

The True Nature of Merlin the Magician in *Vita Merlini*

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Background

- Geoffrey of Monmouth created Merlin Ambrosius based on the legends of Myrddin Wyllt and Ambrosius Aurelianus
- 2 main works Merlin appears in are *Historia Regum Britanniae* and *Vita Merlini*
 - Monmouth creates 2 entirely different personalities
- Still, Merlin remains a villain

General View of Merlin Today

- Sword in the Stone
 - Gives us good impression we have of him today
- Spread of Christianity changed his character fundamentally



<https://d1u1p2xjjiahg3.cloudfront.net/43doee37-1b91-4f16-bf7b-9d46dce45935.jpg>

Merlin was Unique



His Birth

- Merlin's mother, a nun, is raped by an incubus
- She has Merlin baptized upon his birth to cleanse him of any demonic influence
- Half-demon, half-human
 - Retains both demonic and godlike powers
- Later in his life, God decides to use Merlin as a messenger to the people

Merlin's Madness

- After losing his friends in a battle, Merlin is overcome by a madness
 - Flees to the Woods for comfort
- Spends many years there, abandoning his sister and his wife, Guendoloena
- When he is forced to return, he gives a puzzling response when asked about his wife's possible future with other men
- On Guendoloena's wedding day, he murders the bridegroom



<http://windling.typepad.com/.a/6a00e54fcf73858834019102c18d7c970c800wi>

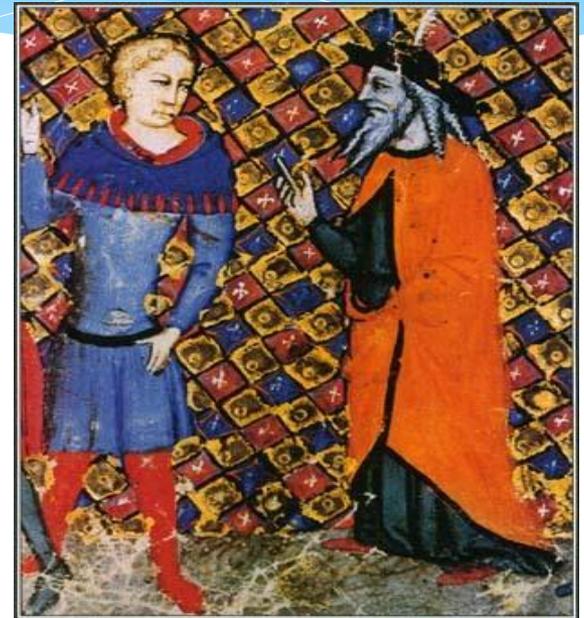
The Story of the Apples



- On a hunting trip, Merlin and his companions come across a pile of apples
- Coincidentally, there are enough for all of them save one
- His friends are overcome with madness and some die
- Merlin says the apples came from one of his former lovers

Issues with the Story

1. Merlin has been advisor to many kings and even served as a leader
2. Merlin is a prophet
 - Prophecy of the Threefold Death
- Merlin can be seen as the devil himself
 - Scene's similarity to "The First Sin"
 - "*Draconarius*"



http://www.mythencyclopedia.com/images/mlw_0001_0003_0_img0132.jpg

The Next Prophet

- At the end of *Vita Merlini*, Merlin's sister, Ganiada, begins to prophesy about the fate of the world
- Merlin acknowledges her as God's new prophet
 - Says he has lost the powers given to him by God
- God has deemed him unfit as His messenger



<http://www.timelessmyths.com/arthurian/gallery/merlinfairyt.jpg>

Conclusion

- While Merlin has performed some generous acts in his life, he typically did so for his own advantage
- Monmouth's attempts to make Merlin a hero in *Vita Merlini* fail
- Given that this work is supposed to portray Merlin as a morally improved version of himself, we can conclude that he is a villain, and in some ways, a monster.

RESEARCH PAPER

The True Nature of Merlin the Prophet

Throughout history, there have been many instances in which people who were given great power tended to abuse this power. We can see the circumstances of those who were abused in those times through literature. However, even those with power often suffered as well. There have been many instances in the world's past in which those who were given great power were driven by madness. Prominent examples of such rulers are King Charles VI, Ivan IV, and, more recently, Adolf Hitler. Geoffrey of Monmouth was one of the authors who strove to tell the conditions of his time in the Middle Ages through his book, *Vita Merlini*. One of the characters he created, Merlin Ambrosius, one of the most controversial characters created during the Middle Ages, has become quite a well-known, even notorious character, especially after his inception in Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, in which the famous *Sword in the Stone* story originates. Monmouth tries to portray Merlin as more of a hero than a cunning criminal in *Vita Merlini*, but Merlin still remains a villain. This analysis will focus on Merlin's stance in *Vita Merlini*, a work that, according to Tatlock, was not studied so much primarily because of its unattractiveness (Tatlock 265). This unattractiveness is due in part to several of the following factors: its length and content. Compared to the *Historia Regum Britanniae*, *Vita Merlini* is miniature in comparison with 67 pages. Additionally, as to the content of the book, Monmouth describes very little of Merlin's life, giving little insight as to what Merlin was like. Instead, he writes a good portion of the book on prophecies about what is to happen to Merlin's country. As a result, very few have performed much research on the content of the book, and those who have focused more on the prophecies described. Therefore, to shed some light on this story, I will use several secondary sources to show just how, in this work, Merlin is a villain, and not the hero many make him out to be.

