted as credible within the medieval societies Geoffrey and Merlin were offering their chronicles in. Without credibility, Merlin cannot effectively perpetuate shared beliefs to accomplish his agenda as nationalist.

Malory upholds the notion of divine kingship in his prophetic counsel to the Archbishop of Canterbury to prepare the way for Arthur. Malory notes that Merlin "wente to the Archebisshop of Caunterbury and counceilled hym for to send for all the lordes of the reame and all the gentilmen of the armes, that they shold to London come by Christmas...for to shewe somme miracle who shold rightways be kynge of this reame" (7). Merlin's counsel to the archbishop is significant because it continues his characterization as councilman and explicitly paves the way for Arthur's reign because the "miracle" that the lords find in London is the sword in the stone that bears the inscription "Whoso pulleth oute this swerd of this stone and anyyld is rightwys kynge borne of all England" (8). Merlin's advice brings to fruition the miraculous sword. Merlin prophetically knew the sword would appear, suggesting that he has some insight into God's divine plan. Malory's choice to highlight Merlin's awareness of God's will is significant in the future establishment of Arthur as king because "kingship in Malory's day carried with it an articulate notion of Christian divine right, but broader idealization is evident in Malory's

combination of secular and sacred signs that Arthur must rule” (Allen 5). Merlin becomes the secular agent that offers the sacred sign of the future king. Corinne Saunders notes, “The idea that Merlin enacts divine providence in setting Arthur on the throne is underlined by an emphasis on the observation of Christian ritual, often added by Malory” (237). Hence, Malory is developing Merlin’s characterization from mythic being to enlightened leader, and in doing so, sets up a character who is reliable and aware of the nation’s beliefs.

Merlin’s prophetic council is crucial in establishing Arthur as a facet of English identity. He employs his prophetic abilities to support the role of nationalist in affirming Arthur’s rights to the throne. Merlin’s nationalistic agenda culminates in the plot to make sure that Arthur becomes king, and that he does so as a holy and noble ruler. When some claim that Arthur is illegitimate, suggesting that he is unworthy of the throne, Merlin defends Arthur’s honor (as well as the purity and nobility of Uther and Igraine, and essentially, England) by explaining how Arthur was conceived after the Duke of Tintagel’s death, ending with the prophecy that “HE shal be Kyng and overcome all his enemyss; and or he deye, he shalle long Kyng of all Englonde and have under his obeysaunce Walys, Yrland, and Scotland” (12). Arthur must have been conceived in a legitimate, un-adulterous relationship to be legitimately in line with the will of God. Otherwise he would have been tainted and unable to ascend the throne. Merlin would have known this because he is an advocate of the beliefs of England’s Christian society. Merlin’s plan to orchestrate Arthur’s conception at the time of the Duke of Tintagel’s death seems to be premeditated and highlights Merlin’s intelligence and proficiency as a prophetic councilman. Furthermore, in this scene, it is noteworthy that Merlin again supports Arthur’s reign, through prophecy, foretelling Arthur’s breadth of success as the right ruler of England. The other kings and

people of England are swayed by Merlin's summary of Arthur's conception, and impressed by Merlin's prophecy, so they accept Arthur as the rightful heir. Hence, essentially, Merlin is the sole reason that the Britons accept Arthur. After this scene, Merlin becomes Arthur's council in times of war and peace and helps Arthur rule with intelligence, nobility, and justice. Arthur even recommends Merlin to the nation as a valuable leader when he tells the barons, "Ye knowe wel that [Merlin] hath done moche for me, and he knoweth many thynges; and whan he is afore you I wold that ye prayd hym hertely of his best avyse" (14). In this announcement, Arthur establishes Merlin as a respected councilor, and urges the other leaders of the realm, and thus, the nation, to take Merlin's advice. The nation and Arthur continue to follow Merlin's counsel until Arthur takes Gwenyvere as his wife. At this point, Merlin disappears from the chronicle. Merlin's absence from Arthur's court is significant in the characterization of Merlin because it suggests that Merlin's role is complete—he has achieved his purpose of instilling Arthur as the legendary ruler he was destined to be and no longer needs Merlin's counsel. At this point Merlin has effectively created a history for England while simultaneously offering already shared ideas of what constitutes being English. His agenda is complete, so he is extracted from the chronicle.

