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OLD ENGLISH SPELLS IN BBC'S *MERLIN*  
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Master's thesis

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## Abstract

*This paper investigates Old English spells in BBC's Merlin. The aim is to show whether the language is simply reconstructed or inevitably reinvented for entertainment purposes such as this TV show. The spells are analysed and discussed in terms of Old English grammar and vocabulary. The paper also provides a brief overview of Old English and Merlin.*

Keywords: Old English, Merlin, spells, grammar, vocabulary

## 1. Introduction

This paper investigates Old English in BBC's *Merlin*. More specifically, it analyses, in terms of grammar and vocabulary, the language as recreated for the purposes of the show's spells. The aim is to show whether Old English, employed for an entertainment programme such as this, is simply reconstructed or whether it gets inevitably reinvented, in line with the Arthurian story itself.

The part on grammar focuses on morphological intricacies, the very heart of Old English grammar, in order to find out whether inflections have retained their importance, and whether the complex rules of declension and agreement for the different parts of speech have been adhered to. The vocabulary section poses the following questions: Do Old English words acquire new meanings, are they used in different contexts? It also discusses the various methods employed by the translators in dealing with the demands of the show: interesting vocabulary choices, innovative coinages and borrowings from Old English Literature.

The paper begins with a brief overview of Old English, which only outlines some features of grammar and vocabulary, while hinting at other aspects of the language, its historical background and Old English literature, as this is such a rich and vast area of exploration. An introduction to *Merlin* and the spells is offered too, followed by analysis and discussion.

### 1.1 Old English

The languages spoken on the British Isles prior to the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons belong to the Celtic family of languages and the peoples who "came to the islands around the middle of the first millennium BC" (Crystal 2003: 8). Hardly anything is known about the languages of Britain's "Paleolithic and Neolithic inhabitants" (Millward & Hayes 2011: 79). By 50 AD, some of the territory had already been subjugated by the Romans, who remained on the island until the

beginning of the fifth century, when their armies withdrew to help defend the Continental borders of the collapsing Roman Empire (Millward & Hayes 2011: 79; Durkin 2013). It was then that some of the Celtic settlers requested help from the Germanic tribes, the Saxons, the Angles and the Jutes, to “fight off the Scots and the Picts” (Crystal 2003: 6), as described by the Venerable Bede in his *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (*An Ecclesiastical History of the English People*). These, however, soon turned against the Britons, who were, supposedly, briefly united by King Arthur (the latest theories claim he might have been “a general of Romano-British background”) before they were conquered by the Germanic tribes (Millward & Hayes 2011: 82).

The term *Anglo-Saxon*, which came to use in the 16th century, refers to “all aspects of the early period – people, culture, language,” whereas *Old English* has been the “preferred name for the language” since the 19th century, when more detailed studies of the histories of languages were being conducted (Crystal 2003: 8). Old English is not the oldest language of the British Isles, as it was preceded first by the Celtic languages and later Latin, which was “in extensive use as the language of government and the military and probably also in other functions in Roman Britain,” although it is not certain how much of it “remained in use in the post-Roman period” (Durkin 2013). *Saxon* was, in fact, what the Celts called the Germanic invaders, “regardless of their tribe,” whereas these referred to the natives as *wealas* (“foreigners”) (Crystal 2003: 7). The term *Angli* (“Angles”) came to be used in the 6th century and *Anglia* was already the usual Latin name for the country in the next century (Crystal 2003: 7). This is where *Engle* and *Englisc* derive from, but *Englaland* (“land of the Angles”) doesn’t appear until 1000 (Crystal 2003: 7).

Old English is “the name given to the earliest recorded stage of the English language,” extending from the “coming of Germanic invaders and settlers” in the fifth century “up to the Norman Conquest in 1066, and beyond into the first century of Norman rule in England” (Durkin: 2013). Although it is difficult to date exactly the “beginning” of Old English, it is taken to approximate the period from 450 to 1100/1150 (Algeo 2013: 11; Durkin 2013). The earliest surviving documents, however, stem from “around the year 700,” and even earlier materials exist “only in later copies” (Durkin 2013). A member of the West Germanic branch of the Germanic languages, “closest in structure” to Old Frisian (Crystal 2003: 6), the Old English of the Anglo-Saxon corpus of prose and poetry was by this time already “very distinct” from them, due to many sound changes (Durkin 2013).

As a result of the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity, “extensive texts” were written in the Roman alphabet “on parchment, as opposed to very short inscriptions on wood, bone or stone in runic character” (Durkin 2013), the very first linguistic evidence, “preserved in about

400 inscriptions,” which simply state “who made or owned the object,” and a few manuscripts from the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> centuries, the earliest possibly from late 4<sup>th</sup> century (Crystal 2003: 9). The Runic Alphabet, in which Old English was first written, dates from around the 3<sup>rd</sup> century and was used in present-day Scandinavia, Germany and the British Isles (Crystal 2003: 9). The Alphabet consisted of 24 letters which could be written horizontally in either direction and was called *futhorc*, after its first six letters, as each letter had a name (Millward & Hayes 2011: 93). Additional Old English sounds amounted to 31 symbols in some versions of the alphabet (Crystal 2003: 9). It was only after the arrival of the Roman missionaries that the “literary age” began (Crystal 2003: 10). The Latin alphabet was adopted, with characteristic forms for *f*, *g*, *r* and *s* (Quirk & Wrenn 1955: 7). *Q*, *x* and *z* were rarely used (Crystal 2003: 16) and two runic symbols were “incorporated to represent sounds not occurring in Latin” (Millward & Hayes 2011: 95): *wynn* (𐌺) for /w/ and *thorn* (þ) for /θ/ and /ð/. *Eth* (ð) was used interchangeably with *thorn*, whereas *ash* (æ), borrowing the name from the runic alphabet, came to represent the Latin diphthong (Crystal 2003: 16). Roman symbols were also employed for numbers (Crystal 2003: 17).

Crystal considers Old English grammar “a fascinating mixture of the familiar and the unfamiliar” (2013: 20). Its most distinguishing features could be summed up as follows: “a larger set of inflections in verbs, nouns, adjectives and pronouns, and (connected with this) a rather less fixed word order;” also, existence of grammatical gender in nouns and adjectives (Durkin 2013). It was the “complex inflectional grammar” (Burnley 2013: 3) that signalled the “relationship between the parts of the sentence” (Crystal 2003: 20), allowing for a more loose word order, as seen in the example from *The Story of Cædmon* (qtd. in Durkin 2013): *wæs he se mon in weoruldhade geseted oð þa tide þe he wæs gelyfdre ylde; ond he næfre nænig leoð geleornode* (“was he the man in secular life settled until the time that he was of-advanced age; and he never any poem learned”).

Old English nouns were inflected for three genders (masculine, feminine and neuter), four cases (nominative, genitive, dative and accusative) and two numbers (singular and plural), and were grouped, on the basis of these distinctive inflectional endings, into several classes (Millward & Hayes 2011: 101; Crystal 2003: 21). The declension of the u-stem nouns *sunu* (“son,” m.) and *hand* (“hand,” f.), for instance, would look like this (Baker 2012):



Table 6.11. *u*-stem nouns

		short stem	long stem
singular	nominative	sunu ‘son’	hand ‘hand’
	accusative		
	genitive	suna	handa
	dative		
plural	nominative	suna	handa
	accusative		
	genitive	suna	handa
	dative		

Cases were chosen depending on their function in the clause, or were governed by Old English prepositions, as demonstrated by the following sentences from Ælfric’s *De temporibus anni* (*On the Seasons of the Year*, qtd. in Durkin 2013): *Ðunor cymð of hætan & of wætan. Seo lyft tyhð þone wætan to hire neoðan & ða hætan ufan* (“Thunder comes from heat and from moisture. The air draws the moisture to it from below and the heat from above”). The preposition *of* (“of, from, out of, off”) requires the nouns *hæte* (“heat”) and *wæta* (“moisture”) to take the dative inflection. The endings appear to be identical in the second sentence, yet the nouns are now in the accusative case since they function as the direct objects. The accusative case is also indicated by the definite article *þone/ða*, which too agrees in gender with the nouns, as *hæte* is feminine and *wæta* masculine. Strictly speaking, Old English neither had an indefinite nor a definite article, other than the demonstrative *þa* (“the, that”), which can be said to have assumed the function of the latter (Millward & Hayes 2011: 103). It should also be noted that “articles” were not “used as much as they would be in Modern English” (Crystal 2003: 21).

The “most highly inflected” parts of speech were certainly adjectives (Millward & Hayes 2011: 103). In addition to being determined by the (pro)noun they modified, with which they agreed in case, gender and number, adjectives also took the weak (definite) or strong (indefinite) inflections. The weak adjectival declension took place after the definite article, demonstratives and possessives (Wright & Wright 1967: 216). Otherwise, the strong inflections were employed. The weak declension often replaced the strong in poetry (Wright & Wright 1967: 216). The following is an example from Baker (2012):

Table 8.4. Weak adjectives

		<b>masculine</b>	<b>neuter</b>	<b>feminine</b>
<b>singular</b>	<b>nominative</b>	gōda ‘good’	gōde	gōde
	<b>accusative</b>	gōdan		gōdan
	<b>genitive</b>	gōdan		
	<b>dative</b>			
<b>plural</b>	<b>nominative</b>	gōdan		
	<b>accusative</b>			
	<b>genitive</b>	gōdra, -ena		
	<b>dative</b>	gōdum		

The Old English personal pronouns appear to be “the most fully inflected of all words,” often serving “to disambiguate, together with the definite article,” the sometimes “obscure concord of Old English sentences” (Burnely 2013: 5). They also preserve “traces of dual number” (*wit*, *git*) and “instrumental case” (Burnely 2013: 3). The possessive, demonstrative, and interrogative pronouns were inflected too. As “Old English had no relative pronoun,” the “indeclinable particle *þe*” was used in its place (Millward & Hayes 2011: 106).

Old English verbs “show an extensive range of inflections, reflecting distinctions of person and number (e.g. first person singular, first person plural, etc.), tense (present or past), and mood (indicative, subjunctive, or imperative)” (Durkin 2013). Other distinctions, such as voice, were “realized by periphrastic constructions” (Durkin 2013). There were three kinds of verbs: strong and weak (change in the stem vowel vs. past tense suffix) and irregular (Durkin 2013). Interestingly, Old English employed two different verbs to convey the notion of “be”: *wesan* and *beon*, the latter “preferred in habitual and repetitive contexts” (Crystal 2003: 21). Here is an example of verb conjugation (Baker 2012):

Table 7.6. Contracted weak verbs

		<b>singular</b>	<b>plural</b>
<b>infinitive</b>		smēaġan	
<b>present indicative</b>	<b>1</b>	smēaġe	smēaġað
	<b>2</b>	smēast	
	<b>3</b>	smēað	
<b>past indicative</b>		smēade	smēadon
<b>present subjunctive</b>		smēaġe	smēaġen
<b>past subjunctive</b>		smēade	smēaden
<b>imperative</b>		smēa	smēaġað
<b>participles</b>		smēaġende	
		smēad	

Uninflected word classes also existed, including prepositions, conjunctions, adverbs and interjections (Millward & Hayes 2011: 110).

Old English vocabulary appears “much more homogenous” (Durkin 2013) than today, comprising a “handful of Celtic words” and the more numerous Latin borrowings, some of which were remnants of “the earliest moments of contact” (Crystal 2003: 8), while the others were brought to the Isles by the Germanic peoples and the Roman missionaries. A few of the Celtic loanwords made its way into *Merlin*, as will be seen later: *gafeluc* (“small spear”), *binn* (“bin”), *dry* (“sorcerer”), *torr* (“peak”) (Crystal 2003: 8). It cannot be stated with certainty whether the Celtic languages might have had a greater influence in “some areas of grammar and pronunciation” (Durkin 2013). Several hundreds of words were borrowed from Latin, as “fresh concepts” were introduced in religion (*mass*, *monk*, *minister*), military and legal institutions (*camp*), commerce (*pound*), and household (*dish*) (Crystal 2013: 8). New place names and names for plants (*pear*, *lily*), animals and food (*cheese*, *wine*) also emerged, and so did numerous calques (*godspell*, “gospel”)

(Millward & Hayes 2011: 122). The ensuing “conflict and interaction” with the Scandinavians, “from the late eight century onwards” (Durkin 2013), gave rise to *skin* and *skirt*, *they*, *them* and *their*, *are* and the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular *-s*, but also to settlement names ending in *-by* (*Derby*), *-thorp* (*Linthorpe*) and *-thwaite* (*Applethwaite*), and personal names in *-son* (*Henderson*) (Crystal 2003: 25-26). Nevertheless, the vocabulary of Old English was “profoundly Germanic” (Crystal 2003: 27) as borrowings made up “only a tiny percentage” (3%) of its constitution (Durkin 2013; Crystal 2003: 27). The “major influx” of French and Latin words is witnessed in the “Middle English period and later” (Durkin 2013).

Old English seems to have thrived on affixing and compounding. The latter method of word-formation is especially present in “the most remarkable of coinages,” kennings (Crystal 2003: 23). These “vivid descriptions,” entailing “various levels of figurativeness,” were often coined not only for their picturesque character, but also to “satisfy the needs” of metrical structure (Crystal 2003: 23). Over a thousand of them occur in *Beowulf* only (Crystal 2003: 23). Famous examples include *banhus* (“bone-house,” a person’s body) and *hronrad* (“whale-road,” the sea), hundreds of compounds involving the Old English noun *mod* (“spirit, courage, pride”), and a great deal of those which have to do with sea: *swanrad* (“swan-road”), *brimstream* (“ocean-stream”), *hwælweg* (“whale-way”) (Crystal 2003: 23). Affixes such as *ymb-* (“around”) and *op-* (“away”) were not retained, whereas certain words expressed slightly different meanings: *sona* meant “immediately,” not “in a little while;” *wan* implied “dark,” not “pale,” whereas *fæst* was “firm, fixed,” not “rapidly” (Crystal 2003: 22).