According to Monmouth, Merlin Ambrosius was actually born half-demon, half human. His mother, a nun, is raped by an incubus and, terrified about the man he would become, immediately has him baptized upon his birth to rid him of any potential demonic influence. This combination gives Merlin powers of both divine and demonic origin, characteristic of the Antichrist, who was also expected to have come from the union of an incubus and a virgin, nun or whore (Curley 234). Often, he uses these powers for good, but sometimes he abuses them, showing that he has not been completely "cleansed" of his demonic heritage.

Throughout *Vita Merlini*, Merlin experiences an overwhelming madness, earning his title of the *Wild Man of the Wood* that makes him quite apathetic to the plight of his loved ones and more focused on his own well being. Periodically, he returns home, but because he values nature over material goods, he retreats back to the woods. Merlin's unpredictability becomes quite taxing on both his wife and sister. Guendoloena, his wife, is described to be "dying in despair," while Ganiada, his sister, is "in tears by her side" (Monmouth 61,63). In fact, they mourn so greatly that they cannot sleep or eat. Despite knowing this, Merlin does not pay much attention to their troubles, eager to return to his original home, where he has no worries other than the need to survive, which keeps him fixed in the present.

In fact, when his sister tries to prevent him from leaving, he becomes quite irate, throwing tantrums. He "rage[s] and he "[ights]" because Ganiada will not let him have his way (Monmouth 71). We see more of this irrational thinking when he is asked about his wife's future, as he had virtually divorced her. Now that Merlin had abandoned her, Guendoloena had essentially been widowed as the man her husband had been had seemingly died. Merlin promises her that, on the day of her wedding with another man, he will be "provided with fine gifts" to "endow Guendoloena handsomely" (Monmouth 73) to show his support. Yet, when the day of her wedding actually arrives, Merlin appears, riding a stag, promptly killing the groom with its horns and then attempting to escape before he inevitably gets captured again. Merlin acts so quickly that his actions could be nothing but deliberate. Monmouth describes the motion so briefly that it implies Merlin has no hesitation in killing his rival. Not only does this make Merlin a liar, but also a murderer.

Murder is not new to Merlin, however; he had been responsible for the deaths of many others as well. During Merlin's recovery from the madness, another man with the same condition appears. Merlin is shocked to see that the man had actually been one of Merlin's former hunting companions. He elaborates on how he and his friends had found a pile of apples lying in the woods near them. There had been enough for the whole party except Merlin, so he had decided to pass up on the opportunity. Little did they know that the apples had actually been poisoned by one of Merlin's former lovers as a desperate act to exact her revenge on him. Unfortunately, Merlin's friends were caught in the crossfire and suffered as a result. Upon eating the apples, the madness seized them. They began to "bit[e] and scratch each other like dogs, scream[ing], foam[ing] at the mouth and roll[ing] demented on the ground" (Monmouth 129). Merlin's claim that he did not know the apples were poisoned is a bit difficult to believe, especially for someone with such prophetic powers. For example, prior to this, Merlin is able to foretell the death of a boy that would occur several years later. With such spectacular prowess, it is quite unlikely that Merlin cannot see the futures of his comrades or gather where the apples originated. Therefore, it can be assumed that Merlin knew what the apples were going to do, making him more directly responsible for the insanity and death of his comrades. Goodrich takes a different perspective on the apples; he views them as symbolic of the apples Adam and Eve were given that, when consumed, gave them moral and sexual knowledge, an act that was considered the first sin ever committed (Goodrich 95). We see a very strong likeness to the scene described in *Vita Merlini*. Merlin allows his companions to eat the apples instead of considering the consequences that would arise in doing so. Furthermore, Merlin was a *draconarius*, a soldier whose position in the military was represented by a dragon. Yet, unlike the majestic creatures many see them as today, in medieval times, dragons were synonymous with serpents (Malcor 7). When taken this way, Merlin can be seen as the Serpent, representing the Devil, who tricks his comrades into eating the apples, causing them to sin. Just as the Devil was responsible for the corruption of the world, Merlin is responsible for the physical and mental corruption of his companions.