Finally, Malory continues Geoffrey's depiction of Merlin as orchestrator of Arthur's glorious reign through Merlin's choice to have Blayse chronicle Arthur's knightly adventures "and all the batayles that were done in Arthur's days" (27). This final characterization combines Merlin's role of kingmaker and councilman. Merlin's desire to have Arthur's deeds preserved in written chronicle ensures that in the future, the people will be able to return to their English identity as triumphant under Arthur when in need of hope. Essentially, nationalism serves as a vehicle for hope. Nationalism can be called upon

to remind a society that they are united under a shared history. Blayse's chronicle is noteworthy because Merlin paving the way for Arthur's deeds and kingship, while also ensuring that Arthur's reign will be remembered. Here, a fabricated history becomes a historical artifact and effectively gives agency to a shared Englishness. Thus, Malory solidifies Merlin's purpose as the sole orchestrator of Arthur's reign. Merlin fulfills his characterization as perpetuator of national history and beliefs by making sure that Arthur's deeds are written down. If Arthur's victorious battles are chronicled for later generations to read, then the country can reflect on the nation's triumphant past. This creates a shared identity. The Britons are victors and they can be unified under that identity. Furthermore, Merlin's desire to preserve Arthur's deeds will assist in proving that Arthur is worthy of the throne of England. Arthur has perpetuated British ideals of glory and valor, and Merlin can present the deeds as a written chronicle to prove Arthur's dedication to the country. Merlin's roles as a keeper of history and prophet solidify him as the sole orchestrator of Arthur's reign. As the orchestrator of Arthur's reign, Merlin is characterized as the perfect nationalist. He has created a chronicle that perpetuates a shared identity of Englishness and has groomed and placed on the throne a king who embodies that shared identity to ensure that the nation is unified under a central set of ideas.

## Conclusion

In the medieval development of the Merlin character, one characteristic that remains constant is Merlin's desire for the nation to achieve freedom and unity through the perpetuation of a kind of Englishness. Though his depictions change and his roles differ in each text, he remains on track to achieve his goal from his first encounter with Vortigern in Geoffrey to his departure from Arthur's court in Malory. Merlin's depictions and minor characterizations as bard, madman, teacher, prophet, counsellor, and king-maker culminate in the larger characterization of nationalist. All that Merlin does leads to the unification of the country. In striving for a shared national consciousness, Merlin is able to transcend his marginalizing qualities to work for the benefit of society. He places his own needs below that of the community, perpetuating his characterization as a wise advisor and affirming that he is committed to the people.

Merlin's role in these texts is significant because he becomes a shaper of history through his appointment as council to the kings of Britain. He is a fabrication that becomes fact, and as such, attests to the power of fiction to create history and move people to action. Through Monmouth and Malory's characterization of Merlin as councilman, he becomes the enabler of Arthur's reign through his actions orchestrating Arthur's conception and rise to kingship via Uther's blessing and the pulling of the sword from the stone. Though Malory and Monmouth highlight different personality traits within Merlin and depict him through different lenses (magical and Christian), they both essentially offer a character who seems to exist solely to make sure that Arthur becomes king of England and in doing so, establishes himself within the legend as kingmaker.

In both the *History* and *Le Morte D'Arthur*, Merlin was formed and developed solely for the sake of creating and preserving English nationhood. His role affirms that Britons craved unity under a common identity. Written as a historical figure and keeper of national history, Merlin is able to give the Britons the elements of their identity. He offers a distinct Englishness based upon a shared lineage of valorous deeds and triumphant emancipations from foreign invaders achieved only when the nation stood together. Like other legendary characters, he was “constructed not for [his] own sake but for the sake of a nation. . . [Nations] are given to constructing heroes whose exceptionally grand qualities testify to the grandeur of their people” (Lavezzo xiv). As a man committed to Englishness, Merlin repeatedly reminds the nation that they are superior and brave, so that they will preserve that heritage. Merlin, then, is the real hero of these Arthurian tales. Without him, Arthur would not exist, and without King Arthur, England loses its sense of identity as a grand old nation positioned as supreme under the divine will of God.

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