As Old English spelling was far from consistent or standardized, “evil,” for instance, appears as *yfel* in one place and as *efel* in another (Crystal 2003: 28), while “shield” could be written as *sciold*, *scild* or *scyld* (Millward & Hayes 2011: 95). These differences were not only regional or found among the four major dialects, Kentish, West-Saxon, Mercian and Northumbrian (the latter two are often referred to as Anglian); they could even be attributed to “a single scribe” (Crystal 2003: 17). Even though the “overwhelming majority” (Millward & Hayes 2011: 87) of Old English texts were written, due to political and cultural reasons, in the predominating West Saxon dialect, Anglian is, nevertheless, “cited as more obviously similar to the modern standard form” (Algeo & Butcher 2013: 93), and Modern English is said to have descended from it. The question remains: “How do we know what Old English sounded like?” (Crystal 2003: 18) The answer is: We do not. All we can do is “make a series of informed guesses,” based on alphabetical logic, comparative reconstruction and poetic evidence (Crystal 2003: 18-19). Studies of sound changes, such as i-mutation are also suggestive of possible explanations (Crystal 2003: 19).

The Old English corpus of the University of Toronto hosts 3, 5 million words, and only 5% of this (around 30,000 lines) is poetry (Crystal 2003: 10). Old English poetic manuscripts had no titles; these were added later by editors, as were capital letters and modern conventions of punctuation (Crystal 2003: 13). Varying editorial practices were undertaken to make Old English texts understandable to modern readers. The “chief literary work of the period” (Crystal 2003: 10), the heroic poem *Beowulf*, did not contain “poetic line divisions” (Crystal 2003: 12). Most of the poetry is also anonymous. A number of poems, such as *The Dream of the Rood*, were “concerned with Christian subjects,” whereas others (*The Battle of Maldon*, for instance) were preoccupied with the Germanic tradition in dealing with wars and patriotism (Crystal 2003: 10). Most “extant texts,” such as *The Anglo Saxon Chronicle*, were composed and translated (Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History*, among others) “in the period following the reign of King Alfred” (849-899) (Crystal 2003: 10). The *Exeter Book* is known for including Anglo-Saxon riddles (Crystal 2003: 12).

“The conventional dividing date of approximately 1150 between Old English and Middle English reflects (very roughly) the period” in which the following changes in grammar and vocabulary become visible “in most of the surviving texts”: the number of distinct inflections decreases, and word order “takes on an increasing functional load; at the same time borrowings from French and from early Scandinavian become more frequent” (Durkin 2013). Old English was estimated to contain 24,000 different lexical items; however, 85% are no longer used (Crystal 2003: 27).

## **1.2 “In a land of myth and a time of magic...”**

Like its hero, the legend of King Arthur seems to be of a “once and future” kind. “Eternally reworked” for all sorts of purposes, the Arthurian story “never dies” (Stanley 2009). There being no one, single, “definite version of the tale,” but a “multitude of them, always refusing to fully cohere” (Manea 2013: 147) allows for each age to have its own “versions and derivatives” (Torregrossa 2004: 168) of the narrative. Even one of the earliest accounts, written by Geoffrey of Monmouth in the 12<sup>th</sup> century was an amalgam of “vaporous Celtic myths and ancient folklores” (Stanley 2009). The modern era has produced “a seemingly endless number of works,” and the character of the sorcerer Merlin from the Arthurian tradition “continues to be featured each year” in “films, novels and comics” (Torregrossa 2004: 168-169). *The Adventures of Merlin*, popularly known as simply *Merlin*, is one of the latest takes on the myth. The BBC fantasy TV series based on the legend of King Arthur and Merlin, produced by the “award-winning team” of Julian Murphy, Johnny Capps, Jake Michie, Julian Jones, and directed by James Hawes (MerlinTvSeries.com), “brings a much-

loved tale to a whole new generation with a fresh, youthful new look and approach” (Holmwood 2008).

Set “in a land of myth and a time of magic,” an ancient story is given a magical twist and told in a new way (MerlinTvSeries.com). Reinvented for the 21st century audience “the mythical city of Camelot” becomes “a fantastical realm of legendary beasts and mysterious people, a dangerous world in which magic has been banned by the ruthless tyrant,” King Uther Pendragon (MerlinTvSeries.com). Sent by his mother to study under Gaius (the court physician), a young Merlin learns his true destiny upon his arrival to Camelot: he must protect the “headstrong Prince Arthur” (BBC 2008b). Indeed, he saves Arthur's life in the very first episode and is made his manservant in return. The audience are “destined to experience a series of magical adventures” as the “unlikely friendship” between the young warlock and the future king evolves (BBC 2008a), and as Merlin struggles to keep his magical abilities secret while fulfilling his destiny.

“Instead of creating an entire mythology,” the producers have opted for “reinvention”, for which Merlin “was ripe” (Making Magic 2012). They “tapped into” “the Arthurian legend and the story of Merlin” and did it their way (Murphy Q&A). Their fascination with this “rich pot” to be explored “met in their minds” with their ongoing interest in coming of age stories (Making Magic 2012), and the resulting innovation has Merlin and Arthur as contemporaries. Hailed for its blend of fantasy, humour, “magical storytelling” (BBC 2012) and special effects, this unique “retelling of the Arthurian legend” (The Guardian 2012), filmed in Wales and France, went on for five seasons (2008-2012), each with thirteen episodes of cca 45-minute duration. The episodes featured “epic life and death situations” that drew inspiration from “big Arthurian legend story moments” adjusted to the show's own purposes (Making Magic 2012). But the plots also allowed for the exploration of “big emotional themes between characters” (Making Magic 2012) in “small, human stories” (MerlinTvSeries.com). In the words of one critic, *Merlin* is “not at all a bad place to start” (Stanley 2009).

This new story is partly delivered in old lines, Old English lines, that is, and the “dialogue's mix of olde worlde language and teen-drama banter could make you cringe as much as wonder” (The Guardian 2012). In a land of myth and a time of magic all sorts of different characters, Old Religion practitioners, high priestesses, sorcerers, witches, warlocks, druids, dragonlords and Merlin himself cast spells and chant in Old English. Imagined by the creators to be realistic, the spells are not “simply glossolalia;” rather, they are direct translations of magical acts “rendered as adapted Old English words and phrases” (Chadwick 2012: 200). For instance, in order to bring a statue of a dog to life Merlin utters (Chadwick 2012: 200): *Bebiede þe arisan cwicum* (“I command

you to rise up to life”). The incantation *Cume þoden* (“Come whirlwind”) literally summons a whirlwind in the midst of a “major battle” (Chadwick 2012: 200), whereas the spell *Bregdan onweald gafeluc* (“Move the powerful spear”) “enchants and empowers Lancelot’s lance so that it may puncture the Griffin’s previously inviolable body” (Chadwick 2012: 201).

How did the idea for Old English spells come about? The creators “went through lots of different sort of languages and found that Old English was good” (“Talking Spellish”). Having settled on their choice of language, they wrote to several scholars of Old English at various universities. “Until somebody said they would help us and didn’t think we were completely nuts,” Capps, one of the producers humorously recounts, “because it’s a bit odd letter to write: *Could you help us write some Old English spells, please*. You can get strange looks and replies” (“Talking Spellish”). What got him worried, he says, was when towards the middle of the series the script editors, “constantly writing spells,” started talking to each other in Old English (“Talking Spellish”). “It’s all proper stuff,” Jones explains, “we’ve got to have it translated”. They did “try and put down a few bits of Old English,” and they “pick[ed] up a few things like *tospringe* [“open”],” since certain spells recur throughout the entire series. “But when you’ve got to conjugate a verb, and all the rest of it, you got to have some Oxford professor give us the lowdown,” and this is why, he adds, “it’s so damn hard for the actors”. He wittily reveals that “Katie [McGrath], who plays Morgana, she’s now got some massive spells ... and she comes cursing me every time I see her. I hope she’s not one of those—as long as it’s not a real curse, you know?” (Script Line)

But it was Colin Morgan’s title character, Merlin, who performed most of the show’s impressive number of spells (a little over three hundred in total). The leading actor was often seen with his headphones on, listening to Old English pronunciation (“Talking Spellish”). The script provides the spells in Old English, their meaning and proper pronunciation (“Talking Spellish”), for example:

*Forbearnan*

[English: To set fire to]

[Phonetic: for-bear-nahn]

Even though the pronunciation becomes easier, “once you get the basic sense” of it, Capps admits it could be quite “difficult” and “intimidating” for the newcomers among the cast, especially those who had to master four to five lines of Old English for a single spell (“Talking Spellish”). Some of them had it written down on boards in front of them as the scenes were sometimes

“difficult enough” even without having the characters speak another language (“Talking Spellish”). Despite all the effort, the pronunciation does not always seem to match the one in the transcript. *Bebiede þe arisan cwicum*, for instance, sounds more like *Berbay odothay arisan quicken*, whereas the melody from the first episode, sung by the witch who pretends to be Lady Helen, contains imaginary words that fit the tune, although a sleeping enchantment is found in the script. Nevertheless, the spells work their magic by adding to the show’s mystery as characters’ eyes flash and zoom in whenever they recite “magic words” or simply perform non-verbal spells.

Old English does not appear to be the only language of magic in the show. In the last episode of season two Merlin learns that he is the last dragonlord, and the producers have decided on another language for that epic scene: “We have to use a different language for that, whereas we use Old English the rest of the time. When he speaks with the dragon-tongue, it’s something else” (Script Line). Jones jokes: “We have to get another researcher for that” (Script Line). What came to be known as *dragonspeak* is in fact Homeric Greek, and this is what the audience hear whenever Merlin “imposes his will over dragons” (Manea 2013: 152). Manea explains this as a “possible reference to the Galfridian [refers to Geoffrey of Monmouth] historiography, which placed the Trojan Brutus as the founder and first king of Britain (hence its name)” (2013: 152). And yes, there is a third language, too. Old Irish resurfaces as the language of “nefarious magical beings from Irish folklore, the sidhe and the pixies”. Manea offers this “marginalization” of Old Irish (“no mention has been made of Welsh,” either), the language “not used by human beings” (2013: 152), as evidence for his thesis that *Merlin* “proposes an ahistorical fantasy of primeval Britishness, denuded of its Celticness” (2013: 151). It can be argued, however, that the show seems to be permeated with the idea that magic can be put to both good and bad uses, and that the creators might have simply wanted to present Irish mythology in its “proper” language.

There has been a number of Arthurian-themed live action and animated movies as well as TV series: *The Sword in the Stone* (1963), *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975), *Excalibur* (1981), *King Arthur* (2004), *Camelot* (2010), to name a few. The BBC “has previously tackled Camelot” too, in the eight-part drama series *The Legend of King Arthur* (1979) (Deans 2005). Osberg and Crow observe that Arthurian works share “an inescapable and self-conscious concern with language then and language now” (1999: 39). And whereas some or most of them have rendered their language “antiquated or stylized” (Osberg & Crow 1999: 39) in one way or another, not many have ventured into “retro-translations” (Everson 2002). A similar attempt to depict the language of magic was seen in Boorman’s *Excalibur* (1981). Osberg and Crow interpret the film to suggest a harmony between man and nature, in which “words had a direct relation to the world, and



the secret words unlocked the power latent in the world” (1999: 55). Whereas it can be argued that BBC’s *Merlin* “exemplifies” not so much “the magical nature of language” (Chadwick 2012: 199) as magic as a “form of learned intellectual agency” (Chadwick 2012: 200), the “primary significance” (Osberg & Crow 1999: 55) of Merlin's Old English spells as well as his “charm of making” in *Excalibur*, is their “unintelligibility” (Osberg & Crow 1999: 55). “For just as the charm of making is a lost language, so magic is a lost art,” (Osberg & Crow 1999: 55) and this too seems to be the case with the language and magic of the Old religion in BBC’s *Merlin*, which has been banned brutally by Arthur’s father. Nevertheless, it is precisely from these “unintelligible languages,” that the spells derive their magic.

The phonetic transcription of Merlin's “charm of making” has been interpreted as Old Irish: *Anál nathrach, orth’ bháis’s bethad, do chél dénmha* (“Serpent’s breath, charm of death and life, thy omen of making”) (Everson 2002). But BBC's *Merlin* has definitely gone “to greater lengths”, in terms of the number of spells, “to portray Anglo-Saxon, the language of magic and the Old Religion,” even to the extent, as Manea correctly points out, “that this violates the show’s own narrative logic” (2013: 152). After all, Old English did arrive with the Anglo-Saxons, Arthur's enemies. Historically speaking, the Celtic languages would be more likely candidates for an old language and a religion that seems to be inspired by mythologies from pre-Christian Britain. However, who spoke what in reality bears little relevance for the context of *Merlin*, which happens to be “a land of myth and a time of magic,” as we are reminded by the Great Dragon at the opening of each episode. Not delving further into postmodern or postcolonial discussions of *Merlin*’s gender/ racial/ language politics, this paper explores the grammar and vocabulary of Old English as (re)designed for the purposes of the spells.

## 2. Methods

The analysis took into account all five seasons of *Merlin*. A total of 306 spells was obtained from Merlin Wiki, which provides both the phonetic spelling from the transcript and its more probable version closer to Old English spelling, as well as literal translations and possible meanings. The sentences were thus (re)analysed and revised in terms of grammar and vocabulary and, based on the findings, categorized according to some common features. Their occurrence in the series was also verified. The materials consulted (Old English grammars, dictionaries, *Merlin* sources) are listed under works cited.

### 3. Analysis & discussion

A slight decrease in the number of the spells seems to accompany the progression of *Merlin*, with series one displaying 72 and series two 69 spells, whereas the subsequent seasons contain 59, 56, and 50 spells, respectively. Out of the 306 spells, 16 instances were *dragonspeak* in Homeric Greek, while 13 were found to be Old Irish. Of the remaining 277 Old English spells, 19 were used on more than one occasion in the show. A few of the spells or some of their parts included in the Wiki transcripts were not verified in the show. The only two episodes which did not involve verbal spells were episodes eight (“The Hollow Queen”) and eleven (“The Drawing of the Dark”) from season five.

