



Is Dumbledore another disguise? Where to find Merlin in *Harry Potter*

Florence Marsal (University of Connecticut)

Many studies on the sources of *Harry Potter's* magical world have already been published, and among them, a few have focused on medieval literature. The consensus is that instead of directly borrowing characters or story lines, the *Harry Potter* series is an amalgam of popular myths, foes and heroes, reworked into a more modern fantasy tale, in a not so original boarding school setting. Medievalists have analyzed in more details the Arthurian influences in the series, and in particular its similarities with Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval ou le Conte du Graal*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.^[1] They have also found some historical inaccuracies, and a clear tendency towards the medievalism of popular culture: which is absolutely not to say that J. K. Rowling is ignorant or careless, but rather, that she is embracing and reworking enthusiastically and with her usual sense of irony, a material already known to most of her readers. The case of Merlin, who is the subject of this article, is representative of the treatment of the Middle Ages in the *Harry Potter* series, and, I would even add, in our consumer's society in general. It is evidently an object of fascination, but it is also a subject of ignorance, condescendence, and of many stereotypes. Much like Merlin himself, it is shape shifting, both old and youthful, and still appealing after many centuries.

The point of this article is to provide a framework that would help teachers introduce and study medieval texts around the figure of Merlin, with the assumption that most students are familiar with *Harry Potter*, through the movies and the books. Instead of fighting it, let's rely on this previous knowledge and great interest to embark students in an exploration of the medieval Merlin, a character who, if less familiar, is just as fascinating and mysterious as *Harry Potter's* wizards. Teachers will find the following reference works indispensable: first and foremost, *Merlin: a Casebook*, edited by Peter H. Goodrich and Raymond H. Thompson, which provides a study of Merlin's legend through time, along with an analysis of the character's many facets, and of major literary works where he is a key figure. The Spring 2000 issue of *Arthuriana, the Quarterly for the International Arthurian Society – North American Branch* is entirely dedicated to essays on Merlin; and *L'Esplumeoir*, the International Society of Merlin's Associates' journal, publishes scholarly articles and book reviews about Merlin, in French and English. In addition, Norris J. Lacy and Geoffrey Ashe's *Arthurian Handbook*, and Alan Lupack's *Oxford Guide to Arthurian Literature and Legend*, are essential surveys of the Arthurian legend. For a pedagogical resource, the MLA published *Approaches to Teaching the Arthurian Tradition*, where teachers will find more bibliographical information, and a description of various courses based on the Arthurian legend, and on specific authors.

Implicit and overt references to Merlin are indeed numerous in *Harry Potter*, in part because Merlin is a ubiquitous model for wizards; having accomplished practically everything a wizard is supposed to do, he could be included in the curriculum of almost all

of Hogwarts' courses. But, as far as the readers know, he is not. Instead, his figure is adapted into a new "greatest wizard of the age," Albus Dumbledore, the school's headmaster, who is very much to Harry and the wizards' world what Merlin is to Arthur and his kingdom. The key here is of course to decide which Merlin(s) will be discussed in the course: Merlin's character is multi-faceted, and this article will go over several of his appearances, and compare them with J. K. Rowling's treatment of Merlin and Dumbledore, in order to give teachers a choice.

In the *Sorcerer's Stone*, Dumbledore appears fairly early in the story, to supervise Harry's arrival at the Dursleys' doorsteps. He is described as such: "He was tall, thin, and very old, judging by the silver of his hair and beard, which were both long enough to tuck into his belt. He was wearing long robes, a purple cloak that swept the ground...." (8).

His very appearance, prepared by the unusual sighting of owls during the day, already hints at his identity: a long silver beard, long robes and a long nose, are traditional features of a wizard. We can therefore be a little surprised, when the description ends with this name: "Albus Dumbledore," since the description reminds us very much of the iconic 20th-century Merlin, as portrayed by T.H. White in the *Sword in the Stone*, and in its Disney animation movie version. T. H. White's Merlyn has a pet owl, "a long white beard and long white mustaches ... stars and triangles [on] his gown,"^[2] and plays an important role in the transmission of the magician's legend in our modern-day society, especially for a public of young readers. It is this extremely entertaining and relatively light-hearted introduction to a darker *Once and Future King* that truly turned our contemporaries' attention towards specific aspects of the legend that are particularly important in children's literature: education, comedy, and childhood, Arthur's childhood in particular. Medieval texts do not make Merlin a tutor of young Arthur. In fact, Arthur is not mentioned again before he is old enough to hold a sword and be a knight, and Merlin usually returns to him once he is king: Merlin's role is that of the king's counselor, their association mirrors the ancient Indo-European Priest-and-King couple that links two figures of high power. Alongside love and the marvelous, political issues of military alliances, feudal relationships, and heroic feats during battles, are the topics of interest in a literature whose main target audience is the nobility. Even when medieval texts introduce Merlin as a child, he may be a hairy baby, but he talks, reasons and argues like an adult. Twentieth century literature modified its focus on Merlin's character to match audience's changing interests. T.H. White's enduring association between an underestimated boy, who will grow to become the greatest and most famous king ever known, and an aging and distracted magician who grows fond of him, has become emblematic today. And beyond the typical long white beard and robe, Merlyn serves as a model for Dumbledore, as noted by many scholars^[3]: they both supervise a young boy's education in an atypical manner, because they know that this child will change the future.

