

# Merlin's Role in Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*

...

by Zachary Zlatin

**Malory's Merlin not only ensures  
the conception of Arthur, but also  
his ascension to king.**

# Background

- 1485
- Book I
- Book III

LE MORTE D'ARTHUR  
THE BOOK OF KING ARTHUR  
AND OF HIS NOBLE KNIGHTS  
OF THE ROUND TABLE. BY  
SIR THOMAS MALORY, KNT.



LONDON. PHILIP LEE WARNER  
PUBLISHER TO THE MEDICI  
SOCIETY 1<sup>st</sup> MDCCCCXXI.

<http://www.cclapcenter.com/archives/mortearthur.jpg>

# Arthur's Conception



[https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/736x/61/ef/9c/61ef9cfa57c4a55f46048d4157eb543c.jp](https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/736x/61/ef/9c/61ef9cfa57c4a55f46048d4157eb543c.jpg)

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- Uther's Disguise
- Arthur's Guardianship
- Uther's Future Trust
- Heir to the Throne

“Merlin has the means of arranging access to the lady’s bed and agrees to do so on condition that the child conceived there be, in due time, handed over into his safekeeping” (5).

McCarthy, Terence. *Reading the Morte Darthur*. Cambridge: Brewer, 1988. Print.

# Arthur's Conception



- **Uther's Disguise**
- **Arthur's Guardianship**
- **Uther's Future Trust**
- **Heir to the Throne**

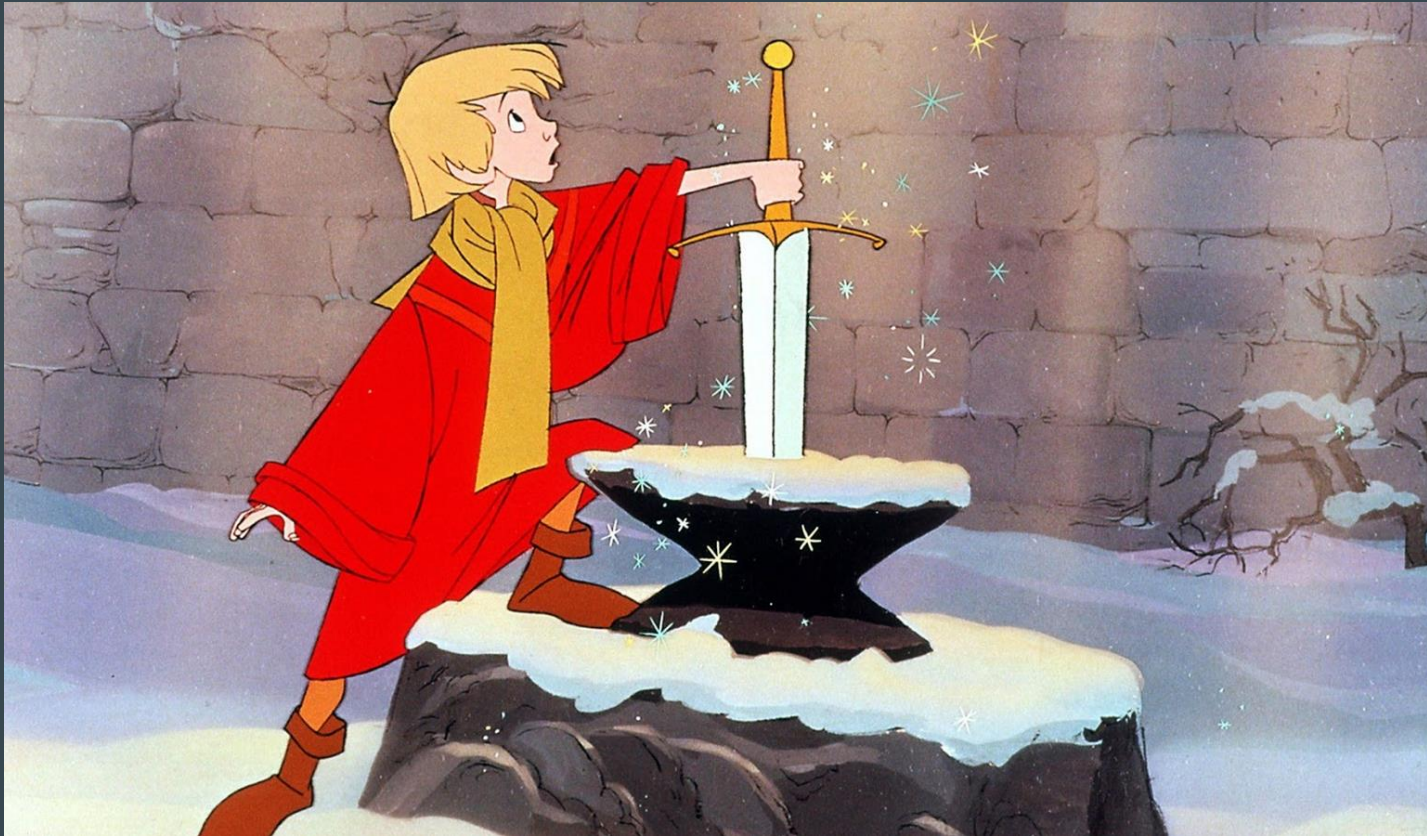
[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c0/Boys\\_King\\_Arthur\\_-\\_N.\\_C.\\_Wyeth\\_-\\_p4.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c0/Boys_King_Arthur_-_N._C._Wyeth_-_p4.jpg)