The spells were analysed in terms of Old English grammar and vocabulary, which are the two main sections of the discussion, each with its own subdivisions. The part on grammar includes separate subsections for the different parts of the speech (nouns, prepositions, adjectives, and verbs), whereas vocabulary contains a subsection on Old English literature. The two final sections single out one-word spells and those which were only slightly altered or were not in need of any revision. The spells have been italicised, whereas the translations and episode names have been put in inverted commas. As elaborating on every single detail in each of the spells would have been very complex and would have taken up much more space, (grammatical) revision was sometimes indicated in square brackets with no further explanation and was not undertaken for every spell in the vocabulary section, as the focus was on word meanings, rather than inflections or syntax.

#### 3.1. *Merlin*’s Old English grammar

*Merlin*’s grammar trouble seems to revolve around declension, as cases turn out to be the greatest challenge. Therefore, the following subsections on nouns, prepositions and adjectives focus precisely on inflections and case-requirements. In the part on verbs attention is paid to mood, voice, tense and subject-verb concord.

##### 3.1.1 Nouns

The very first spell in the transcript entails a problematic construction. The enchantment, *Acwele seo mægh*, spoken by the witch trying to kill Lady Helen (“The Dragon’s Call”), was probably intended to mean “Kill the maiden,” as it was translated. The verb *acwelan*, spelled with a single *l* is actually an intransitive verb, meaning “to die, perish”. In this case, the sentence would translate as “Die, maiden,” although the definite article *seo* (“the”), which takes the feminine form

to agree with the gender of the noun *mægb* (“girl, virgin, maiden, maid”), would appear surplus. There is a possibility that *acwelan* was simply misspelled, for there is an Old English verb with the meaning “to kill, destroy,” *acwellan*. This, however, leaves the definite article *seo* in the nominative, instead of the accusative case (*þa*). Interestingly, Merlin’s spell which removes Freya’s handcuffs, *Unspanne þás mægb* (“Unfasten this maiden;” “The Lady of the Lake”), has the demonstrative *þeos* (“this”) correctly placed in the accusative. The sentence *Þu fornimest adl fram guman* (literal translation: “You take away disease from man”), employed by Merlin as a healing spell (“The Mark of Nimueh”), encounters a similar issue: the direct object (*adl*) in the nominative, rather than the accusative case (*adle*). The case of the noun *guman* cannot be stated with certainty since its form remains identical in all of the cases but the nominative. It is not preceded by an article or a demonstrative, which would provide a cue, although the preposition *fram* requires the dative case.

One of several love spells used on Arthur is another instance of the direct object in the nominative case: *Héo hæfþ þín heorte* (“She has your heart;” “Sweet Dreams”), instead of *Héo hæfþ þíne heortan*. The feminine noun *heorte* (“heart”) belongs to the *-an* declension (although it used to be neuter), and the possessives of the (1<sup>st</sup> and) 2<sup>nd</sup> person take the indefinite adjectival declension (Quirk & Wrenn 1955: 27, 38). The possessives seem to take the definite declension, though, in the spell *Aweax þu meteþearfende! Þicge þu þone drycraeft þe þinan deorc~~æ~~[e] mode gefylþ* (“You, needing food, arise! You, consume the magic which fills up your dark power.”), by means of which Morgana enchants a creature which will “devour the magic of others” (“The Diamond of the Day: Part One”); the indefinite form would be *þin* (neuter, accusative). *Mode* (“heart, mind, feeling”) appears to be the dative case (*mod* is the accusative). Merlin attempts to counteract the effect of an ageing spell by uttering: *Edniwe min[e] geoguð[e]* (“Restore my youth;” “Queen of Hearts”). The direct object remains in the nominative case once more, while the possessive *min* (nominative, masculine/neuter) does not even agree with the feminine noun in gender. Cornelius Sigan gives the reason for his return to Camelot (“The Curse of Cornelius Sigan”): *Ic cume eft to Camelot. Swá þæt ic mæg min[e] fæhþ[e] awrecan! Nu ic lybbe ece and ic mæg rædan min[e] burh!* (“I come again to Camelot. So that I can strike my revenge! Now I live eternally and I can rule my kingdom!”). *Camelot* would have probably been declined too. The spell *Onluce* (probably *Onluce*) *þe!* opens the door of the cell in “Arthur’s Bane: Part Two”. Wiki translates it as “Unlock this,” but *þe* is either the accusative/dative of the personal pronoun *þu* (“you”), or the indeclinable particle *þe* used as a relative pronoun. *Onluc þa soþan treow[e]!* (literally: “Reveal the real truth;” Wiki: Reveal the true fidelity”), which reveals Lancelot’s “true form” (“Lancelot du Lac”), also displays a case disagreement between the article in the accusative and the noun in the nominative.

The following spells, all of which involve the verb *þurhhælan* (“heal thoroughly”), make it difficult to tell whether this is another object-in-the-nominative situation as they make use of the verb’s ambitransitivity. *Þurhhæle licsar min* (“Heal thoroughly my wound;” “The Sorcerer’s Shadow”) allows for both the transitive and intransitive interpretation since the neuter noun *licsar* (“wound”) and its possessive *min* (“my”) have identical nominative and accusative inflections. The spells *Þurhhæle dolgbenn* (“The Crystal Cave”) and *Ahlúttre þá séocnes[se]*. *Þurhhæle bræd* (“The Last Dragonlord”) seem to employ *þurhhæle* as an intransitive verb because the nouns *dolgbenn* (“wound”) and *bræd* (“flesh”) are unequivocally nominatives. The translations, however, suggest the objective case, or at least this is how the inserted articles, which are missing in the Old English version (as they were not used as often), alter the meaning. Thus, “Heal thoroughly the wound” is the translation for the first one (in which case *dolgbenn* should take the accusative inflection *-e*), whereas the second one means “Cleanse the sickness. Heal thoroughly the flesh” (and *bræd* is then to become *bræde*; interestingly, the article in first sentence of the spell, *Ahlúttre þá séocnes*, already signals the accusative case but the noun is not inflected and remains in the nominative). Unless, of course, the transcript simply omitted commas and the spells were meant as commands to the wounds and flesh to heal (by themselves), as in *Gestepe hole. Þurhhæle!* (“Heal the injury! Heal thoroughly!”; “Le Morte d’Arthur”). Considering the meaning of the verb *gestepan* (“help, support, assist, sustain,”), it might even be possible for the noun *hol* (“hole, hollow, cavern, den”) to appear, as it does in the spell, in the dative case. The translation in *Merlin the Complete Guide* (qtd. in Merlin Wiki) reads: “Cure. Make well”.

Meanwhile, another spell includes the verb *þurhhælan* and the noun *licsar* again, yet the latter strangely takes the dative inflection, with its preceding possessive in the nominative/accusative case: *Íc þe þurhhæle þin licsare mid þam sundorcræftas þære ealdap æ!* (“I heal you thoroughly from your mortal wound with those special powers that are ancient! Oh!”). The functions of the dative are discussed later in this section, and this kind of usage of the case, that might imply “I heal you thoroughly *from* your wound,” would probably have to be indicated by a preposition. Careful listening reveals Merlin actually saying *licsar* (“The Crystal Cave”), and the phonetic spelling contains this nominative/accusative form too. The preposition *mid* (“with”) requires the dative case, as indicated by the definite article in the plural (*þam/þæm*), so it should be *sundorcræftum*, instead of *sundorcræftas*. It is not easy, at first, to make sense, of the “phrase” *þære ealdap æ*, which also occurs in the spell *Gebiede ic þone feorhberend þære ealdap æ!* (“I summon the creature that is ancient! Oh!”; “Love in the Time of Dragons”) and some others too. Since *æ* is an interjection meaning “oh, alas,” it could not stand in for the verb *be* (as understood in the translation), and

*ealdap* doesn't appear to be the verb *ealdian* ("to grow old"). The phonetic spelling of both spells (*þære ealdan æ*) calls for a slightly different interpretation, as it could suggest the common usage of the genitive case (which would in fact be *ealdra*, and does resemble Merlin's pronunciation), its possessive function, and would thus translate as "of the old". *Þære* is the probably misspelled genitive plural *þara/þæra*, for the first interpretation would require it to be in the nominative plural *þa* and singular *se*, for each of the spells respectively, whereas the adjective *eald* ("old, ancient") would take the nominative inflection too, in order to comply with the rules of agreement.

Merlin keeps his promise to free the dragon in "The Fires of Idirsholas," and he does so with the following words:  *Ic bebeode þisne sweord þæt hé forcierfe þá bende þæra dracan. Un clyse!* ("I command this sword to cut the chains of the dragon. Open!"). This spell is interesting in several ways. *Forcierfe* testifies to the Old English use of subjunctive (which expresses, among others, wishes and commands), whereas *Un clyse!* (literally: "Un close/shut"), with its negative prefix *un-*, introduces another important topic, as Old English is known for allowing multiple negation. The spell from "The Changeling," *Ne un clyse* ("Not un-shut," that is, "close," although *Ne onluce* is heard in the episode) is another example demonstrating the writers' (or the translators') freedom to play with the rules and apply them in innovative ways to recreate Old English for *Merlin*. As for the rest of the previous spell, *sweord* in the accusative is acceptable because the verb *bebeodan* ("to command, order") can take both the dative and the accusative case. According to Wright and Wright, *þá bende* is the correct accusative too (1967: 191). The only difficulties then seem to lie in the personal pronoun *hé* (masculine) and the definite article/demonstrative *þisne* and *þæra*. *He* and *þisne* refer to the sword, which is neuter in Old English, and should therefore be neuter too (*hit*, *þis*), whereas *dracan* (aptly put in the genitive singular) should be preceded by the singular genitive *þes* instead of the plural *þæra*. "Power of the days, conceal me. This spirit becomes torpid and callous to my friends and enemies," is the translation of Merlin's spell that turns him into old Emrys in "Queen of Hearts". The analysis of the Old English version, *Miht* (nom.sg.) *dagena* (gen.pl.) *beþeccc* (sg. imperative) *me* (acc.sg.). *Adeadap* (3<sup>rd</sup> ps. sg. present) *þisne* (acc.sg. masc.) *gast* (nom.sg. masc.) *min* (nom.sg.) *freondum* (d.pl.) *ond min* (nom.sg.) *feondum* (d.pl.), makes room for a few minor modifications: the possessive *min* placed in the dative plural *minum*, so it obeys the rules of agreement, and the demonstrative *þisne* changed to *þes* (nom. sg. masc.) for the same reason.

The spell *Naedre Morganam forgripe* ("Snake, attack Morgana"), cast by Merlin in "The Castle of Fyrien," brings up the declension of personal names in Old English. Insufficient data were found on this subject to form a hypothesis but it seems unlikely that a feminine noun in the

accusative would display the *-m* inflection, usually associated with the dative case and its “very complex functions” (Quirk & Wrenn 1955: 64). The dative object, for instance, is seen in Morgana’s summoning of a crow (“The Death Song of Uther Pendragon: Part One”): *Cume mec, hræfn wann... bebuge me. Nim bod min þissere nihte þinum dryhten. Gedo hit his agendum handum* (“Come to me, dark raven... reach me. Take my message in this night to your king. Take it to its owner's hand.”); although, strictly speaking, *mec* is the accusative of the personal pronoun *ic* (“I”), whereas the dative case of the noun *dryhten* (“ruler, lord, prince”) is *dryhtne*. *Agend* (“owner, possessor, master, lord”) should probably take the genitive (*agendes*) instead of the dative (*agendum*), which appears in the spell. Merlin’s *Inbringe, cume mec* (“Bring in, come to me;” “The Beginning of the End”) is another example of the indirect object in the accusative case (the spell in fact enchants keys, so the imperatives could have perhaps been used in plural). The indirect object is found once again in the accusative *þec* in the spell *Gielde ic þec þissa meowles sawol... Gyden æblæce [u]* (“I offer you this maiden’s soul... White Goddess;” “With All My Heart”), while the implied genitive, *þissa meowles* (“this maiden’s”), would in fact look like this: *þisse meowlan*.

The enchantment *Ic, séo héahsacerd, þe ácwele, strengþe eald[r]e æwfæstnesse* (“I, the High Priestess, kill you, by the power of the Old Religion;” “Le Morte d’Arthur”) demonstrates the “instrumental function” of the dative inflection, used to express “the means or manner of an action” (Quirk & Wrenn 1955: 66). Finally, the dative case is required by certain prepositions (discussed in the subsection below), such as *fram* (“from”), and the possessive *þisse* (“this”) in the following spell does indeed take the dative: *Yfel gæst ga þu fram þisse lichaman. Biþ hire mod eft freo. Ar ond heofontungol sceal þurhswiþan* (“You, evil spirit, go away from this body. Her mind is free again. Glory and the heavenly luminary shall prevail!;” “With All My Heart”). *Þisse*, however, is the feminine, not the masculine gender (*þissum*) required by the noun *lichama* (“body, corpse”). The last sentence contains subject-verb disagreement (dealt with in the section on verbs) as the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular *sceal* (“shall”) is used with the subject(s) *ar* (“honour, glory, rank, dignity, magnificence, respect, reverence”) and *heofontungol* (“heavenly luminary/body”).