From this early appearance on, Dumbledore's responsibilities with regards to Harry are very similar to most of Merlin's own actions towards Arthur: he is in charge of the baby's future, and makes the decision to leave him with adoptive (albeit unwilling) parents until he can monitor him more closely. Merlin does more than supervise Arthur's upbringing though, he first engineers his birth: nine months after having helped Uther assume the disguise of Ygerne's husband, on the night when they conceive Arthur, Merlin takes Arthur away from his parents and leaves him with Ector and his wife, Kay's parents. The two boys will be raised together. Arthur's supernatural conception echoes Merlin's own origin: Merlin is in fact the son of a very pious virgin, and an incubus demon. He knows the past, thanks to his father, and he can foresee the future thanks to God, who gave him this gift after his baptism. Only after Arthur finds the sword in the stone, does Merlin return to his side, to help him win the war against the kingdom's barons who do not accept him as a king. Merlin also designs and organizes the construction of Stonehenge; he advises Arthur to seek alliance with King Leodegrance, Guenever's father, a marriage which also provides Arthur with the Round Table in the form of his wife's dowry. But Merlin fails to prevent Arthur's incest with his half-sister, whose identity Arthur does not know.^[4] Their son, Mordred, will betray and kill Arthur at the battle of Salisbury: this is one of Merlin's numerous prophecies

to Arthur. All the while, Merlin retires from time to time in the woods, in order to dictate to Blaise, his mother's former confessor, the story of Arthur. Thanks to Merlin's counsel, Arthur is a well-established and respected king when Merlin meets the Lady of the Lake, falls in love with her, and disappears forever, imprisoned or entombed by her. This is the bulk of the legend, but there are many discrepancies in the different texts recounting it.^[5]

Geoffrey of Monmouth is the author who, in the twelfth century, brought Merlin and Arthur together briefly in his *Historia Regum Britanniae* (History of the Kings of Britain): before this, the two characters were separate and linked to historical figures living at different time periods. Geoffrey wrote two more texts about Merlin's character(s): the *Prophetiae Merlini* (Prophecies of Merlin), around 1135, right before or at the same time as the *Historia*, and later, around 1150, a *Vita Merlini* (Life of Merlin). And interestingly, Geoffrey's work itself shows wild inconsistencies with regards to Merlin's identity. In the *Prophetiae*, among other predictions, and sometimes very mysterious ones, Merlin foretells Arthur's rise and fall. In the *Historia*, he appears as a precocious child, whose father is unknown, and confounds King Vortigern's magicians by explaining the real reason why the King's tower keeps falling down. He also predicts the death of Vortigern, at the hands of Aurelius Ambrosius, and Uther Pendragon, whose throne he usurped. He engineers Arthur's conception, by transforming Uther Pendragon's appearance into Ygern's husband, and allowing Uther to visit her. But after that, Merlin simply disappears from the story. In the *Vita* however, Merlin appears as a Welsh king, driven mad during the battle of Arfderydd, and retires in the forest, where he develops the ability to foresee the future. There are also wide chronological discrepancies in the three works, which is most probably at the source of Merlin's numerous transformations when subsequent authors carry on with his legend.^[6]

At the end of the twelfth century, Robert de Boron, a French cleric, added an essential component to Arthur's and Merlin's legend: he devised a three-part verse romance, as an all encompassing continuation to Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval ou le Conte du Graal* (ca. 1180), the first romance ever mentioning the Grail. Robert recounted the origins of the Grail in his first romance, *Joseph d'Armathie*: the Grail is a relic of the Passion of Christ, brought to Britain by Joseph, to evangelize the island. In the *Merlin*, the devil sends a demon to conceive the Antichrist, but Merlin's mother confesses to Blaise, who baptizes the child, and redeems him. Merlin will soon become an agent and facilitator of Britain's evangelization during Arthur's reign, by narrating the story to Blaise who will write the Great Book of the Grail, and by advising Arthur, whose Round Table is identified as a symbol of the Last Supper's holy table. Robert's work is left unfinished; his third romance has not been found. But his many continuators will expand and pass on the story, which will end with the Grail quest and the fall of Arthur during his final battle against Mordred. One series of texts in particular, the thirteenth century *Lancelot-Grail* prose cycle, also called the Vulgate, provides the basis of the complete legend.

In the Middle-English realm, the following works focus on Merlin's character: *Of Arthour and Merlin* (1270), which provides a more secular, pre-Christian version of events, focusing on heroic action, a verse *Merlin* by Henry Lovelich (ca. 1450) and an anonymous prose *Merlin*, around 1450 also.^[7] This is a relatively small number of texts compared to the French tradition. And similarly, while Merlin remains a very important character in Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* (1470), his treatment is quite ambivalent, and short-lived. Merlin's origins are not clearly identified in *Le Morte D'Arthur*, and the supernatural is often balanced against Merlin's role as the main counselor to the king. Merlin certainly performs many prophecies and enchantments, the very first being the announcement of Arthur's birth: "Sir, said Merlin, this is my desire: the first night that ye shall lie by Igraine ye shall get a child on her, and when that is born, that it is delivered to me for to nourish there as I will have it... (3). Merlin's own birth is not retold; however, in a way, the devil's design to engender the Antichrist is echoed in Merlin's "desire" for Arthur to be born and delivered to him. The outcome of this decision is also extremely ambiguous. When Ulfius accuses Igraine of treason for not having openly declared that Arthur was Uther's son, and therefore having caused the death of many men at war, it is finally agreed that, since "it was delivered unto Merlin, and nourished by him, and so [Igraine] saw the child never after ...

