

UNIVERSITY OF SURREY
ENGLISH DEPARTMENT

*Women and Arthurian
Literature:
Seizing the Sword*

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`An Arm Clothed in White Samite':
Twentieth-century Women Writers and the Arthurian Legends

I

Mary Stewart: The Sword Was Not For Me

Mary Stewart's Arthurian novels, which consist of the Merlin trilogy (The Crystal Cave (1970), The Hollow Hills (1973) and The Last Enchantment (1979)) and a book on Mordred (The Wicked Day (1984)), are some of the most enjoyed twentieth-century versions of the legends.ⁱ Her combination of a traditional idealisation, a detailed and seemingly accurate historical setting, and a vivid form of characterisation, have made the books international best-sellers as well as providing suitable material for a television series.ⁱⁱ As such Mary Stewart is one of the most important women writers to address herself to the stories of Arthur and she certainly deserves to be considered in this paper. But it would be a mistake to cast her as a 'feminist' author. Indeed, the first novel was composed in the 1960s before feminism, either in its political or critical sense, became a recognised concept. Nor does she take the woman's view or even concentrate upon the female figures of the legends. Instead, Stewart focusses on the first person narrative of Merlin, Arthur's magician, and makes no question about the anti-hero status of her narrator in the Prologue to The Crystal Cave:

I am an old man now...This is what happened...I saw it, and it is a true tale.

(pp.11-12)ⁱⁱⁱ

In addition to the basic lack of appeal with which she introduces Merlin, the magician's inheritance from the traditional myth has him as the least sympathetic to women of all the Arthurian characters. Unlike the knights who vow to serve their ladies, the ideal Lancelot or the courtly Gawain, Merlin conventionally avoids or disparages women, and he is punished

for this by being trapped with magic into a living-death by the Lady of the Lake (Stewart reworks this part of the tale in The Last Enchantment). Merlin is, therefore, a somewhat strange figure for a woman novelist to adopt as her primary narrator, but Stewart's choice is surprisingly successful since, although Merlin might be depicted as misogynistic and/or nervous of women, he is at the same time always cast as an outsider. The autobiographical voice within The Crystal Cave situates itself on the margins of Arthur's court and the male value systems of battle and bravado. In this Merlin reflects Stewart whose authorial voice, by virtue of its female gender, must necessarily be excluded from the predominantly male authorial versions of the Arthurian myth. I intend to return to the question of the gendered voice at the end of this section and, at present, concentrate on the gradual development of Merlin's character and his function within the text's thematic allegiances.

The Merlin trilogy takes us from the magician's boyhood through to his denouement at the hands of Nimue, and it follows his support of a set of moral values and the king who wishes to establish them. The first book, The Crystal Cave, sets the tone for the two later additions and introduces Stewart's odd combination of spiritual belief and historical authenticity. This aporia is epitomised by the character of Merlin who does have special powers, the 'sight', but at the same time is consistently demystified. Stewart is at pains to make the magician recognisably human; he is intelligent, gifted and possibly telepathic, but makes no claim whatsoever to 'magic' in the sense of spells and demons. As Taylor and Brewer comment:

Magic is introduced under the naturalistic guise of psychic phenomena or even ESP: Merlin's gift of sight permits visions, but in trances of piercing agony. He does not perform conjuring tricks. His powers are derived from the application of exceptional intelligence.^{iv}

As Merlin explains it to the reader/listener, 'You would call it, not memory so much as a dream of the past' (p.12). Thus, when Mary Stewart adopts the young Merlin's voice she gives us a psychologically realistic portrait of a young boy who is alienated from his peers because of his bastardy and his lack of physical strength, and who grows into a sensitive young man yearning for a legitimate father and for recognition of his intellectual abilities. This Merlin is an odd figure in the chivalric cut and thrust of the Arthurian legends, but Stewart draws out our sympathy as well as our interest as she uncovers the story of his birth, his paternity and his final involvement in Arthur's conception. The author does take the basic picture of her narrative from traditional sources, but alters the fine detail to make a believable story, a realistic history, rather than a myth or a legend.^v

The story of Merlin's own conception is an example of Stewart's split allegiances to history and to myth. At the end of the fiction she adds two sections, 'The Legend of Merlin' (pp.457-60) and 'Author's Notes' (pp.461-4), the former tells the traditional version of the tale:

The messengers took Merlin and his mother to King Vortigern. The King received the mother with all the attention due to her birth, and asked her who was the father of the lad. She replied that she did not know. 'Once,' she said, 'when I and my damsels were in our chambers, one appeared to me in the shape of a handsome youth who, embracing me and kissing me, stayed with me some time, but afterwards did as suddenly vanish away. He returned many times to speak with me when I was sitting alone, but never again did I catch sight of him. After he had haunted me in this way for a long time, he lay with me for some while in the shape of a man, and left me heavy with child.' The King, amazed at her words, asked Maugantius the soothsayer whether such a thing might be. Muagantius assured him that such things were well known,

and that Merlin must have been begotten by one of the 'spirits there be betwixt the moon and the earth, which we do call incubus daemons'. (pp.457-8)

The vocabulary used never questions the acceptability of mystical forces; the words 'one appeared', 'haunted', 'in the shape of a man', 'soothsayer', 'spirits' and 'incubus daemons'. Moreover, it also sets up the world of romance narrative with the use of archaisms such as 'damsels', 'he lay with me', 'heavy with child' and 'betwixt'. Finally, the readers' own doubts about such a story are allayed along with King Vortigern's who listens to Maugantius' voice of authority. There is never any suggestion that Merlin's mother is lying or that anyone, least of all the 'lad', disbelieves her. In Stewart's retelling of this event within the main body of the fiction, she alters the woman's reply so that it becomes a skillful device to conceal Merlin's true identity -- he is the son of Ambrosius, Vortigern's enemy. And the mother tries to convey the reasons for her duplicity to her son:

'Merlin, I would not have had you know it this way. I would have spared you this.' But this was not what her eyes were saying. (p.275)

i. Mary Stewart, The Crystal Cave (London, 1991); The Hollow Hills (London, 1974); The Last Enchantment (London, 1992); The Wicked Day (London, 1993). All future references to these texts will be made parenthetically. Stewart's Arthurian works are also the most taught versions; see, Maureen Fries, 'Trends in the Modern Arthurian novel' in Valerie M Lagorio and Mildred Leake Day (eds), King Arthur Through the Ages (London, 1990), Vol II, pp.207-22; p.218.

ii. The Crystal Cave was turned into a BBC television series.

iii. For a discussion of Merlin's role as antihero and for the magician's association with the authorial voice see: Thomas Hoburg, 'A Whistle For the Wing: Mary Stewart's Merlin', Avalon to Camelot II 4 1987, pp.17-9.

iv. Taylor and Brewer, p.303.

v. See Charles Moorman, "'Yet Some Men Say...that Kyng Arthure Ys Nat Ded'" in Mary F Baswell and John Bugge (eds), The Arthurian Tradition in Convergence Tuscaloosa, Alabama, 1988, pp.188-99.