### 3.1.2. Prepositions

The analysis of the following spells is concerned with Old English prepositions, as each has its own case requirements. The preposition *on* (“on, in, at”), for instance, takes the dative case (Quirk & Wrenn 1955: 68) and is found in the spells *Ga on wuda* (“The Secret Sharer”), *Flieh nu on moras* (“The Darkest Hour: Part One”) and *Hleap on bæc* (“The Darkest Hour: Part Two;” “The Wicked Day;” “The Sword in the Stone: Part Two”), among others. These seem to bypass the rule

at first since the “stunning spell” *Hleap on bæc* (“Leap on your back”) retains the noun in the nominative/accusative case (*bæce* is the dative form), while the other two (“Go to the woods;” “Fly now (back) to the swamps”) lack the distinctive dative plural inflection *-um*. The preposition *on*, however, requires the accusative case “when there is motion” (Quirk & Wrenn 1955: 68). Therefore, the spells appear to adhere to Old English grammar after all, although it remains questionable whether another preposition (*to*, for instance) would have been more appropriate for at least the last two spells. *On* seems an adequate choice for the spell *Astyre. Wæcce on sæbát bælfyr mæst* (“The Lady of the Lake”). It is not quite clear whether the verbs *astyran* (“to steer, guide, govern”) and *wæccan* (“to watch, wake”) were intended to convey their imperative or 1<sup>st</sup> person singular meanings, as the spell is uttered by Merlin, who sends Freya’s dead body across the lake on a burning boat (“Guide. I watch the funeral fire on the boat.”). The noun *sæbát* (“sea-boat, vessel”) follows the paradigm of the general masculine declension (Quirk & Wrenn 1955: 20), according to which its dative is *sæbáte*.

The preposition *fram* (“from, since, by”) requires the dative case too (Quirk & Wrenn 1955: 68), although this doesn’t seem to be taken into account in the spell *Pece treowee[an] andwlitan heora fram gesiht eallra* (“Cover their true faces from every sight!;” “Gwaine”), as *gesiht* (“sight, vision”) remains uninflected (*gesihthe* is the dative case). The Old English *þurh* (“through, by means of”) occurs in Morgana’s and Mordred’s joint effort in “The Diamond of the Day”: *Þurh minum gewealde ond þinum mægen ... geclippað we þone lieg þe eallæ[u] awestað* (“Through my power and your strength... we summon the fire which destroys you all”). The preposition is commonly followed by nouns in the accusative, although, rarely, the genitive or the dative is used (Wright & Wright 1967: 305). The possessives *minum* and *þinum* and the noun *gewealde* are all in the dative case, whereas *mægen* is the nominative /accusative. When an adjective “refers both to masculine and feminine beings,” as *eall* does, “it is put in the neuter plural” (Wright & Wright 1967: 216).

### 3.1.3. Adjectives

The following sentences were singled out for their involvement with another set of Old English declension rules, those which pertain to adjectives. Adjectives too are required to agree with the nouns they modify in gender, case and number, and two kinds of adjectival declension exist: the weak (definite) and the strong (indefinite). It will be shown that *Merlin*’s spells do not always adhere to these, as the adjectives, just like nouns, often remain uninflected too.

*Bregdan anweald gafeluc!* (“Move the powerful javelin”) is the spell Merlin casts on Lancelot’s spear (“Lancelot”). The inflections which *anweald* (“powerful, mighty”) and *gafeluc*

(“spear, javelin”) will take depend on whether *bregdan* is used as an intransitive or transitive verb. In the first case, both the noun and the adjective remain in the nominative, as they occur in the spell. The translation, however, treats *bregdan* as a transitive verb, which would then require the direct object case. As there is no article or some other defining word, the adjective *anweald* would probably take the strong declension inflection: *Bregdan anwealdne gafeluc*. Another interpretation of the spell exists: “Bind power to the spear” (Chadwick 2012: 201). The spell *Miere torr sweolophat* (“Disturb that burning hot column”) is employed by Merlin to destroy Morgause’s “column of burning fire” (“The Castle of Fyrien”). As the noun *torr* (“tower”) is unambiguously the direct object, the adjective *sweolophat* (“burning hot”) should also take the accusative case: *Miere torr sweolophatne*. Once again, in the absence of defining words, the adjective follows the pattern of the strong declension.

The episode “The Tears of Uther Pendragon: Part One” contains several spells which handle adjectival declension. *Weorc untoworpenlic* (“Inviolable suffering”) is yet another case of the strong declension, as is the enchantment *Isen fæstnunga onlucap me* (“Iron fastenings, release me”), even though the adjective *isen* (“iron”) is not placed in the nominative plural (feminine): *Isena fæstnunga onlucap me*. It remains unclear whether *fæst* in the spell *Fýrbendum fæst* (“Bars forged in the fire secure”), which closes a cabinet in one scene and a door in another, is an adjective or a verb. Although in the indirect object case, the inflection *-um* nevertheless signals an attempt at declension, suggesting that *fæst* might be the verb *fæstan* (“to fasten, make firm”) after all. The imperative, however, has the form *fæste*: *Fýrbendas fæste!* As an adjective (“fast, fixed, firm, secure”), *fæst* would take the strong declension inflection, whereas the noun would accordingly shift to the nominative case: *Fýrbendas fæsta!* The spell *Awendaþ eft wansæliga neat* (“Avert [again] terrible beasts!”), from the same episode, encounters the already dealt with issue of verb (in)transitivity. *Awendaþ* is both the present plural and the imperative plural of the verb *awendan* (“to turn away or off, avert, remove, turn”). *Neat* (“animal, beast, ox”) and *wansælig* (“unhappy, unblest, miserable, evil”) both retain the same form in the nominative and accusative case (neuter, plural). Therefore, regardless of the interpretation, the spell would look like this: *Awendaþ eft wansæligu neat*. The plural *neat* is usually translated as “cattle,” although in Merlin it refers to the scorpion-like creatures called Serkets (Merlin Wiki).

Morgana’s spell *Wanne nædran, fram þæs foldan bosme astigaþ ge* (“The Dark Tower”) summons “dark snakes,” to “rise from the womb of the earth”. Both the noun and the adjective appear in their proper cases and *wanne* even obeys the strong declension pattern. However, there exists a gender disagreement, since the form *wanne* is the masculine nominative plural and *nædre*



(“snake, serpent”) a feminine noun. *Wanna nædran* would be the grammatically correct invocation, although the inflection *-e* was often found for all genders in the nominative and accusative plural (Quirk & Wrenn 1955: 31). The second sentence of the enchantment *Lære us, forþbrenge us, ætlæde us. Wisu heofoncandel ure* (“The Castle of Fyrien”) seems to display the strong adjectival declension, although the weak seems to be in order, as the noun *heofoncandel* is poetically postmodified by a possessive: *Wise heofoncandel uru*. The translation of the entire spell (“Guide us, bring us forth, lead us. Your cunning heavenly candle”) is somewhat complicated by vocabulary choices. The verb *forþbrengean* is probably not used as a phrasal verb (“to produce”) and the imperative *ætlæde* (“lead out, drive away”) seems to be implying quite the opposite of the spell’s intended effect, as Morgause strives to find a way *into* the tunnels. The second sentence means: “Wise heavenly candle of ours”. The kenning *heofoncandel* (“heavenly candle/light, light of the heavens, sun, moon, stars”) addresses the ring which Morgause enchants to show them the way.

The analysis reveals the use of strong declension in Morgana’s lengthy spell *Eala leofu sweostor þæm gastum befæste ic þe. Alynne þa þeostre þe inne onwunap; onginn dwolma* (“Oh, dear sister, I entrust you to the spirits. Release the darkness that remains inside you; chaos, begin!”; “The Darkest Hour Part One”) to be without objection. The same goes for Merlin’s *Mod wæs cræftleas* (“The mind was simple”; “The Sword in the Stone: Part One”). The adjectives in the remaining two spells concern referents that cannot be identified from the linguistic context only. *Swiþe mihtig* (“exceedingly mighty, of great might;” “very powerful”) in the spell *Gehæle þisne lichaman. Gestrenge me nu þæt ic beo swiþe mihtig hie to forwiernan; yfel is on ofost* (“Ye, cure this body. Now strengthen me so that I will be fiercely able to hinder them; evil is in haste”) is the Dochraid (“With All My Heart”). A female “creature of the earth” (Merlin Wiki), she would probably describe herself as *mihtigu*. As the spell *Bebide þe arisan ealdu* (“I command you, ancient one, to come forth”) occurs in two episodes, there are also two different referents of *ealdu* (feminine sg. and neuter pl., strong declension). In “The Mark of Nimueh,” the spell summons the Afanc (another creature of the earth, supposedly inspired by Welsh mythology) egg (Merlin Wiki), and the Old English noun *æg* appears to be neuter. The spell is used four times in the episode “A Remedy to Cure All Ills,” each time referring to the magical insect “Elanthia Beetle” (Merlin Wiki). The Old English noun *bitel, bitela* (“beetle”) is masculine.

### 3.1.4. Verbs

This section focuses on Old English verbs in the spells, in terms of mood, voice, tense and subject-verb concord. It discusses, for instance, the effectiveness of putting infinitives to various uses and the convenience of applying the subjunctive mood or the passive voice for the different

purposes of the spells. It also analyses adherence to the rules of subject-verb agreement. The aim is to demonstrate how these verb features have been employed in the service of *Merlin*'s spells.

Infinitives have been found to assume the function of imperatives in a number of “commanding” spells (particularly in the one-word spells). Devlin “animates” the Serpent Shield (“Valiant”) by having it “change therein”: *Ɔærinne ymbcierran* (the second part of the sentence is discussed in the vocabulary section). Merlin enchants the door in “The Mark of Nimueh” using two plain infinitives: *Onstyrian, onbregdan!* The first verb means “to move, rouse, disturb, stir, agitate, excite” and the latter “to move, bow, start up: burst open,” although the spell has been translated as simply “Here” in *Merlin the Complete Guide* (qtd. in Merlin Wiki). He attempts to make the Serkets go away (“The Tears of Uther Pendragon: Part One”) by ordering them to “let me go” (the spell is interrupted as Merlin gets stabbed): *Forlætān me a...!* Here we have the infinitive once again, instead of the 2<sup>nd</sup> person plural imperative *forlætāþ*. It is also possible that the original script contains the imperative form, for it is rather difficult to make out Merlin’s pronunciation of the final syllable of the word in question. The same goes for the spell *Gewican ge stanas* (“A Servant of Two Masters”), as the pronunciation does not clarify whether it is another case of the infinitive substituting the imperative (“Ye, stones, fall.”). The spell *Readee asce geotan* (“I decide to pour the dust”) serves as an interesting example of the Old English infinitive used “with verbs of causation, intention, and inception” (Quirk & Wrenn 1955: 86). Merlin pronounces the first verb as if it too were an imperative: *Readan* (“A Remedy to Cure All Ills”). It can also be noted that the noun *asce* (“ash, dust”) remains uninflected, although it is the direct object (*ascan*) of the verb *geotan* (“to pour, pour forth, shed”). *Bebiede þe arisan cwicum* (“Valiant”) is translated in *Merlin the Complete Guide* (qtd. in Merlin Wiki) as “I command you to rise up to life”.

*Merlin*'s Old English seems to employ the infinitive as another form of expressing commands in addition to the subjunctive, which also appears in the spells, for instance, in the form *onslæpe* in the spell *Gefultume hie* (acc.) *þæt heo onslæpe* (“Help her to sleep;” “The Sins of the Father”). The subjunctive in the second part of the spell *Ic ðe ðurhhæle ðin[~~h~~] licsar mid ðam sundorcræft[um] ðære ealdan æ. Drycræft ðurhhæle ðina wunda ond ðe geedstaðolie* (“A Servant of Two Masters”) is indicated by the 3<sup>rd</sup> person *ðurhhæle* and *geedstaðolie*. The second sentence might thus be translated as: “May magic heal thoroughly your wounds and strengthen you” (the first part was analysed in the section on nouns). More often, though, the infinitive or the indicative mood is used, such as the (presumably) 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> person singular present tense in the spells *Strangap bydenfæt* (“The barrel moves with energy;” “A Herald of the New Age”) and *Ic þe bebiede þæt þu abifest* (“I command you to be shaken”), respectively. It can be argued that the subjunctive (*abife*)

would have perhaps been more appropriate for the latter spell, which Merlin employs to cause an earthquake (“The Death Song of Uther Pendragon”). The fourth sentence (*Ic ðe bebiede...*) of the lengthy spell

*Ic her aciege ænne windræs! Færblæd wawe! Windræs ungetemed: gehiere! Ic ðe bebiede mid eall[r]e strangnesse ðæt ðu geblæwest ond syrmest strange! Ge spurne þeos [þas] hægtesse* (“Here I summon a storm of wind! Sudden blast of wind, blow! You, strong and unstoppable storm of wind, obey! I command you with all my power to blow and devastate [rage] violently! Strike this witch!”),

which occurs in “A Servant of Two Masters,” seems a textbook occasion for the use of subjunctive, although the indicative occurs instead.

*Ic bebiede fealle*, the Old English spell cast by Merlin to make the chandelier fall in the episode “Lancelot and Guinevere,” has the following translation: “I command the snare trap”. However, since the verb *bebeodan* requires the object to be in the accusative (or even the dative) case, it can either be suggested that the noun *fealle* was simply not inflected (the accusative is *feallan*) or that the spell conveys the “more obvious” meaning, with *fealle* actually being the imperative of the verb *feallan* (“to fall”), or even its subjunctive. Similarly, the spell *Abanne átí* (“I command you to pull;” “The Beginning of the End”) too contains a command verb followed by what was probably intended to be the imperative *atyne*. *Fielan* in *Ic bebíede þis giestærn tácen fielan* (“I command this inn’s sign to fall;” “The Lady of the Lake”) appears to be the inflected infinitive of the verb *feallan*, although it might be the misspelled verb *fiellan* (“to fell, cause to fall”) too.