Merlin is more to blame than [her]" 39. But Merlin inspires awe and fear, which is probably why nobody accuses him openly of treason. His many transformations, his enchantments and fast movements astonish and scare everybody around him, even Arthur. And the Lady of the Lake, Nimue herself, gets rid of him mainly out of fear: "she was afeared of him, because he was a devil's son... So by her subtle working she made Merlin go under that stone to let her wit of the marvels there; but she wrought so there for him that he came never out for all the craft he could do. And so she departed and left Merlin" (103). Right before his death, Merlin prophesied many adventures, after the "dolorous stroke" given by Balin to King Pellam, while establishing clearly, for everybody, the relationship between the future, the present, and past Evangelic times:

And King Pellam lay so, many years sore wounded, and might never be whole till Galahad the haut prince healed him in the quest of the Sangreal, for in that place was part of the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, that Joseph of Arimathea brought into this land, and there himself lay in that rich bed. And that was the same spear that Longius smote our Lord to the heart; and King Pellam was nigh of Joseph's kin... 71.

So even if the quest of the Sangreal happens long after Merlin's death, its origin is contemporary with him. And Merlin's knowledge of the past and prediction of the future place him, structurally, at the exact center of the story of the Grail, while his status as a half human, and half supernatural being, split between God's gift and the Devil's will, mark him as the one opening up the narrative's realm of possibilities.

But besides being a time-binder, and controlling the physical world, as well as time and space, with supernatural powers, Merlin also holds the very human role of counselor to the king, and especially influences Arthur's military campaigns. Arthur wins his first wars against the barons thanks to Merlin, who not only performs a few enchantments, but most importantly, also advises him to enroll specific allies (King Ban and Bors, King Leodegrance), who to avoid in combat (King Pellinor) and when to stop a battle to restrain himself from killing more knights. Merlin's great lesson for Arthur is to prefer the scabbard to the sword itself: the scabbard is a magical object, which will save its owner from bloodshed.^[8] Unfortunately, Merlin's interventions to counsel Arthur through magic and prophecies seem to cause as much harm as good, which explains the ambivalent opinions felt towards Merlin. As an example, Arthur is mainly responsible for the slaying of the May babies, but Merlin is accused again, even if only covertly. And it is true that his prophecy about Mordred is a direct cause of Arthur's decision to kill all newborns in his kingdom.

Similarly, conflicting sentiments towards wizardry in general are introduced very early in *Harry Potter*, and are also at the core of the series. Young wizards are taught that Muggles' violent reactions towards magic are at the source of the Wizards' Statute of Secrecy, and they have to write essays about "witch-burning" in the Middle Ages. Dumbledore's own sister was attacked by Muggles and remained traumatized afterwards. The Dursleys, Harry's aunt and uncle, and adoptive family, show an absolute disapproval of wizardry. The reason for this is given in the first pages of *The Sorcerer's Stone*: Mr. Dursley "didn't approve of imagination" (5). At this point, readers understand that if they want to continue reading, they will have to turn away from Mr. Dursley's point of view, suspend their judgment, and simply accept this new fictional world, where a man (Dumbledore) appears out of nowhere, to put out all of the street lights, and talks about a baby brought to him in a flying motorcycle, with a cat who just turned into a woman. The range of human reactions to magic (wonderment, fear, contempt, jealousy, brutality etc.) found in *Harry Potter* is comparable to ambivalent attitudes towards Merlin in medieval texts. And indeed, when magic is referred to explicitly, because Harry is finally told that he is "a wizard" (50), after ten years of secrecy maintained by the Dursleys, in the hope that if they did not talk about it, the "problem" of magic would cease to exist, Merlin's name appears: Harry's letter of acceptance at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry cites Albus Dumbledore as its Headmaster, and lists his titles, among which is the "Order of Merlin, First Class" (51). With a few exceptions, of course, (Dumbledore's titles all refer to magic, and an owl flies away with the return letter), the letter is extremely official, recognizable and reassuring for

the reader at least. The reference to honorary titles provides at first a sense of orderliness and structure, in opposition to the chaos that the Dursleys see in magic. The magical world's social organization is presented as similar to the non-magical world, and Merlin, an intertextual character, as a liaison between the two: he is of course a wizard, but one the reader already knows. And because of Merlin's fame, ambivalent reactions are transferred to newer and possibly scarier characters, such as Dumbledore. As for Merlin, when he is actually referred to explicitly, he functions as the figure of an erstwhile famous type of wizardry, which will lead us to something new (new in the medieval or postmodern way, that is to say, a rewrite, an adaptation).