“He is present at Uther’s deathbed and prompts  
Uther to declare Arthur his heir.”

Boyle, Louis J. "Ruled by Merlin: Mirrors for Princes, Counseling Patterns, and Malory’s ‘Tale of King Arthur’." *Arthuriana* 23.2 (2013): 52-66. Web.



# Arthur's Ascent to King





# The Sword in the Stone

“Merlin was also responsible for concocting the legendary sword in the stone event, which was ultimately designed to prove before the lords in the land that Arthur was the rightful king of Britain.”

Choronzy, Jessica A. "Morgan Le Fay, Nimue and Merlin in Sir Thomas Malory's "Le Morte D'Arthur": Advancement and Devastation through Magic." Order No. 1437566 Southern Connecticut State University, 2006. Ann Arbor: *ProQuest*. Web. 28 Oct. 2015.

# Merlin Fades Out

King Lot and Company

Ban and Bors

Books II and III

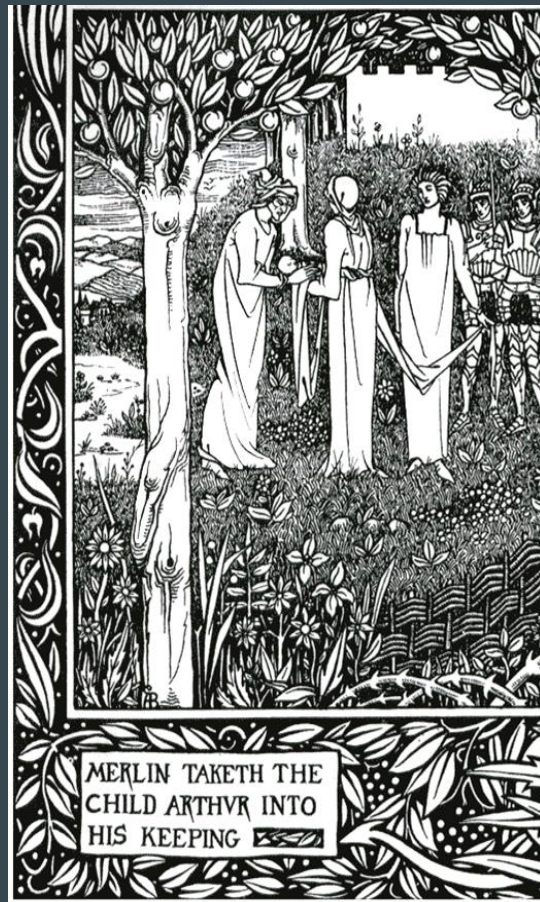
Death

# Conclusion

Arthur's Conception

The Sword in the Stone

Merlin Fades Out



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**Thank you**



# RESEARCH PAPER

Zachary Zlatin

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## Merlin's Role in Arthur's Birth and Ascension to King

Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* is one of the medieval books describing fable of the life of King Arthur and the knights of the round table. In this version, Merlin, a sorcerer, creates Arthur, and aids in his becoming king. To accomplish this goal, he uses trickery, magic, and his abilities to form prophecies. Book one of Malory's story begins with Merlin causing the conception of Arthur. He then gets Arthur to be named heir to the throne, and through other trickery, such as the sword in the stone, gets Arthur to be king. In this paper, I will prove that the sole purpose of Merlin's existence in not only to ensure the conception of Arthur, but also aid his ascension to king, which in by doing so portrays Merlin as a hero.