The next spells are interesting in that they allow for an exploration of the not so common Old English passive as most of the verbs have “only active voice inflections,” the exception being the verb *hatan*, “to call” (Quirk & Wrenn 1955: 80). One of the ways to express the passive voice then was by means of “a copula verb with the past participle” (Quirk & Wrenn 1955: 80). This is exemplified in the spells *Wæs asnið[den] gyrdel* (“The belt was cut off;” “The Castle of Fyrien”) and *Beo þu leohte bewunden* (literally: “Be you surrounded by light;” “The Coming of Arthur: Part Two”). They both (should) contain the auxiliary *beon/wesan* (“to be”) and the past participles of the verbs *asnîðan* (“to cut off”) and *bewindan* (“to wind round, clasp, entwine, envelop, encircle, surround”), respectively. *Beo* is not only the imperative but the subjunctive form too, so the second sentence can be interpreted both ways. Word order is another noticeable feature of these spells. The verb precedes the subject in several cases. *Beo þu leohte bewunden*, for instance, can be classified

as a jussive expression (command!), whereas *Hine fordo...* (“Kill him...;” “Arthur’s Bane: Part Two”) exemplifies the pronoun object coming before the verb, as was the frequent practice. The passive voice was probably foregrounded in *Wæs asnið gyrdel*.

The following spells were found to disobey the rule of subject-verb agreement by employing singular imperatives with nouns in plural. In “The Beginning of the End,” Merlin attempts to hide Mordred’s boots by ordering them around: *Bestepe scós. Gestile scós. Astýre scós* (“Go, boots. Boots, be still. Guide the boots.”). *Bestepe* (*bestæppan*, “to tread upon, step, go, enter”) and *gestile* (*gestillan*, “to rest, cease, be still/quiet/mute”) are 2<sup>nd</sup> person singular imperatives, whereas *scós* is the nominative/accusative plural of the noun *scó(h)* (“shoe”). He commands the keys (“Goblin’s Gold”) using the 2<sup>nd</sup> person singular imperative with the noun in plural once more: *Cæga, cume her* (“Keys, come here”). The episode “The Fires of Idirsholas” features lengthy spells by Morgause with visible subject-verb disagreement: *Cnihtas Medhires, éower sáwla sind min sáwol. Onwic and cóm hér eft. Rid eft ond forsliehð eft. Gehðu, Uther Pendragon* (“Knights of Medhir, your souls are my soul. Yield and came here again. Ready again and destroy again. Grief, Uther Pendragon.”). The forms *onwic* and *rid* (probably refers to the verb *ridan*, “ride,” rather than “ready”) are 2<sup>nd</sup> person singular imperatives (*com* is the past tense), although they refer to “knights of Medhir”. *Forsliehð* is the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular present tense of *forslean* (“to strike with violence, smite, break, slay, kill, destroy”). The sentences entail more than one kind of disagreement. *Eower[a/e]* (“your”) and *min[u]* (“my”) are not inflected for gender (their referent *sawol*, “soul,” is feminine), whereas *Medhir*, being the sorceress’ name, would probably not have the usually masculine/neuter *-(e)s* in the genitive.

The next spell makes use of the previous one, while adding another 2<sup>nd</sup> person singular imperative to the beginning: *Astýre ús þanonweard!* (“Guide us away from here!”) *Cnihtas Medhires, éower sáwla. Rid eft ond forsliehð eft.* The subject-verb disagreement can also be observed in (*Ferian æt gylden.*) *Ic búgan þeos* (the bracketed part is discussed in the vocabulary section), where the pronoun *I* is followed by the infinitive *bugan*. A reversed situation is found in *Efencume ætgædre, eala gastas cræftige: gestrice þis lic forod[e]* (“Come together, oh, powerful spirits: Mend this broken body;” “The Wicked Day”) and the similar *Efencume ætgædre, eala gastas cræft ige: ecg[e] ahefigie; ahefigie mid þære swærnesse þusenda geara; ofercume þone sweordboran* (“Come together, oh, powerful spirits: Make the sword heavy; make it heavy with the weight of a thousand years; Overcome the swordbearer;” “His Father’s Son”), where the singular imperative *efencume* summons the plural *gastas* (*ahefigie* is singular too). A sort of tautology seems to be at work here, since *efencume* already implies, by itself, a coming together, which is only

enhanced by the adverb *æt gæd[e]re* (“together”). The same goes for the enchantment *Behæpse fæst* (“Sweet dreams”), as the verb which means “to fasten with a bolt, bolt a door” is followed by the adjective which translates as “fast, fixed, firm, stiff,” or conveniently, “firmly fixed,” (the adverb *fæste* would have been perhaps more appropriate).

The (perhaps a bit unusual) use of the past tense has been noted in the following spells. *Bene læg* (sg.) *gesweorc* (sg./pl.) (“I summon the clouds to flow;” “The Nightmare Begins”) employs the preterite of the verbs *bannan* (“summon”) and *licgan* (“to lie, be at rest be situated; to flow, go, run”), implying thus: “I summoned the clouds flew”. The verb forms in the second sentence of Morgana’s spell from “A Servant of Two Masters,” *Astige ðu wrym fah ond gepéowe ðæt mod ðisse[s] þeowes. Hine bind ond ða heold ond awendaþ he ealle* (“You, hostile serpent, rise and enslave the mind of this servant. Bind him and possess him; he changes completely”) complicate the otherwise transparent interpretation: *heold* is the past tense of *healdan* (“to hold, grasp, contain, keep, possess”) and *awendaþ* the imperative or present plural of *awendan* (“avert, turn aside, change”); *awendeþ* is the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular.

### 3.2 Merlin’s Old English vocabulary

This section analyses *Merlin*’s spells in terms of Old English vocabulary. It highlights interesting and unusual word choices by the translators, as well as those which seem to be their own imaginative coinages. It also attempts to shed light on what appear to be less comprehensible spells. Unlike the previous sections, this one does not delve as much into grammar-induced difficulties, as the focus is rather on clarifying ambiguous word meanings.

The analysis has shown some of the nouns and expressions to be part of what could be termed *funeralspeak*, as many of the spells relate to funerals. The expression *bælfýra mæst*, which appears in the already discussed spell *Astyre. Wæcce on sæbát bælfýr[a] mæst* (“Guide. I watch the funeral fire on the boat”), cast by Merlin as the final goodbye to Freya in “The Lady of the Lake,” is in fact found in *Beowulf*. Describing the hero’s “magnificent cremation in superlative terms” (Owen-Crocker 2000: 92), it translates as “the greatest of funeral fires”. Likewise, the funeral-themed *bælwylm* (“flames of a funeral-fire”) occurs in the somewhat puzzling spell *Lyft sy þe in bælwylm[e] ac forhienan* (*se wiðere*, this part is not heard in the episode)! This one is cast by Merlin in “The Mark of Nimueh,” as he fights the Afanc (a creature of Nimueh), and literally means: “Air is thee (acc. /dat. /inst.) in fire’s heat but defeat (inf.) (the/that (n.) hostile)”.

*In sibbe gerest(e)* is the final spell and the last bit of Old English in the series. It is spoken by Merlin, with his hand placed on (the now dead) Arthur's forehead. The scene delivers another brilliant performance by Colin Morgan and ends with a boat carrying Arthur's body to Avalon. The phrase was probably supposed to fill in for an Old English version of "Rest in peace" (an abbreviation of the Latin *Requiescat in pace*). The noun *sib(b)* denotes "relationship, kinship, friendship, love, happiness" (hence *sibling*) and "peace," too, although this does not seem to be its most common meaning. It has, however, been translated as "peace" in a number of instances in *The Homilies of the Anglo-Saxon Church*:

*Witodlice on swa micelre sibbe wæs Crist acenned* ("Verily in such great peace was Christ born"); ... *þurh his acennednysse men beoð gebigede to anes geleafan sibbe* ("through his birth men shall be inclined to the peace of one faith"); ... *Sy wuldor Gode on heannyssum, and on eorðan sibb mannum...* ("Be glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men...").

A very interesting analysis, offered by a fan (Linda), has found *sibb* to have been "used by Bede in his *Ecclesiastical History* and in Layamon's *Brut* to refer to the peace that comes after war, when two sides have finally reconciled". It also put forth a comparison with the Old English noun *frip* ("peace, freedom from molestation, security guaranteed by law to those under special protection, e. g. that of the Church; peace as opposed to strife, discord") and inspired further research into neighbouring Germanic languages which has found them to employ a similar noun for the phrase "rest in peace": German *Ruhe in Frieden*, Danish and Norwegian *Hvil i fred*, Dutch *Rust in vrede*, Icelandic *Hvíli í friði*, and Swedish *Vila i frid*.

The German *Achtung* ("attention, esteem, respect") seems to have found its way into the spell *Onhrine* (imp.) *achtung bregdan* (inf.), which has a book "slide to Merlin on the table and open up" ("Valiant"). Translated as "Lay hold of honor, move it quickly," it remains a rather unusual word choice, considering the purpose of the spell. Unusual is also the almost unidentifiable word class of *ryne* in the spell *Aliese duru rýne* ("Open uninterrupted the door;" "The Poisoned Chalice"), as it is in fact a noun, the meaning of which implies a "running, onward course, course of life, flux, extent," and is even reminiscent of *rune* in that it also refers to a "mystery, mysterious saying". *Sawolduru* is an interesting coinage, by probably the translators themselves, which appears in the spell Gaius repeatedly utters in his struggle to destroy the mantichore's portal in "Love in the Time of Dragons": *Ado þas sawolduru!* ("Destroy this spirit-gate!"). As a compound of the two Old English nouns, *sawol* ("the soul") and *duru* ("an opening, a door"), it could even perhaps classify as a (modern) kenning.

The “Old Merlin” escapes being burnt at the stake by making the fire grow with the spell *Intende lig, intende lig!* (“Queen of Hearts”). The translation (“Fire, attack! Fire attack!”) seems convenient for the scene but *lí(e)g* is an Old English word for “flame, lighting,” whereas *intend* has been found to signify a “persecutor”. There is a similar sounding verb, *ontendan*, with the meaning “to kindle, set fire to, to fire”. The translators appear to have put the constructions *swilce swa* (“in the same way, just as, as, like”) and *swa swa* (“so as, as as, so that”) to use in the spells *Hoppaþ nu swilce swá lieg* (sg.) *fleogan* (inf.) (“Dance now just as flames with wings;” “The Lady of the Lake”) and *Fleoge þu swa swa se windræs grimsaþ* (“Fly you so that the storm of wind rages;” “With All My Heart”). Merlin creates a horse figure out of smoke (“The Witchfinder”) by means of the cleverly designed spell *Hors, beride þá* (acc.pl.) *heofonum* (dat.pl.), which literally translates as “Horse, surround/ride around the sky/heaven”. He attempts to “disenchant” Arthur in “Sweet Dreams”: *Abuge ágláccræft* (n./acc.)! *Abuge ágláccræft!* *Abuge ágláccræft* (“Be turned away from evil arts! Be turned away from evil arts! Be turned away from evil arts!”). If it wasn’t for the context, though, the spell would leave us guessing its meaning since the verb *âbûgan* (“to bow, bend, incline, withdraw, submit”) can suggest both a turning to and turning from.

The ambiguous spell that cures Arthur in “The Crystal Cave” involves the adverb *wel* (“well, very”), the adjective *cene* (“keen, force, bold, brave”) and the noun *hol* (“hollow place, cave, hole”) in the dative case: *Wel cene hole*. The remarkably different translation “Do well to the perforation” can perhaps be supported by the form *cene* also appearing as the imperative of the verb *cennan* (“to beget, create, bring forth, produce, declare”). *Licsar ge staðol nu* is another spell from this episode, which, interestingly, seems to contain only healing spells. “Wound you support now” is the literal translation (“support” is used as a noun). *Ge hailige*, also employed for healing purposes (“The Coming of Arthur: Part One”), is probably *Ge halige* (imp. /subjunct.), “You heal”. The less comprehensible spell *Ic us bisen hræð tán hwanon* (“I for/to us example/pattern/model quick branch whence”) is used by Merlin to copy a page from the book on “Northumbrian nobility” and insert Lancelot’s name (“Lancelot”). *Organ* (“canticle, song, voice”) *horwiht* (adj. *horweht*: “foul, filthy, dirty;” verb *horwian/horgian*: “to defile”) *dolg* (“wound, scar, cut”), the second sentence of the already analysed spell *Þærinne ymbcierran* from “Valiant,” appears as vague.

The absence of commas and conjunctions makes it difficult to interpret the exact meaning of the spells *Feormian dust rénian* (“Clean dust depose”) and *Bebiede þe arisan ablinnan* (“I command you to arise cease”) from “A Remedy to Cure All Ills”. The latter spell is repeated once more at the end of the episode, with *Ablinnan* as a separate sentence. It is also rather difficult to discern whether Merlin whispers *Offeal* or *Opfiel æstel* in “Goblin’s Gold,” although the first seems

to be the case. Nevertheless, both verbs convey perhaps too strong and imprecise meanings (“fall upon, kill by falling, destroy;” “fall off, decline, decay, fall away”) for a spell which Merlin uses only to distract Geoffrey Monmouth, by making an object from a library shelf fall on his foot. He also causes “part of the vault roof” to fall on Morgana (“The Tears of Uther Pendragon: Part Two”): *Feoll bu brand! Feoll* is the past tense of the verb *feallan*, *bu* stands for “dwelling, habitation,” whereas *brand* designates “fire-brand, flame, torch”. The baffling word order further complicates the spell *Ecg* (“sword,” nom.) *geteoh þing* (“thing, object,” nom. /acc., sg. /pl.) *to* (“to”), which “attaches iron tools” to a sword (“The Tears of Uther Pendragon: Part One”), as it could not be determined with certainty whether *geteoh* is a noun (“matter, material, instruments”) or some form of the verb *geteohian* (“to appoint, determine, decree, assign”) or even *geteon* (“to draw/bind together, lead, appoint, assign, cause”).