In the first volume, for example, on the train to Hogwarts, Harry discovers the Chocolate frogs, with their collectable cards representing "famous witches and wizards."^[9] Ron explains that he has about 500 cards, and he is missing two wizards: Agrippa and Ptolemy. The first card Harry gets is Dumbledore's. Morgana and Merlin are the only Arthurian magicians in the cards that Harry gets. And nothing but their name is mentioned about them. In fact, Ron gives Harry the card he just found in his frog: "No, Morgana again, and I've got about six of her... do you want it? You can start collecting" (103). The wizard's world is a consumer's society just like ours, and there, the Arthurian wizardry does not seem to have a particular value because it is not rare enough. Merlin's name is attached to an unimportant object again in *The Half-Blood Prince*: the founder of an Antique shop mocks those who try to sell him fake antiquities: "We hear that sort of thing all the time: Oh, this was Merlin's, this was, his favourite teapot" (261). Instead, the locket that Voldemort's mother brings in for sale is identified immediately by the shop's owner as an authentic and a "near enough priceless" object.

Merlin's name is cited in later volumes, in mundane contexts again, such as various swear words: "Merlin's beard," "Merlin's pants."^[10] And the Order of Merlin reappears in the *Chamber of Secrets*, since the new teacher and famous author Gilderoy Lockhart belongs to the Order, as he reveals when he first introduces himself to his class: "Me- Gilderoy Lockhart, Order of Merlin, Third Class, Honorary Member of the Dark Force Defense League, and five-time winner of *Witch Weekly's* Most-Charming Smile Award" (99). As the last title suggests already, the class learns very soon that Lockhart is a totally inefficient teacher and wizard. His claim to fame relies on his good looks, and on his numerous alliterative and plagiarized publications (44). Lockhart's association with the Order of Merlin seriously diminishes the reputation of the Order, even if his inferior talents allow him to belong only to the Third Class. In the next volumes, we learn about more members of the Order: in *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, we find out that Pettigrew was awarded the Order of Merlin, first class, after his death. Of course, we learn later that he staged his own death, faking an attempt at catching Sirius Black, who was supposed to have betrayed Harry's parents. The real killer is in fact Pettigrew, and the Order of Merlin is once again awarded to a fraud. Even the Black family, a notoriously cruel family of dark wizards, is in the Order, which seems to be nothing more than a superficial recognition of services or purity of blood, given by an easily fooled Ministry of Magic. As a consequence, when Voldemort becomes too powerful and threatens the Wizard and Muggle worlds, a new Order is founded, and given a different name: The Order of the Phoenix. Merlin is first shown as a recognizable model of wizardry, but soon, the reproduction distances itself from his model and Dumbledore becomes the new archetype of a paternal figure: quirky, often funny, but also authoritative and grave when needed, a cherished, wise and generous wizard.

Appearances are deceptive, however, and Merlin is known to be where he is not expected. Dumbledore's disappearance when the time comes for the hero to face the enemy alone (he is killed and seemingly betrayed by a long time ally), his flaws and ambiguities, and of course his use and power over magic, but also over time, memory, and the narration, put the two characters on the same plane. Dumbledore's clear choice for the good of all people, Muggles and Wizards alike, in the fight against evil, seems to distance him from his model, since as we have seen, Merlin is feared as the devil's son by the characters themselves. But under close scrutiny, the incredulity, misunderstanding and even censorship Dumbledore faces inside and outside the fictional world — his announcement of Voldemort's return is

not well received by the ministry of Magic; and the *Harry Potter* series has been the object of numerous attacks by religious conservatives^[11] — is exactly what Merlin is up against in medieval texts. The controversy surrounding *Harry Potter*, as well as Merlin's treatment in the texts, is related to rising defenses of Christian values. Whereas Merlin starts as a character combining the features of several pre-Christian holy men from Wales, Scotland and Ireland, his insertion in the more and more intensely Christianized story of the Grail, after Robert de Boron, modifies considerably the way he is presented in, and disappears from, the text. In the Vulgate, for example, Niniane designs a prison of love for Merlin, and visits him every night. In the French *Didot-Perceval*, a continuation to Robert de Boron's cycle, Merlin helps Perceval in his quest of the Grail, and when it is achieved, Merlin simply retires near the Grail castle with Blaise, in his "esplumeoir."^[12] However, Merlin suffers a crueler downfall in most other medieval texts, such as the Post-Vulgate *Suite*, or in *Les Prophésies de Merlin*, two thirteenth-century French prose romances: Niniane entombs him under a rock and leaves him there to die.^[13] Prose romances show an increasing focus on Christian spirituality, and more intolerance towards sexuality and feudal violence. The Vulgate itself is a long and complex work, where *La quête du Graal*, the fifth volume, ultimately destroys the knightly and supernatural adventures designed mainly by Merlin, and Morgan (Morgue). Hermits systematically interpret adventures as allegories of Good and Evil. Needless to say, Merlin is unequivocally placed on the devil's side. Later on, as we have already seen, Malory's Nimue is said to have killed him because he is the devil's son, even though his character is, more often than not, beneficial to Arthur's kingdom through his magic and advice.