Malory's Merlin is directly responsible for Arthur's conception through his disguising of King Uther. Merlin transforms Uther into the image of the Duke of Cornwall in order to "lay with Igraine... and beg[e]t on her that night Arthur" (Malory Book 1. Chapter 2). Merlin agrees to do so on the "condition that the child conceived there be, in due time, handed over into his safekeeping" (McCarthy 6). Terrence McCarthy, a published literary critic, agrees that Merlin aids Uther in his lusty endeavors to cause Arthur's conception and to gain control of Arthur's custody, which is Merlin's first step in fulfilling his aforementioned purpose. Igraine's impregnation was easy to arrange as all Merlin had to do was disguise Uther. Because the king's lust was making the king physically ill, and because he was the only one who could help the king satisfy his lust, Merlin knew Uther had no choice but to give in to any reasonable demands he put forth, which Merlin takes advantage of by asking for the child that he prophesied will be conceived between Uther and Igraine. Merlin begins to fulfill his heroic purpose of establishing Arthur in these first two chapters. He is responsible for Arthur's conception and is able to direct Arthur's upbringing in order to accomplish his task. Additionally, Merlin aiding the king to satisfy his lust also allows him to gain the king's trust, something Merlin later takes advantage, in accomplishing his later goal of making Arthur king.

By gaining the trust of King Uther, Merlin is able to convince him to name Arthur his heir. Since meeting King Uther, Merlin became a source of aid for him. Merlin is often seen aiding the king. First, as previously mentioned, Merlin helps Uther copulate with Igraine. The second time where Merlin explicitly counsels Uther is when Uther falls sick during a war. Merlin convinced Uther into riding into war by tell him "for ye shall never have the better of your enemies but if your person be there, and then shall ye have the victory" (Malory 1.2). We see later in the book that many of Merlin's prophecies are often ignored, but the fact that Uther listens to Merlin demonstrates his admiration, respect, and trust in him. When this prophecy proves true, Uther's trust in Merlin further increases, as seen in how he then soon after requests the council of Merlin regarding his sickness. Critic Louis J. Boyle agrees that Merlin then manipulates Uther's trust on his deathbed to further put forth his plan of making Arthur king. Merlin "is present at Uther's deathbed and prompts Uther to declare Arthur his heir" (Boyle 5). Merlin uses the trust he built between himself and the king to convince the king to declare Arthur his heir. Merlin's council has always aided Uther, so Uther has no reason to believe that this piece of advice was not beneficial.

Merlin designs the events surrounding the sword in the stone in order to ensure Arthur's ascent to king. Although the origin of the stone is never explicitly stated, I agree with literary critic Donald L. Hoffman in that Merlin was responsible for the creation of the sword in the stone (Hoffman 34). The first piece of evidence that Merlin created the sword in the stone is that first chapter opens with Merlin calling for the lords of the region to come to London. Upon arrival in London, a sword in a stone, with the inscription "Whoso pulleth out this sword of this stone and anvil, is rightwise king born of all England" (Malory 1.5). "No one questions the statement" because Merlin, who is a respected individual, shows faith in it (Cawsey 21). The reason Merlin called upon on the lords is initially unclear; however it is likely that Merlin invited them to witness the events of the sword in the stone. Arthur's removal of the sword from the stone would be meaningless without reputable witnesses observing the event, so Merlin "counselled... for all the lords of the realm... to London come" (Malory 1.5). As Merlin has no other motive for calling upon these lords, it is clear that he calls upon them as witnesses to the sword in the stone, verifying that he knows of its existence prior, and he knows Arthur would be the only one able to remove the sword.

Not only would the lords be respectable witnesses for the events of the sword in the stone, but they would also be the other candidates for the kingship, and as they are unable to pull the sword from the stone, it may discourage them from attempting to take the kingship. With less competition for the throne, Arthur's ascension to king would be easier. Also, Arthur's removal of the sword would signify his right to the throne. As Jessica A. Choronyz explains in her literary thesis, "Merlin was also responsible for concocting the legendary sword in the stone event, which was ultimately designed to prove before the lords in the land that Arthur was the rightful king of Britain" (Choronyz 18). The removal of the sword by Arthur would prove Arthur the true king. Prior to the removal of sword, Arthur was not thought of as a potential candidate for kingship as his origin was unknown to most. Only Merlin is aware that Arthur is Uther's son, and that Uther named him his heir. By removing the stone from the sword, the idea of Arthur's kingship is planted in the minds of the lords. Upon seeing the sword removed, and upon Merlin explaining how Arthur was named Uther's heir, the lords crown Arthur king. The events regarding the sword in the stone are directly responsible for Arthur's ascension to king, one of Merlin's primary goals, and in conjunction with how he knew the sword in the stone existed, and how he knew only Arthur could remove it, it is probable Merlin created the entire event. As Arthur is now king, Merlin's role changes from ensuring Arthur's ascent to king to aiding him in maintaining his position.