The enchantment by means of which Merlin attempts to convert sand back into water (“The Labyrinth of Gedref”) is also unclear: *Gréot gecumen leccan. Gecumen gé drý wæter* (“Good sand arrived. Water arrived with the sorcerer”). As *gecumen* seems to be the past participle of *cuman* (“to come”), the first sentence presumably means “moisten (inf.) the sand that came”. Drawing perhaps on the original meaning of *ge* (“with”), before it came to be used as a prefix, the second part might translate as “came with sorcerer water”. This could imply (cases notwithstanding) that the water arrived with the sorcerer or that “sorcerer water” (*drý wæter*) was intended by the translators as another novelty. *Ferian æt gylden. Ic búgan þéos. Ferian æt gylden* (“To Kill the King”) is another “conversion” spell which could approximate the translation “Bring (inf.) to golden (adj.). I convert this. Bring to golden,” although the transitivity of the Old English verb *búgan* (“bow, turn, bend, submit, give way, convert”) remains debatable. The feminine *þéos* (“this”) in the nominative case refers to *lead*, which is a neuter noun (*leád*). *Tintregedan* (“Lancelot du Lac”) was probably intended as participle: *Grið fæstne mid þisse tintregedan sawle* (literally: “peace fasten/secure/bind with this tormented soul;” Wiki: ‘Give peace to this tormented soul’). First meaning “home, domicile,” *grið* was used in plural “during the struggles with the Danes” to signify “truce, peace limited to place or time, asylum”.

The word *wreop* renders the following spell enigmatic: *Sceadu hine wreop* (“Arthur’s Bane: Part One”). It is cast on Gwaine to “cover him with shadow,” although *wreop* as such hasn’t been found in Old English dictionaries. Similar forms do exist (*wræp*, *wræpan*) and the verb *wræpian* is perhaps closest in meaning: “to prop, stay, support, sustain”. The enchantment which heals Sir Leon (“The Coming of Arthur: Part One”), *Butan þæt cwalu. Hrðe þon aidlian. Hrðe þon eðian. Bot ond tile* (“Out of a violent death. Quickly make it no longer useless. Quickly breathe now. Help him and



cure him”), appears interesting for both its grammar and vocabulary. *Hr(e)ðe* and *þon* (*ðon*) are adverbs meaning “quickly, immediately” and “then, now” respectively. *Butan* is an adverb too (“without, outside”) but can also act as a preposition (“out of, outside of”), which requires the dative case, and a conjunction (collocated with *þæt* it acquires the meaning “except, unless”). If it was a preposition, then *cwalu* (“quelling with weapons, torment, a violent death, slaughter, destruction”) and *þæt* (“the/that,” neuter) would take the dative inflection, *þære cwale*, with the demonstrative in the appropriate gender. Since *cwalu* is the nominative case, the translation “unless violent death,” can be argued for, too. The verbs *aidlian* (“to make useless, frustrate, empty, annul”) and *eðian* (“to breathe”) are retained in the infinitive, whereas the forms *bot* and *tile* can be justified as nouns and as imperatives, the latter even as an adjective .

Merlin’s spell which is supposed to bring out Lady Catrina’s “true nature,” *Hierste þæt iecen sóna* (“The Beauty and the Beast: Part One”), appears demanding for its ambiguous word meanings (*hierstan/hyrstan*, “to fry, scorch, pain; decorate”) and grammatical forms (*iecen* as the subjunctive plural of the verb *iecan*, “to increase, enlarge, augment”). Detailed analysis reveals it might have been intended to mean: “Pain (v.) so that it [the effect of the spell or perhaps Catrina’s “true nature”] is increased immediately” (Wiki: “Let the pain be increased at once”). Or perhaps *iecen* is *ecen* (“great, powerful”) and *sona*, *son* (“music”) (although the cases and *þæt* do not match). The same episode presents another puzzling spell as Catrina herself enchants a necklace:  *Ic nemne þá grædige, yfele, formolsnung[e]. (Cume lán and) mé getryme! Nu meht þú begalan. Nu meht þú begalan.* The translation, “I speak to do evil, greedy corruption. Come and grant me rapture. Behold, mighty you are to be enchanted,” calls for revision, as the Old English *nemnian* (“name, address, mention, invoke”) does not imply that she “speak to do” but rather “invoke, evil, greedy corruption”. The construction of the final sentence does not suggest the passive voice, and neither does the context, as the necklace is to put the spell on Uther: “Now you may enchant”. The bracketed part does not occur in the episode and the imperative *mé getryme* is Catrina’s appeal for the spell to “make me strong”.

Nimueh’s mysterious spells *Diegol cnytte, gewitte me yst, aliese hine, to Camelot, he cymþ* (“The Mark of Nimueh”) and *Diegol cnytte, gewitte me yst, þa tacnian me yst þonne ieceþ sicle. Diegol cnytte, gewitte me yst, þa tacnian me yst þonne ieceþ sicle. Swilte ar ond calan, drædan mordor[mordres?], to Camelot he cymþ* (“The Poisoned Chalice”) allow for different interpretations due to the polysemy of the words involved (*witan*, for instance; this is probably what is meant by *gewitte*, as the form as such was not found). The translation for the first spell, found on Wiki, reads: “Illuminate the darkness, let me see through the rough water, deliver him, he comes to Camelot”.

Whereas *illuminate* and *rough water* remain disputable, the sentence might also imply the following: “Darkness bind, guard me storm, release him, to Camelot he comes”. The ambiguity contained in the second spell pertains to *sicle*, preceded by the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular marker *-þ* (*ieceþ*) suggesting it to be a noun in the nominative case. Denoting “sicle, shekel,” the Old English noun appears ill-fitting in the context of the spell, so it is more likely related to the adjective *sicol* (“in bad health, sickly”). *Sicle* might also be the mispronounced *sicet* (“sigh, groan”), which seems appropriate, considering the episode’s plot, as Arthur is on a quest to save the dying Merlin. Wiki translates it as “pain”:

“Illuminate the darkness, let me see through the rough water, mark the water when the pain is increased. Illuminate the darkness, let me see through the rough water, mark the water when the pain is increased. Kill the servant and may he become cold, fear the death, he comes to Camelot”.

Minor grammatical modifications provided, the spell could be understood to mean, more literally: “Darkness bind, guard me storm, indicate (inf.), storm, when the pain is increased. Darkness bind, guard me storm, indicate, storm, when the pain is increased. Die servant and grow (inf.) cold, fear (inf.) death, to Camelot he comes”.

Nimueh summons a wraith (“Excalibur”) with the words: *Gehiere mé wan cniht áwæc! Beo strangra ond steacra for breçþ wáne. Uparis wærc, Uther Pendragon*. Whereas the first sentence is easily translated (“Hear/obey me absent knight, arise!” is a more likely translation than Wiki’s “I judge. Absent knight, arise!”; *cniht* originally referred to a “boy, servant” ), the second entails several issues. *Strangra* seems to be the comparative of *strang* (“strong, powerful, mighty”) but *steacra* is probably the adjective *stearc* (“stiff, rigid, stern, harsh, strong;” *stearcra* is the genitive plural for all genders) as no other similar form exists in Old English dictionaries (Wiki: “I am powerful and unbending”). It is also difficult to identify parts of speech in the rest of the sentence since it is uncertain whether it says *for breçþ wane* or *forbrec þa wane* (phonetic spelling). Wiki’s translation, “for lamenting grief,” seems to imply the first (the Old English grammatical construction literally reads: “for grief I lament”; although *wane* could also be the Old English adjective which appears in the first sentence of the spell, in the feminine gender). In the second case *wane* would be a noun (“want, lack”) in the dative case, even though *forbrec* (“break”) would require the accusative *þone wanan*. This interpretation is supported by the context, as the knight’s/wraith’s absence is finally “broken” by Nimueh’s spell, and he is brought to life to avenge his death. The final part literally translates “Rise up anguish, Uther Pendragon,” while Wiki seems to make sense of it by rendering Uther the indirect object: “Raise up; anguish to Uther Pendragon”.

Trickler’s love spell (“Sweet Dreams”), *Alese... Lufað he hie þonne he onwæcnaþ. Biþ his hyht þæt he her seón mote ána oftie þonne ealle mán*, appears relatively unproblematic (“Choose ... He loves her when he awakes. May it be his joy...”) until *he her seón mote ána oftie þonne ealle mán* is to be interpreted. Wiki’s debatable translation (“that here he strains to plead a withholding when entirely wicked”) will have to suffice here, for any attempt at further analysis would require greater knowledge of Old English phonetics and phonology, as Trickler’s words in the episode seem to differ from the transcript. Instead of *Lease fearr anga* (“Set the solitary beast free”), *Ge beluce* (“Ye lock”) is heard in “Lancelot and Guinevere” when Merlin locks Hengist in the cage with wild beasts. Morgause’s “Rood spell” (*Hider eft funde on þisse ne middangeard þín suna wæs*) seems to have been imagined as a longer enchantment, although its continuation (*...þæt þu þonne wile great þone þe on þissum lænum lif þe geholian wæs*; “...when you bound that, you obtained this gift in this life”) does not appear in “The Sins of the Father”.

In “The Tears of Uther Pendragon: Part One,” she enchants the mandrake root: *Mid þæm wundorcræft[e] þæs ealdan æwe ic þe hate nime Utheres wopdropan ond þa gemengan mid his blod[e]. Sy he under wittig ond deofol seocnes his heorte[/an] afylþ* (“With that power that is ancient I curse you fervidly, I take Uther’s tears and I mix those with his blood. He is insane and an evil sickness causes his heart to fall.”). *Wundorcræft þæs ealdan* is literally “miraculous power of the old (sg.)” (or perhaps even of “a great age”), *æwean* means, more precisely, “to despise, condemn, scorn,” and the form *hate* (“hotly”) is also the verb *hatan* (“order, command, bid, promise, name, call”), although the translation “fervidly” seems more appropriate. *Under wittig* (the collocation appears to be of the translators’ own invention) would translate something like “underwise,” not in the sense of lacking wisdom, or knowledge, but rather of not being in one’s right mind, which is the case with Uther in this episode (as pointed out by Wiki). *Deofol seocness* (“devil sickness”) “fills up his heart,” rather than causing it to fall.

The three soothsayers of the Disir chant (“The Disir”):

*Heo cwæþ. Se wyrdes last biþ ansiene. Nu sind his folma blodige ond þa ne mæg he feormian. His endetima is on ofost. Heo cwæþ. Se wyrdes last biþ ansiene. Nu sind his folma blodige ond þa ne mæg he feormian. His endetima is on ofost*

(“She spoke. The accomplishment of his fate is visible. Now his hands are bloody and he cannot cleanse them. The end of his life is in haste. She spoke. The accomplishment of his fate is visible. Now his hands are bloody and he cannot cleanse them. The end of his life is in haste.”).

The more common meaning of *last*, translated as *accomplishment*, is “(foot)step, sole of the foot, track, trace,” whereas *ansiene*, handled by the translation as the adjective *visible*, is in fact the noun *ansien* (“form, figure, presence, view, sight”). The use of the Old English *folma* for “hands” is considered poetic, and the expression *on ofoste* (“in haste”) is found in *Beowulf* (2747, 2783, 3090) (Klaeber 1922: 103, 104, 116). Morgana’s words (“The Wicked Day”) *Seolfor þræd aþring winstre, aþring yfele, aþring wiþ ealle gode cræfte*, the purpose of which is to counteract the effects of Merlin’s healing spell, remain a little unclear in terms of grammar as the cases do not quite match the translation: “Silver thread, rush to the left-hand path; rush to evil; rush against every good skill”. *Abidan* in *Ic þín[e] sáwol hér beluce, abide þæt ic þé áliese* (“I shut in your noble soul and proclaim that I liberate you”) means “to wait (for), remain,” rather than “to proclaim,” and *her* could also refer to “here,” as the adjective (“noble, excellent, sublime”) would probably have to take the weak inflection *-an*.

Last, but not least, the spell *Gegadre anne here fram þisse bune[an] ond heora blod. Swa þæt hie ne abyg[a]ð ond ne swilteap naht, ac leofaap a on ecnesse* (“I gather the entire army and their blood by this Cup. So that they won’t submit and they’ll never die (at all), but (that) they’ll live forever”), by means of which Morgause enchants the Cup of Life (“The Coming of Arthur: Part One”), offers a great deal of interesting Old English grammar and vocabulary for analysis. It demonstrates, for instance, the instrumental use of the preposition *fram* (as seen in the translation “by this Cup,”), and the double negation with *naht* (“not, not at all”). It also makes use of the Old English phrase *a on ecnesse* (“for ever and ever”).

### 3.2.1. *Merlin’s Old English literature*

Literature seems to have been another source of magic for the writers of *Merlin* as they turn to Old English poems in search for spells. This borrowing strategy has been employed in several enchantments which prove to be composed of lines taken from *Beowulf*, *The Ruin* (Merlin Wiki) and *The Dream of the Rood*.

Bits and pieces of *Beowulf* are scattered throughout an entire episode of season one. “The Poisoned Chalice” features interrupted spells by the unconscious Merlin and the High Priestess Nimueh who attempts to hinder Arthur’s quest that will save Merlin’s life. The episode opens with the already analysed incantation by Nimueh (*Diegol cyntte...*), although Wiki lists another spell, attributing it to the “longest epic poem in Old English” (The British Library 2009). The adapted lines in question (*We-Gar Dena ...*) do indeed come from *Beowulf* (qtd. in Crystal 2003: 11) but the spell is not heard in the show. The transcript contains an extended version of another spell which

supposedly includes a verse from *Beowulf*, (*He þæs frore geband, weox under wolcnum, weorþmynde þah*). *Eorðe ac stanas hiersumaþ me. Ic can stanas tobrytan. Hiersumaþ me!*, but the part in brackets, which does belong to the Old English poem (qtd. in Crystal 2003: 11), hasn't been used either, whereas the rest means: "Earth and stones, obey me. I have the knowledge to break the stones into pieces. Obey me" (Merlin Wiki). There are, however, a few vague (and possibly mispronounced) lines "muttered" by Merlin and one by Gaius which hint at *Beowulf*.