Dumbledore's understanding of the past and the present, and his guesses about the future make him a central character, like Merlin. But divination, Merlin's own brand of magic, although at the core of the narration in *Harry Potter*, is deemed problematic by Dumbledore himself, who instead focuses on the notion of choice, self-definition and psychology, to foresee the future: "The consequences of our actions are always so complicated, so diverse, that predicting the future is a very difficult business indeed ... Pr. Trelawney, bless her, is living proof of that."^[14] Pr. Trelawney, the divination teacher, indeed lacks credibility, even though she is the one who prophesizes the end of the great battle between Voldemort and Harry: "neither can live while the other survives." Prophecies are, by definition, most of the time misunderstood, ignored, or insufficient to stop undesirable events from happening. We have seen how Merlin prophesizes the quest of the Sangreal and the healing of King Pellam, how he also reveals King Pellam's and Joseph of Arimathea's kinship, and the role of the spear in the Passion. Because he had already prophesized several times how Balin would strike and kill "the truest king and the man of most worship that now liveth,"^[15] characters and readers should be more inclined to believe him, but they often aren't. Malory's Merlin also leaves memorials, such as names written on a tomb, where will take place "the greatest battle betwixt two knights that was or ever shall be, and the truest lovers, and yet none of them shall slay each other" (59). King Mark and Balin are present when Merlin writes the golden letters on the tomb, and they both express a strong disbelief:

Thou art a marvelous man, said King Mark upon Merlin, that speakest of such marvels, thou art a boistous man and an unlikely to tell of such deeds. What is thy name? said King Mark. At this time, said Merlin, I will not tell, but at the time when Sir Tristam is taken with his sovereign lady, then ye shall hear and know my name, and at that time ye shall tidings that shall not please you. (59)

The "tidings" in question will of course be the fact that La Beale Isoud, his wife, is in love with Tristam, Mark's nephew, and that he loves her in return. Similarly, Balin doubts Merlin's prophesy about the dolorous stroke: "If I wist it were sooth that ye say I should do such a perilous deed as that, I would slay myself to make thee a liar" (60). But he doesn't kill himself, and the prophecy will come true. After Balin has struck King Pellam by mistake, and then, killed his own brother, also by mistake, and died at his hands, Merlin buries them both, and announces more adventures: a bed "that there should never be a man lie therein but he went out of his wit," a sword such as "there shall never be man

handle this sword but the best knight of the world, and that shall be Sir Launcelot or else Galahad his son, and Launcelot with this sword shall slay the man that in the world he loved best, that shall be Sir Gawaine” (77). These predictions of supernatural adventures function as an introduction, a “prelude to the *Morte*, announcing themes and characters, sometimes as a Wagnerian *leitmotiv*, as in the brief notes about the *perowne* that only hints at the fully orchestrated symphony of the Lancelot-Tristram theme...”, as Donald Hoffman explains.^[16] Dumbledore’s interpretation of mysterious events and hidden motives also confirms him as a central character in the series, because his intelligence and understanding make him, like Merlin, a “time-binder,” in the sense that they both understand “causality from the past into the future.”^[17] In each of his final speeches, Dumbledore resolves the mysteries left unexplained from the present volume, and opens possibilities of doom and redemption for future volumes.^[18] He is an “explicator and facilitator of events”^[19] even after his death^[20]; but like Merlin, his announcements are rarely taken seriously, and do not prevent evil from happening. “Tidings” and prophecies are nevertheless a great narrative tool, as they introduce suspense to invite further reading.

The legacy Dumbledore leaves for Harry, Hermione and Ron is, for example, a series of mysterious and seemingly useless objects: a sword and a snitch (a little flying ball used in the game of Quidditch), a book in runes, and a deluminator (which turns every light in a room on and off). The three friends spend a lot of time trying to understand their function, but, as with Merlin’s prophesies, they are understandable only at the very moment when they become useful (Ron will use the deluminator to find his friends, whom he left in anger). This lack of clear explanations from the only one whose powers and intelligence match Voldemort’s provokes the anger and frustration of everyone in the wizard’s world, even Harry, and the reader (the three teenagers spend many chapters wandering in the woods wondering what to do). Of course, when the objects finally make sense, Dumbledore’s perspicacity comes to light, and his secrecy is explained: Dumbledore, like Merlin, must not intervene nor overshadow the main character. His attitude is explained within the story by the prophecy labeling Harry as the chosen one to defeat Voldemort. And most importantly, his seemingly passive attitude is necessary to allow the narration to unfold, with characters discovering and understanding events along with the readers, and a narration imitating life: it is, as with Merlin, a matter of controlling time, and not uncovering too early the truth and errors it reveals: “I am afraid I counted on Miss Granger to slow you up... I was scared that, if presented outright with the facts about those tempting objects, you might seize the Hallows as I did, at the wrong time for the wrong reasons” (720) he tells Harry, when asked the pertinent question: “Why did you have to make it so difficult”? Timing is the key to a good narration with suspense, because, if everything happens too fast, there is no story. Dumbledore’s actions and speeches reflect Merlin’s role in the Arthurian legend, and in *Le Morte D’Arthur* in particular, according to Peter Goodrich: “Merlin performs as the marvelous catalyst who gets Arthur’s society going — but who must then vanish in order for it to work out its own brilliant, yet ultimately tragic, destiny. The mage’s flawed greatness forecasts the imperfections of Camelot itself...”^[21]