It is also equally far-fetched that Merlin had no suspicion about the apples lying in wait for them. Merlin had been advisor to many, including the renowned King Arthur, who kept England at peace. Had he truly not had any qualms about eating the apples, his reputation as an advisor would be greatly discredited. Still, it is possible that he did not pay mind to the apples, simply because he was not eating any himself. If he had been, he would have been more cautious and the entire calamity could have been avoided. Yet, because it was instead his comrades experimenting with the apples, Merlin did not consider the implications of doing so.

This is typical of Merlin, however; he is selfish, only concerned for himself. During the battle with Peredur and Rodarch, Merlin's companions fall in battle. Instead of lamenting their deaths, he worries about how their fates would affect his. Merlin worries about his own life, about his enemies that would be out to get him now that his companions are not there to protect him. Because of the shock, he mourns for them throughout the rest of the battle, making himself more of a liability to his allies rather than an asset. It falls upon the rest of the army to drive back the Scots that fought them. Shortly after the battle, Merlin retreats to the woods for virtually no reason at all (Thomas 32-33). Although he and his allies had won, Merlin flees from the scene of the battle. Monmouth gives no indication as to the rational thought that was going through Merlin's head. However, it was not an act of impulse. Despite the harsh conditions of the wintery forest, which deprived him of food and shelter, Merlin refuses to return home. So why would Merlin choose to put himself through such suffering rather than return to the comforts of his home and his patiently waiting wife? This act of obstinacy can be seen as his way of punishing himself for his weakness in the War. He does not accept the comfort and requests of his friends, preferring to suffer alone as he alone is responsible for the deaths of his comrades (Monmouth 57). He does so as he is ashamed of his fear and how he was essentially paralyzed by shock of the fate of his friends. Through this, we become more of the hero others thought him to be. However, he ultimately fails. In trying to eliminate this weakness, Merlin loses the love he has for his family as shown earlier. Love becomes too emotionally costly for him and he instead becomes a hermit, cutting off all ties to the outside world, losing some of the qualities that made him human.

Merlin also shows a complete disregard for the laws and morals of that time. Upon discovering his sister's infidelity to the king, he laughs about it (Monmouth 69,71). He learns about the dishonesty of a rich man exploiting others by disguising himself as a poor man and laughs again; when he learns about the imminent death of a man purchasing new shoes, he continues to laugh at the irony of the situation (Monmouth 79). Each time, for Merlin to reveal the information he knew, the king has to promise Merlin his freedom to go back to the woods. We see just how manipulative Merlin can be, only sharing parts of his vast knowledge with others only when it benefits him.

At the end of *Vita Merlini*, Ganiada, Merlin's sister, begins to prophesy about the fate of many of the countries in Western Europe, astonishing everyone present, including Merlin himself. He acknowledges that his sister is the new prophet God chose to do His bidding, as God had "curbed [his] tongue and closed [his] book" (Monmouth 135). Why does God choose to make a mere mortal his messenger rather than someone as experienced as Merlin? I believe that God has decided that Merlin's actions have made him unfit to carry out God's Word. Additionally, even though Ganiada herself had committed sins of her own like adultery, God still makes her His new messenger because He considers Merlin's actions to have been far worse than Ganiada's. God no longer considers him worthy for the position of prophet. He can no longer bear the burden of prophesying as he has become too personally involved with it, which is "socially corrosive" (Chism 465). The prophetic powers he inherited from his demonic father overpower him, taking full advantage of his human weakness (Frongia 121-122). As a result, Merlin's role as God's messenger is over.

Despite the claims that Merlin is a hero throughout all the books he is present in, he is still a villain even in *Vita Merlini*. Monmouth's attempts to make him seem more human and less monstrous ultimately fail and instead create the opposite effect. His actions, his personality, his attitude all come together to show his corruption. In fact, his transition into insanity can instead be considered his transition back to his original demonic state of mind. Therefore, Merlin remains a villain, a criminal who brought chaos to the world he lived in.

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The Presentation

[Merlin the Magician](#)

Reflection

With this research paper, I felt that most of my ideas flowed quite smoothly together. Each paragraph had relevance to those before and those after it. However, Ms. Bledsoe had pointed out several things that I had missed in my initial revision. First, I had noticed that I left out many citations for the quotes I had used in my paper. Additionally, in an effort not to let my sources take over my argument, I had placed many seemingly unnecessary quotes in my paper, without explaining their relevance to my argument. For example, I had used one quote by Neil Thomas that said Merlin had no reason to flee to the woods. He had won the war and there had been no indication that he was to be punished for his actions in the battle. However, I argued the opposite shortly after and failed to connect the two statements. I had used Thomas' quote to show lack of rational thinking in Merlin's head, but I was still arguing that he had reason to flee to the woods. This was one of the main issues in my paper among many others. There were some errors in citation, but these were corrected more easily.