The first one, *Him? Liffrea, wuldres wealdend, woroldare forgeaf*, matches the poem's verses 16-17 (*Him þæs liffrea, wuldres wealdend, woroldare forgeaf*), which translate as: "the Lord endowed him, the Wielder of Wonder, with world's renown" (Klaeber 1922: 1; Gummere 1910). The next one begins with Arthur's name inserted into what appear to be verses 20-23 (Klaeber 1922: 1; Gummere 1910)

*Swa sceal geong guma gode gewyrcean, fromum feohgiftum on fæder bearme, þæt hine on ylde eft gewunigen wilgesipas, þonne wig cume, leode gelæsten; lofdædum sceal*

("So becomes it a youth to quit him well, with his father's friends, by fee and gift, that to aid him, aged, in after days, come warriors willing, should war draw nigh, liegemen loyal: by lauded deeds"),

as the following is found in the script: *Arthur – swa sceal geong – guma gode – gewyrcean*. But Merlin actually stops right after *sceal*, only to continue with *eft gewunigen wilgesipas, þonne wig cume* in a later scene. *Fromum feohgiftum on fæder bearme*. *Fromum feohgiftum* is the enchantment he speaks to create a guiding light to assist Arthur. Last, but not least, is Gaius's effort to save Merlin. His incantation, *Seópan ærest wearð feasceaft funden. Denum æfter dom. Dreamleas gebad he gewann langsum*, seems to be a blend of verses 6-7 (*Syððan ærest wearð feasceaft funden*; "Since erst he lay friendless, a foundling") and 1720-22 (*Denum æfter dome; dreamleas gebad þæt he þæs gewinnes weorc þrowade, leodbealo longsum*; "to Danes as was due; he endured all joyless strain of struggle and stress of woe") (Klaeber 1922: 1, 64; Gummere 1910).

The writers haven't stated their reasons for incorporating *Beowulf* (and other) lines into their own, which leaves us guessing whether it was on their mind to perhaps draw a parallel between the two hero stories or simply experiment with pastiche. Whereas most of the verses can be interpreted to fit the scenes, the one mentioning Danes could've perhaps been omitted.

In “The Sins of the Father” (episode eight, season two) we come across another work of Old English literature, the 8<sup>th</sup>-century poem *The Dream of The Rood*, an excerpt of which is carved on the Ruthwell Cross in the runic script (Crystal 2003: 9). The poem recounts the Dreamer’s vision of the cross on which Jesus was crucified, as well as the Rood’s own story, told from the inanimate object’s point of view (Rambaran-Olm 2002). Its unique language assigns it a remarkable place in Old English literature, for it stands out with its “fresh words and phrases” employed as a “device of unexampled effectiveness in making vivid an event about which [for Christians] the entire history of the world revolved” (Rambaran-Olm 2002). *Merlin* seems to have borrowed and slightly adjusted two verses for the purposes of two similar spells spoken by Morgause, Morgana’s half-sister in the show. The actress’ (Emilia Fox) education could be credited for her fluency in pronunciation, as she mentions picking up some “Anglo-Saxon” during her university days (“Talking Spellish”).

The first scene involving “the Rood spell” has Morgause “summon Igraine,” Arthur’s mother, “from the dead”. The original (Rambaran-Olm 2002) *Ārās mid his miclan mihte mannum tō helpe* (101-102; “arose again to help men with his great power”) was changed to *Aris(e) mid min miclan mihte þín suna to helpe*. The past tense *arās* was appropriately converted to the imperative *aris*, and, accordingly, the possessive *his* becomes *min*, or rather *minre*, if the declension rules are applied. Instead of “helping men,” Igraine reveals to her *son* that he too was “born of magic”. Thus, the incantation would be translated as: “Arise with my great power to help your son”. The possessive *þín* should take the dative form (*þínum*). The spell includes one more sentence, *Hider eft funde on þisse ne middangeard þín suna wæs*, also adapted from *The Rood* (103-104) and then modified. The negating *ne* was inserted into the original *Hider eft fundaþ on þysne middangeard mancynn sēcan* (“Hither again [the Lord, Himself] will set out into this world to seek mankind”), and the last two words were replaced with *þín suna wæs* (“your son was”). *Fundaþ*, 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular of the verb *fundian* (“to endeavour to find, tend to, aspire to, strive, go forward, hasten, intend, desire”) was substituted for its imperative form, *funde*. This sentence was in fact split into two at the beginning of the episode as Morgause declares “battle for Arthur’s soul”: *Hider eft funde. On þisse ne middangeard* (“Again, set out from here. Not in this world.”). Whereas the meaning of this one is not problematic, the previous spell, or at least its literal translation (“Hither again set out in(to) this not world your son was”) might be less well understood. Perhaps Arthur, aided by magic, is to enter “this not world” in which his mother abides, which was the case with his visit to his late father in “The Death Song of Uther Pendragon”. The scene with Igraine could also suggest that the world of the living is the “not world” into which she is summoned to meet her son.

The opening episode of season five (“Arthur’s Bane: Part One”) brings another Old English poem to the small screen, entitled *The Ruin* (Merlin Wiki). Interestingly, the text of the poem has been damaged (possibly by fire), suffering the same destiny as the ruined city it depicts (Magennis 2006).

Unlike the previous two, this borrowing seems more straightforward. Almost intact verses make up the sorcerer Ruadan’s prayer:

*Crungon walo wide, cwoman woldagas, swylt eall fornom secgrofra wera, wurdon hyra wigsteal westen stapolas, brosnade burgsteall. Betend crungon hergas to hrusan. Forpon pas hofu dreorgiad, ond paes teaforgeapa tigelum sceaded. Crungon walo wide, cwoman woldagas ond paes teaforgeapa tigelum sceaded hrostbeages hrof..*

The prayer follows the original (University of Virginia),

*Crungon walo wide, cwoman woldagas, swylt eall fornom secgrofra wera; wurdon hyra wigsteal westen stapolas, brosnade burgsteall. Betend crungon hergas to hrusan. Forpon þas hofu dreorgiað, ond þæs teaforgeapa tigelum sceadeð hrostbeages hrof,*

for the most part, only to have Ruadan’s first (*Crungon walo wide, cwoman woldagas*) and last (*ond paes teaforgeapa tigelum sceaded*) line repeat after *sceaded* (*sceadeð*), before it continues with *hrostbeages hrof* and is interrupted by his daughter’s arrival. A possible translation (of the original) goes like this (Echard):

“Slaughter spread wide, pestilence arose, and death took all those brave men away. Their bulwarks were broken, their halls laid waste, the cities crumbled, those who would repair it laid in the earth. And so these halls are empty, and the curved arch sheds its tiles, torn from the roof...”

### 3.3 One-word spells

These spells are simple one-word sentences uttered by different characters in the show for the purpose of performing brief, instant acts of magic, such as opening a door, starting a fire or producing light. Most of them draw on the use of verbs, either in their imperative or infinitive form.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> person singular imperative of the verb *tospringan* (“to spring apart, fly asunder, crack”), *tospringe*, is employed on several occasions as a spell that “quickly opens” cabinets (“Beauty and the Beast: Part Two”), cupboards (“The Witchfinder”), doors (“The Witch’s

Quickening”) and cells (“The Curse of Cornelius Sigan;” “The Lady of the Lake”), and blows off gates (“The Nightmare Begins”). The spell spoken by Merlin to open Valiant’s door in the second episode of season one is the Old English verb *aliesan*. *Merlin the Complete Guide* (qtd. in Merlin Wiki) translates it as “open” but dictionaries of Old English state its meaning to be “to loosen, let loose, free, redeem, release, absolve,” which makes it a rather odd choice in this context. Similar effects are achieved by means of another two spells. Merlin rescues Gwen in “The Death Song of Uther Pendragon: Part One” as he commands the door to *Aspring(e)*. The Old English verb *aspringan*, meaning “to spring up, arise, originate, break forth” is used here in its imperative form (2<sup>nd</sup> person singular). The infinitive *Onbregdan* (“to move quickly, start up, burst open”) enchants a door (“The Mark of Nimueh,” and summons Aulfric’s staff (“The Gates of Avalon”). *Merlin the Complete Guide* (qtd. in Merlin Wiki) translates both instances as simply “(move) here”. *Bærne* (2<sup>nd</sup> person singular imperative) and *Forbearnan* (infinitive) denote similar actions (“to cause to burn, burn up, consume by fire, kindle, burn, light, set on fire”) and are used interchangeably by Merlin to magically create fire for different purposes (“The Nightmare Begins, The Tears of Uther Pendragon: Part Two;” “The Sorcerer’s Shadow;” “The Moment of Truth”; “The Witchfinder”).

The spell *Ahatian* (“to become hot”) heats a bandit’s sword in “The Moment of Truth”. *Gestillan* (“to rest, cease, be still, quiet, mute”) enchants a broom, thus stopping it from falling to the floor and waking up Gaius (“The Nightmare Begins”). *Scildan* (“to shield, protect, guard, defend”) protects Merlin “from Kilgharrah’s fiery breath,” and *Gehæftan* (“to bind, seize, arrest, detain, imprison”) has him tied up in “The Labyrinth of Gedref”. The already discussed *Acwele* is heard several times in “To Kill the King,” but also in “The Gates of Avalon,” one of the episodes involving Old Irish spells and Sidhe magic. *Snæde* (*snædan*, “to cut, slice, lop off, hew, prune, cut branches off trees”) breaks the powerful Rowan staff into pieces (“The Tears of Uther Pendragon: Part Two”). *Astrice* (*astrican*, “to strike”) destroys a gargoyle come to life in “The Curse of Cornelius Sigan” and occurs in two other episodes too (“Le Morte d’Arthur”; “The Fires of Idirsholas”). Merlin commands a boat to move using two different spells. *Gesegle* (*geseglian*, “to sail”) is employed in “The Coming of Arthur: Part Two,” and *Astyre* (*astyran*, “to steer, guide, control”) appears to achieve the same magical effect in “Le Morte d’Arthur”. *Feall* (*feallan*, “to fall, fall down, fail, decay”) too is spoken by Merlin, in order to “destroy part of the ice-cliff” and escape the Saxons in the snowy atmosphere of “Arthur’s Bane: Part Two”. *Wearp* (past tense) is another one by Merlin but this time in a much more relaxed surroundings, in the tavern, as he relies on his magic to win at dice (“The Diamond of the Day: Part One”).



Dices seem to be evoked in Morgana's spell *Tæfle*, which throws Merlin, Arthur and the knights on the ground ("The Sword in the Stone: Part One"). It is not clear whether the form in question is the imperative of the verb *tæflan/tæflian* ("to gamble, game") or the adjective *tæfle* ("given to play, given to dice-playing"). Both are possible but the adjective might have to take the plural form if it is to refer to those who are about to be spellbound. Gaius's *Oferswinge* (*oferswingan*, "to strike through") sends Morgause against a wall ("The Coming of Arthur: Part Two"). *Atæse* (*atæsan*, "to wear out, injure, strike, smite, tear with a weapon") is an attempt by the Dochraid to "stab Emrys with a flying dagger" in one of the funniest episodes, "With All My Heart," which features Merlin dressed up as the sorceress Dolma and once again brings out Morgan's impressive range of acting skills. It was quite imaginative of the translators to come up with the verb *strangian* ("to grow strong, be strong, prevail, flourish, to move or act with energy, vigour, force") for the scene in the first part of the final episode, "The Diamond of the Day," when Merlin, exhausted after having been attacked by a creature, fails to command a cup to come to him and repeatedly utters *Strangap* (presumably 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular but possibly plural, present tense, as this couldn't be verified by Old English grammars and vocabularies), realizing he's lost his magic.

When it comes to the one-word spells which make use of nouns, the writers appear to have resorted to obvious, unambiguous vocabulary choices, as in the following cases: *Swefn* ("sleep, dream, vision") induces sleep ("A Remedy to Cure All Ills"), *Leoht* ("light, daylight") creates light ("The Darkest Hour: Part One"), *Ligfyr* ("fire, flaming fire") makes a fire ("The Kindness of Strangers"), *Draca* ("dragon, sea-monster, serpent") creates a dragon out of flames ("The Moment of Truth"), and *Blostma* ("blossom, bloom, flower") produces a flower ("The Lady of the Lake"). *Bryne* ("burning, conflagration, fire, flame, heat") and *Leohtbora* ("light-bearer") both light torches ("The Lady of the Lake;" "Excalibur"), whereas *Andslyht* ("blow") enchants leaves to cover Merlin's and Arthur's tracks on their way to Avalon in the very last episode, "The Diamond of the Day". The remaining two spells were perhaps a bit more unusual word choices. The High Priestess Nimueh summons "timely rain(s)," *Tidrenas*, to pour into the Cup of Life in season one finale, "Le Morte d'Arthur". The amusing effect of *Ceolwærc* ("The Witchfinder"), which has a toad come out of the witchfinder's throat, was not evident immediately as the spell was cast in a previous scene (during his sleep). The Old English noun, in fact, refers to "pain in the throat".

### 3.4. Unaltered spells

This final category comprises the spells which have been found to adhere to Old English grammatical rules and display unambiguous vocabulary, for the most part. As these sentences do not appear as problematic as the previous ones, the aim of the discussion will be to identify the patterns which seem to be behind their construction and consequently group them into appropriate categories, as well as to improve the translation (where necessary).