The last quotation does, however, reveal some major differences between the medieval Book of the Grail cycle,^[22] or *Le Morte D’Arthur*, and the *Harry Potter* series. Voldemort’s short period of domination causes a lot of damage and death, but he is ultimately defeated, and the series ends on a positive note, far from what could be qualified as a “tragic destiny.” And if Dumbledore’s flaws do reflect the temptations of the Dark in each and everyone of us (we learn at the very end of *Deathly Hallows* that in his youth, Dumbledore also sought the Hallows — those magical objects, which, if united, make their owner immortal — in order to lead the Wizards’ revolution), the common ground with Voldemort is short-lived and Dumbledore’s ambitions never carried out. Unlike Merlin, who falls knowingly victim to lust and love, Dumbledore’s “flawed greatness” becomes evident not at the time of his death, but afterwards, when Rita Skeeter, an ambitious and ruthless journalist, publishes his biography. And his flaws are never related to a misplaced lust for a feminine figure, like Merlin’s, but also Uther’s, Arthur’s and Lancelot’s problematic loves. The Arthurian legend starts with an adulterous relation, helped by Merlin’s “crafts,” and

ends because of Mordred's betrayal of his incestuous father, as well as internal tensions and struggles caused by Lancelot's and Guenever's adulterous love. Whereas, in *Harry Potter*, it is Dumbledore's selfishness, blind ambition, and ambiguous need of secrecy that are made obvious to everyone through the tragedy of his family. These flaws, acknowledged and explained by Dumbledore at the very end, carry the message of the series, which is in part that we are all both good and evil, like Merlin. The other message is that the domination of one "race" over another is as much "a lure for fools" ^[23] as the quest of the Deathly Hallows is, because greatness comes in all shapes and forms, and in numbers. Harry succeeds in defeating Evil in the end thanks to Dumbledore's enlightened counsel, and with the help of his friends (Ron is a pure blood wizard; Hermione, a "mudblood" born to Muggle parents) and all of Hogwarts' students, teachers, and diverse creatures. The *Harry Potter* series remains a mostly optimistic tale for children and young adults, with a happy ending, unlike the Book of the Grail cycles, which imitate the unfolding of the Bible, with its own genesis and apocalypse, and a set of opposing values, those of courtly love, against a strict Christian faith.

The happy ending in question is nevertheless much more of a conclusion to the story than the Arthurian apocalypse is, and this will bring us to the last and, in my opinion, main difference between Dumbledore and Merlin, and their functions within these narratives. Dumbledore does not write the story of Harry Potter, whereas Merlin writes the Book of the Grail, and is responsible for passing on the legend to us. Malory's explanations are rather vague: "All the battles that were done in Arthur's days Merlin did his master Bleise do write; also he did do write all the battles that every worthy knight did of Arthur's court" (32). We can only imagine that whatever he will not be able to witness in person, he prophesies to Bleise. But in the Vulgate — which is probably the "French book" (7) Malory translated into English — before his disappearance, Merlin specifically appoints several scribes at Arthur's court. Moreover several episodes of the Vulgate are dedicated to the specifics of the writing process. On the contrary, the only author of *Harry Potter* is J.K. Rowling, and as her April 2008 lawsuit against RDR publishing press for the *Harry Potter Lexicon* publication shows us, she does not like to share authorship. The last words of *Deathly Hallows'* epilogue, "The scar had not pained Harry for nineteen years. All was well." (759) do not invite a sequel or any commentaries.

Interestingly, *Harry Potter* presents a very negative image of writers.^[24] Voldemort's journal almost kills Ginny Weasley in *The Chamber of Secrets*, Gilderoy Lockhart is a successful writer, but a plagiarist, and Rita Skeeter a detestable journalist. Authorship, in the Middle Age, is similarly a very ambiguous activity, since according to strict Christian values, the sole "author" and creator is God, the only Book is the Bible, and any other writing is seen as demonic. But surprisingly enough, this does not deter writers and scribes from inventing stories and re-writing texts. The consequence is that a great number of texts remain anonymous, while others are attributed to known authors, even if they are dead, or to characters within the text, such as Merlin. Authorship is, more often than not, shared in the Middle Ages, and Merlin, the son of a demon, redeemed by God, who dictates the stories to Blaise, his scribe, and who arranges for other scribes to write the knights' stories after his death, is perhaps the most famous and most important representative of the medieval (re-) writing process. In some ways Dumbledore also is a writer, albeit an academic one: he writes the forewords of *Fantastic Beasts* and *Quidditch through the Ages*, where he encourages everyone to buy the books for charity purposes; and *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* includes his notes explaining the implication and significance of the tales in real life situations. Thus, Dumbledore comments on primary sources; he does not write them himself.

There should be no continuation to *Harry Potter*, only more paratexts,^[25] attributed at least in part to Dumbledore, no doubt. His ambiguities and flaws having been resolved and explained, he is now the ultimate mentor, a trustworthy voice advocating charity, love, tolerance, and humor, for Muggles, Wizards and any other creature capable of reading. This feature is not an original trait of any medieval Merlin. It has instead been passed on to us by T.H. White's philosophical and comical Merlyn. But the medieval Merlin(s) are

certainly present in *Harry Potter*: they are sometimes visible, but dismissed by other characters, or in disguise, transformed into a new great mage, still powerful and central to the rise of a new hero fighting against evil. As medieval authors rewriting stories have done many times before, J. K. Rowling has found a way of obliquely acknowledging her sources, while arguing that her text is the latest update, and the best read of all. Our hope is that our students won't take her word for it, but will continue reading, and explore the past, with our help.

Works Cited

- Arden, Heather and Kathryn Lorenz. "The Harry Potter Stories and French Arthurian Romance." *Arthuriana* 13.2 (2003): 54-68.
- Arthuriana* 10.1 (2000).
- Berthelot, Anne. "Merlin and the Ladies of the Lake." *Merlin: a Casebook*. Peter H. Goodrich and Raymond H. Thompson, eds. 162-85. New York and London: Routledge, 2003.
- Chrétien de Troyes. *Oeuvres Complètes*. Daniel Poirion et al., eds. Paris: Gallimard, 1994.
- . *Arthurian Romances*. William W. Kibler, trans. (Erec trans. Carleton W. Carroll). Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991.
- L'Esplumeoir*. 1 (2002)- 8 (2009). Annual.
- Fries, Maureen and Jeanie Watson, eds. *Approaches to Teaching the Arthurian Tradition*. New York: the Modern Language Association of America, 1992.
- Gemmill, Maia and Daniel Nexon. "Childrens' Crusade: the Religious Politics of Harry Potter." *Harry Potter and International Relations*. Daniel Nexon and Iver Neumann, eds. 79-98. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006.
- Geoffrey of Monmouth. *The History of the Kings of Britain*. Lewis Thorpe, trans. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966.
- . *Vita Merlini (The Life of Merlin)*. J. J. Parry, ed. and trans. Urbana: University of Illinois Press. 1925.
- Goodrich, Peter H. and Raymond H. Thompson, eds. *Merlin: a Casebook*. New York and London: Routledge, 2003.
- Gupta, Suman. *Re-reading Harry Potter*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
- Hoffman, Donald L. "Malory's Tragic Merlin." *Merlin: a Casebook*. Peter H. Goodrich and Raymond H. Thompson, eds. 333-341. New York and London: Routledge, 2003.
- Lacy, Norris J. and Geoffrey Ashe, eds. *Arthurian Handbook*. New York and London: Garland, 1997.
- Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in English Translation* Norris J. Lacy, ed. 5 vols. New York: Garland, 1993-96.
- Le Livre du Graal*. Philippe Walter et al., eds. 3 vols. Paris: Gallimard, 2001-09.
- Lupack, Alan. *The Oxford Guide to Arthurian Literature and Legend*. Oxford: Oxford

University Press, 2005.

Malory, Thomas. *Le Morte D'Arthur*. New York: The Modern Library, 1999.

Perry, Evelyn M. "Metaphor and MetaFantasy: Questing for Literary Inheritance in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*." *Scholarly Studies in Harry Potter: Applying Academic Methods to a Popular Text*, Cynthia Whitney Hallett, ed. 241- 275. Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 2005.

Petrina, Alessandra. "Forbidden Forest, Enchanted Castle: Arthurian Spaces in the Harry Potter Novels." *Mythlore* 93/94 (Winter/Spring 2006): 95-110.

Les prophésies de Merlin (Cod. Bodmer 116). Anne Berthelot, ed. Cologny-Genève: Fondation Martin Bodmer. 1992.

Robert de Boron. *Joseph d'Arimathie*. Richard O' Gorman, ed. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1995.

—. *Merlin*. *Alexandre Micha*, ed. Geneva: Droz, 1980.

The Romance of Merlin: An Anthology. Peter Goodrich, ed. New York: Garland, 1993.

The Romance of Perceval in Prose; a Translation of the E Manuscript of the Didot Perceval Dell Skeels, trans. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1961.

Rowling, J. K. *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*. New York: A.A. Levine Books, 2001.

—. *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. New York: A.A. Levine Books, 1999.

—. *Harry Potter and Deathly Hallows*. New York: A.A. Levine Books, 2007

—. *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. New York: A.A. Levine Books, 2000.

—. *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*. New York: A.A. Levine Books, 2005.

—. *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. New York: A.A. Levine Books, 2003.

—. *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. New York: A.A. Levine Books, 1999.

—. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. New York: A.A. Levine Books, 1998.

—. *Quidditch through the Ages*. New York: A.A. Levine Books, 2001.

—. *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*. New York: Children's High Level Group in association with A.A. Levine Books, 2008.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, eds. 2nd edition Norman Davis. Oxford: Clarendon, 1967.

White, T.H., *The Sword in the Stone*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1939.

—. *The Once and Future King*. New York: Ace, 1987.

— and Wolfgang Reitherman. *The Sword in the Stone*. Walt Disney Gold Collection. Burbank, CA: Buena Vista Home Entertainment, 1963.