The analysis has shown most of these spells to function as commands or instructions, similarly to the one-word spells. They could be classified, for instance, on the basis of whether or not the invocations include an “addressee”. The following spells appear to be composed of the addressee and the verb (imperative or infinitive) explaining what action is to be performed (by the addressee). Some of them begin with the addressee: *Bord, wiþ stende hine* (“Board, withstand him;” “Goblin’s Gold”); *Unmicel snaca, suge þa soþan swilcnesse* (“Little snake, suck his true nature;” “The Sword in the Stone Part One”); *Binne tófléon* (“Bins, be dispersed;” “Lancelot and Guinevere”), *Þrosm tohweorfe* (“Smoke, be parted;” “Aithusa”); *Fyr wiþere* (“Fire, resist;” “The Secret Sharer”). Others foreground the action: *Wace wærlic/ierlic* (“Vile [Languish] wary/angry one;” “A Remedy to Cure All Ills”); *Ætslide bencpel* (“Bench, slide away;” “Gwayne”); *Fordwin wamm* (“Stain, vanish;” “The Darkest Hour: Part One”); *Ablinn ðu; forlæte ðu nu!* (“You, leave off; you, surrender now!”; “A Servant of Two Masters”); *Feall hushefen!* (“Ceiling, fall;” “Lamia”); *Færblæd wawe!* (“Sudden blast of wind, blow!”; “A Lesson in Vengeance”). Some of them include an object as well: *Neosie þu þa swaþu* (“You, search out the track;” “The Kindness of Strangers”); *Þurhdrif hie ecg!* (“Sword, pierce her;” “Lamia”).

The (pro)nouns in these spells, however, perform solely as direct objects, as there are no addressees: *Onbinde þa téage* (“Unbind the strap;” “The Once and Future Queen”); *Dæfte þæt bed* (“Ready that bed;” “The Witchfinder”); *Onháte þá wæter* (“Heat the water;” “The Lady of the Lake”); *Abricap benda* (“Break the chains;” “The Tears of Uther Pendragon: Part One” possibly N!); *Acwence þa bælblyse* (“Extinguish this blaze;” “The Secret Sharer”); *Gerihlaec me* (“Guide/direct me;” “The Coming of Arthur: Part Two”); *Geondlihte gesweorc min!* (“Illuminate my darkness;” “The Coming of Arthur: Part Two”); *Bedyrne ús! Astýre ús þanonweard* (“Conceal us! Guide us away from here;” “The Fires of Idirsholas”). Some of them include an indirect object (*Fultume me*, “Help me;” “The Coming of Arthur: Part Two”) and some contain both the direct and the indirect object (*Ætie mé þá þé ic séce*, “Show me those I seek;” “The Sins of the Father”).

The following spells involve more demanding sentences, which the translators seem to have handled very well as they appear impeccable, in terms of both their grammar and vocabulary: *Ontende þisne wyrm þæt he licgeþ unastyred a butan ende!* (“Kindle this serpent so that it will lie/it lies unmoved forever without end!”; “A Servant of Two Masters”); *Ontende eallne Þæs drycraeftes hire sawle!* (“Kindle all [of] the magic of her soul;” “The Sword in the Stone: Part Two”); *Write þás gelicnesse ond afæstne þa þæm clute þa* (“Incise this copy and [then] fix it to the piece of cloth;” “The Hunter’s Heart”).

Other spells could be categorized according to their purpose as they retain the same verb (or its synonym), changing only the subject or the object, or (rarely) adding an adverb. As a number of spells had to do with fire, the imperative *forbærne* and its synonyms were often employed: *Forbærne yfel!* (“I burn you, moral evil!”; “A Remedy to Cure All Ills”); *Forbærne firgenholt* (“Mountain wood, burn;” “The Gates of Avalon”); *Forbærne! Ácwele!* (“Burn up! Destroy!”; “Le Morte d’Arthur”); *Forbærne æltæwelice!* (“Consume by all perfectly good fire;” “The Coming of Arthur: Part One”); *Gar onbærne* (“Spear, burn;” “The Sins of the Father”); *Ligfyr onbærne swiþe* (“Mighty fire, burn!”; “The Secret Sharer”); *Bæl on bryne!* (“On burning fire!”; “The Sword in the Stone: Part One”). *Bryne*, strictly speaking, is not a verb but a noun (“burning, fire, flame, heat”), and Wiki seems to have tackled the translation very well, considering that it literally says “fire on fire”. *On bryne* might be the verb *onbrinnan* (“to set fire to, kindle, inflame”).

The differently spelled imperative *fleoge/flieh* (perhaps this is not a matter of loose spelling and these are possibly two different verbs, *fly* and *flee*) is used in “flying” spells: *Flieh hráegl* (“Cloth, fly;” “Beauty and the Beast: Part Two”); *Flieh fægð* (“Fly imminent death;” “The Curse of Cornelius Sigan”); *Flieh grima!* (“Helmet, fly!”; “Curse of Cornelius Sigan”); *Flieh! Gár!* (“Fly away! Spear!”; “The Last Dragonlord”); *Forþ fleoge* (“Fly forth!”; “The Secret Sharer;” “The Disir;” “The Diamond of the Day: Part One”); *Fleoge seax forþ!* (“Knife, fly forth!”; “Arthur’s Bane: Part Two”). *Cume* appears to be quite convenient and frequent: *Cume her fyrbryne* (“Come here, conflagration;” “Excalibur”); *Cume þoden* (“Come whirlwind;” “The Moment of Truth”); *Cume her, ping scinnlaece!* (literally: “Come here, thing of magic!”; Wiki: “Come here, anguish of a witch;” “Love in the Time of Dragons”).

The verbs *swefan* (“to sleep”) and *onslæpan* (“to fall asleep, sleep”) are found in sleeping enchantments: *Swefe nu!* (literally: “Sleep now!”; Wiki: “Now send (her) to sleep!”; “Sweet Dreams”); *Onslæp nu!* (“Sleep now!”; “The Secret Sharer”). *Swilte* occurs in the spells which are intended to cause death: *Swilte, Merlin!* (“Die a violent death, Merlin!”; “A Remedy to Cure All

Ills”); *Swilte, gold beorþ* (“Die violently, gold-borne [bright with gold];” “The Gates of Avalon”); *Swilte déor* (literally: “Die, animal;” Wiki: “Kill the animal;” “The Labyrinth of Gedref”). The spells which are used to summon creatures employ the verb (*up*)*astigan* (“to rise, ascend”): *Astige ðu wyrm!* (“You, serpent, rise;” “Arthur’s Bane: Part One”); *Upastige draca!* (“Dragon, rise!”; “The Diamond of the Day: Part Two”). “Unlocking spells,” expectedly, use the verb *onlucan*: *Onluc scrin* (“Open/unlock the box;” “Goblin’s Gold”). The verb *ahreosan* (“to rush, fall, fall down”) appears in the following spells: *Ahríes þæc!* (“Coverlet, fall down!”; “Goblin’s Gold”); *Oferbrædels ahríes!* (“Coverlet, fall down!”; “Goblin’s Gold”); *Stanas ahrsosap!* (“Stones, fall down!”; “The Diamond of the Day: Part One”).

*Folge/hlyste min bebod* seems to form explicit commands: *Sceawere, folge min bebod* (“Mirror, obey my command;” “Beauty and the Beast: Part One”); *Hlyste min niehst bebod* (“Obey my next command;” “The Witchfinder”); *Folge min bebod* (“Obey my command;” “The Witch’s Quickening”). *Bebiede* is also part of “commanding spells”: *Ic bebiede þe ðine cyning cwellan!* (“I command you to kill your king!”; “The Coming of Arthur: Part One”); *Ic ácwice þé. Ic þé bebiede þæt þú ne slæpest! Brimstréam* (“I revive you. I command you not to sleep. Sea!”; “The Fires of Idirsholas”). *Beclýppan* (“to clip, embrace”) is found in *Gesweorc, hine beclýppe!* (“Darkness, clasp him!”; “The Death Song of Uther Pendragon”) and *Beclýppe þinne idese þæt heo hine lyste!* (“Clasp your lady so that she will desire him;” “Lancelot du Lac”). *Ecg* (“edge, sharpness, sword, blade”), being the most important weapon in the show (apart from magic itself), was frequently commanded: *Ecg misse!* (the spell makes Lancelot “drop his sword”; literally: “Sword, miss!”; Wiki: “Lose the sword!”; “Lancelot du Lac”); *Ecg ætstande!* (“Sword, stand still!”; “His Father’s Son”).

Some of the spells begin with the personal pronoun *I* and explain either the action taken by the character casting the spell or its purpose. Merlin, for instance, heals Gwen (“The Hunter’s Heart”) by saying *Ic hæle þina þrowunga* (“I cure your sufferings”). He opens the door in “The Nightmare Begins” by means of a spell that translates as “Yea, I open it quickly” (*Ic ia tóspringe*). In the episode “Beauty and The Beast: Part One” he “breaks a hole in the rocks” (*Ic ábietee þæt stánhol*) and “drives off” Jonas (*Ic þe wiþdrife*).

The translation of the spells *Wyrþ* [sg.] *gatu* [pl.] *fæst[e]!* (“Intelligent and closed gates!”) and *Nu bebiede ic þe þæt þu lætest þine flæsclice gelicnysse. Wyrþ deor!* (“Now I command you to leave behind your carnal body similar to sorrow. Intelligent deer!”) is in need of revision as *wyrþ* is the Old English verb *weorþan* (“to come to be, to be made, come, be”). Hence, Merlin’s spell could

be understood as ordering the “gates [to] become firmly fixed,” (“A Herald of the New Age”) whereas Morgana’s turning Gwen into a deer (“The Hunter’s Heart”) could simply be translated as “Now I command you to leave behind your body. Become a deer” (*flæsclice gelicnysse* literally denotes ‘fleshly/carnal image/resemblance’). *Hatan* appears to mean “to bid, order, command” in the spell *Ic þé geháta, searubunden* (Wiki: “I bound you cunningly;” “The Sins of the Fathers”), the translation of which would read: *I command you, cunningly fastened*. *Hate* is probably the subjunctive of *hatan* in the spell *Min[e] strengest miht hate þe tospringan* (Wiki: “Make my fierce power strong to open you;” “The Tears of Uther Pendragon: Part One”): “May my strongest power command you to open”. *Healte* in *Culter, ic þe healte!* (“Dagger, I hold you;” “Goblin’s Gold”) might also be *hate*, as indicated by phonetic spelling, in which case it would translate: “Dagger, I command you”. Perhaps the first interpretation is more likely as the scene involves Merlin deflecting a dagger, although both appear possible since the pronunciation is slightly blurred by the special effects.

Providing that *slæp* is the accusative case and that *swilce*, translated as “like,” requires the nominative *cwalu*, the enchantment *Acene slæp swilce cwalu. Acene slæp swilce cwalu. Acene slæp swilce cwalu* (“Bring forth sleep resembling violent death. Bring forth sleep resembling violent death. Bring forth sleep resembling violent death;” “The Fires of Idirsholas”) can also be regarded as in accordance with Old English grammatical rules. *Gewyrc an lif* (“Create a life”), Merlin’s spell from the first part of the last episode (“The Diamond of the Day”) which creates a butterfly in his hands, tackles the declension of numerals. According to Quirk and Wrenn, *an* (“one”) can take both the indefinite and the definite inflections, but the latter imply the meaning “alone” (1995: 37). With the neuter noun *lif* in the direct object case, the numeral appears to follow the indefinite declension pattern. The verbless *Swéor[a/as] þá* (“Those columns;” “Lancelot and Guinevere”) is interesting for its word order, in which the noun (which in fact enchants barrels) is postmodified by its demonstrative (unless *þá* is to mean “then”). *Scin scire!* (“Shine brightly;” “The Coming of Arthur: Part two”) is one of the rare spells which makes use of adverbs, as few were encountered throughout the series.

## 4. Conclusion

This paper investigated Old English spells in BBC’s *Merlin*. The aim was to find out whether Old English, used for entertainment purposes such as this TV series, was simply

reconstructed or whether it was inevitably reinvented in the process of “retro-translation,” as the Arthurian story itself. An inquiry into *Merlin*’s Old English grammar and vocabulary was conducted and an attempt was made to answer the following questions: Do the long ago discarded inflections still matter? Are declension and agreement rules for the different parts of speech adhered to? What verb forms have been used? Do Old English words take on new meanings? Are they encountered in different contexts? Finally, what are the strategies employed by the translators? Have they resorted to borrowing or ventured into novel creations?

It is difficult to say whether Old English has been recreated in accordance with the rules of the language or whether it was reinvented, for the analysis reveals *Merlin*’s spells to involve a mixture of preservation and innovation. Old English grammar was neither entirely disregarded nor strictly adhered to. As declension turned out to be the greatest challenge, words were more often than not uninflected for case, gender and number. The direct object was frequently found in the nominative case, whereas the indirect often took the accusative inflection. Case requirements concerning prepositions were not always fulfilled either. Adjectives tended to follow the patterns of the strong declension in general but did not always agree in case and gender with the nouns they modified. Verbs displayed disagreement with the subject on several occasions. The infinitive and the imperative were the most common among verbs, with the former often assuming the function of the latter. The indicative mood was preferred to the subjunctive. The past tense and the passive voice were rarely used. On the contrary, almost half of the spells did not need any revising. Those, however, appeared to be far less complex sentences as they tended to include one or several words only, with the exception of a few more elaborate instances. Most of *Merlin*’s Old English vocabulary rested on common word choices, although there were several less comprehensible spells with puzzling combinations of particular word meanings. Old English literature proved to be a fruitful source of vocabulary as many words, phrases and even entire lines were borrowed or adapted for the purposes of the enchantments. A few novel compounds were noted, although literary borrowings were the more frequent strategy.

So, why *Merlin*? In the words of Crystal, who was referring to the English language (2003: 3): Because it’s fun, beautiful and important. *Merlin* has sparked an interest in something as important (or not) as the roots of the English language by way of telling such a beautiful and fun story, interweaving ancient languages and mythologies with amusing storylines and characters. This paper might be of interest to some *Merlin*/Old English/language lovers, and hopefully will be of use to the diligent *Merlin* fans out there who have already done so much work, researching and translating the spells into various languages, and incorporating them into their own little works of

art. It might provide some answers to those who keep asking questions such as this one (lembas7 2013):

Strangath: (The Diamond of the Day, Part 1) Spell used by Merlin to attempt to summon a cup to his hand. Hopefully this means something like “Come!” and not something basic like “Cup!” which would be embarrassing. Couldn’t find the translation on the site, so I’m crossing my fingers for this one. ☺

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