Notes

[1] See works cited by Alessandra Petrina, as well as Heather Arden and Kathryn Lorenz.

[2] White, *The Sword in the Stone*, 30.

[3] See in particular Evelyn M. Perry, 257. The “cosmic shapes” and color are transferred to Dumbledore’s eyes: they shine and sparkle and remind us of stars; their color is the same as the sky; he wears half-moon shaped glasses. In the *Goblet of Fire*, he wears a robe “embroidered with stars and moon,” (Rowling, 175).

[4] This sister is not Morgue or Morgan, however. Medieval texts relate several versions of Mordred’s conception, and when his mother is given a name, she is called Anna, or Morgawse. Morgue, or Morgan le Fay, another sister of Arthur, is indeed a fairy, an enemy of Arthur’s court, and has several lovers (Accolon, Guiomar, and Merlin), but Arthur is not one of them. Modern versions of the story have conflated the two sisters into one Morgan(e), probably because she is a more stable and dark character. See works cited by Anne Berthelot for more information on Morgue.

I want to thank Anne Berthelot for her help and her comments on this article. She has for example asked a very interesting question: is Bellatrix a modern variation on Morgan le Fay?

[5] The different spelling of names is one of many inconsistencies.

[6] Arthur’s succession to the throne is not problematic, since Gorlois conveniently died on the night Uther Pendragon and Ygern got together. They married immediately and Arthur was therefore recognized as Uther’s son. Here Mordred is simply Arthur’s sister’s son, and Arthur’s nephew.

[7] See the introduction of *Merlin: a Casebook* by Peter Goodrich, for a more detailed summary of Merlin’s stories.

[8] Hoffman, 339.

[9] Rowling, *The Sorcerer’s Stone*, 102.

[10] Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 101.

[11] For more information on the subject, see works cited by Maia Gemmill and Daniel Nexon.

[12] It is a play on word, since “merlin” is also the name of a hunting bird, and “l’espumeoir” the cage where hawks are left to molt.

[13] Even after death, however, Merlin still has the ability to communicate with the world. In *Les Prophésies*, his spirit talks a lot.

[14] Rowling, *Prisoner of Azkaban*, 426.

[15] Malory, *Le Morte D’Arthur*, 60.

[16] Hoffman, 334.

[17] Goodrich, 8.

[18] For example, Harry regrets having let Pettigrew go in *Azkaban*, but Dumbledore reassures him and announces an important turn of event in *Deathly Hallows*: “you have sent

Voldemort a deputy who is in your debt... When one wizard saves another wizard's life, it creates a certain bond between them" (Rowling, 427). And indeed, in *Deathly Hallows*, Pettigrew, sent by Voldemort to kill Harry, hesitates for too long, and strangles himself instead (Rowling, 470).

[19] Goodrich, 8.

[20] After his death, he meets with Harry in King Cross station and explains why Harry survived Voldemort's Avada Kedavra spell for the second time, and why he should go back life to fight against evil. (Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, Chapter 35).

[21] Goodrich, 16.

[22] *Le Livre du Graal (Book of the Grail)* is the title given to the latest edition of the Vulgate, published in three volumes by Gallimard, and it is the title given by Merlin to the book he is dictating to Blaise.

[23] Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 713.

[24] As noticed by Gupta, 37-38.

[25] J. K. Rowling has mentioned the idea of writing an encyclopedia of Harry Potter, see the Mugglenet web site, <http://www.mugglenet.com/books/futurebooks/encyclopedia/index.shtml> (accessed July 18, 2009)

Original Citation: *The Once and Future Classroom*, Volume VII, Issue 1, Spring 2009
<http://www.teamsmedieval.org/ofc/F09/dumbledore.php>

NOTE: *Links have been corrected and/or deleted. The original "look and feel" of the journal has been preserved as much as possible, but the original logos have also been removed. No editing to the actual texts has been done since their original publication.*



© 2002-2017

TEAMS:
Teaching Association for Medieval
Studies

Gale Sigal, Editor

The Once and Future Classroom:
Resources for Teaching the Middle Ages
sigal@wfu.edu

Thomas Goodman, President

TEAMS:
Teaching Association for Medieval
Studies
tgoodmann@miami.edu

Carol L. Robinson, Webmaster

The Once and Future Classroom (Archives)
and TEAMS: Teaching Association for
Medieval Studies
clrobins@kent.edu

 Proudly powered by
WordPress.

Merlin has lived for a thousand years waiting for King Arthur to rise again. Protecting Albion has been his life's work, but when Voldemort threatens his world he is needed more than ever. Now, Merlin is needed to protect and help the Chosen One, Harry Potter. But will Harry be the one who saves Merlin? Â© Copyright. Published August 4, 2014 Â· updated February 27, 2015 Â· completed. Merlin was a legendary wizard who lived during the medieval era. Little is known of his past, but he was a member of King Arthur's court, and arguably the most powerful wizard of all time. Merlin was born sometime during the medieval era. During his formative years, he attended Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and was sorted into Slytherin House. It is possible that he was taught by Salazar Slytherin himself, given the time period Merlin lived in. It is said that Merlin's wand was of