Merlin's actions through Book I Chapter VII may establish Arthur as king; in the remainder of Book I, Merlin's purpose becomes to protect Arthur and keep him king. In Chapter VIII, Merlin tries to avoid a war with foreign kings, and in Chapter IX, when he fails, he aids Arthur in a military victory thus keeping Arthur the king of Britain. First, he verbally convinces the other kings of the legitimacy of Arthur's kingship. Merlin tells these kings "for he is King Uther Pendragon's son" (Malory 1.8). By being the son of Uther, Arthur is entitled to throne. Merlin's efforts to prove Arthur's kingship's validity were partially successful, but some of the other kings "laughed him to scorn" (Malory 1.8). Merlin fails to convince all the kings of the legitimacy of Arthur's rule, resulting in hostility. This is Merlin's first attempt to keep Arthur in power; however Merlin fails at dissipating the threat to Arthur's life and kingship. King Lot is one of those who Merlin does not convince, and as such feels he can take Arthur's rule. Lot decides to fight Arthur with the assistance of five other kings. Merlin tries then to protect Arthur's rule by developing a prophecy predicting Lot's defeat; however he fails. I agree with critic Rachel Kapelle when she acknowledges that many of Merlin's prophecies are ignored (Kapelle). Lot's prophecy is one that Kapelle references in her arguments as it is ignored. Upon learning of the inevitability of the fight between Lot and Arthur, Merlin counsels Arthur on how to be victorious. As Merlin could not prevent the threat to Arthur's kingdom, he ensures Arthur's victory and the continuation through advisement. He tells Arthur what he must do to win, as if he is defeated, both Arthur's life and reign will end. In trying to prevent war with other kings, and in the advisement of King Arthur leading to his victory over King Lot, Merlin helps in keeping Arthur king. In *Le Morte D'Arthur*, from this point on, Merlin's role in protecting Arthur shifts from action-based to advise-based.

After initially defeating Lot, Merlin continues advising Arthur to protect him from foreign kings. After Lot's defeat, Merlin warns Arthur that they will return in a second attempt to defeat Arthur. After Arthur's advisors reassure him that his army is strong enough to prevail, Merlin asserts that they are not sufficiently strong. Merlin warns them that Lot, in addition to the five kings from the initial attack, has "four kings more, and a mighty duke," and if Arthur faces them alone, "he shall be overcome and slain" (Malory 1.10). Here, Merlin continues in his role of protecting Arthur through advice and warning. Merlin prevents the early death of, and ensures the victory of Arthur, keeping in line with his aforementioned goal of keeping Arthur the king of the Britiains. President of the American Council of Learned Societies, R. M. Lumiansky, agrees that "Merlin... leads Arthur to victory over the rebel kings" (Lumiansky 23). Without Merlin's continued advice, Arthur would have been defeated, thus ending his rule. Merlin's role as Arthur's protector is seen in the advice he gives to Arthur ensuring his victory.

Merlin's actions are in totality heroic, as virtue by his complete selflessness and his modesty. Merlin receives no retribution for making Arthur king and for helping Arthur showing his total selflessness, a characteristic of heroes. Merlin in his entirety of the book aids others, such as King Uther in his lust for Ingrain or Arthur in his ascension to king. The only compensation Merlin got from aiding Uther was his trust. Instead of betraying his trust to improve his own life, Merlin uses it to aid Arthur in becoming king showing his pure selflessness. After he is successful in employing Arthur becoming king, Merlin never abuses Arthur's position for his own means. Arthur never shows nepotism toward Merlin, and Merlin does not ask for preferential treatment. By not asking for compensation for his actions, Merlin shows complete selflessness. In telling prophecies, Merlin shows his humble nature. Merlin is blessed with the ability to make accurate predictions of the future assuming certain conditions are true, a G-d-like power. Merlin tells Arthur that he will succeed in battle on condition that he recruits the aid of Kings Ban and Bors. In this circumstance that he heads Merlin's advice; however in many other circumstances, Merlin is ignored. When Merlin warns Arthur of the danger in marrying Gwenyvere, Arthur disregards his warning. Instead of preventing Arthur from marrying her, Merlin accepts his lack of power over the situation and shows modesty in accepting Arthur's decision. Also in his death Merlin is humbled. Merlin prophesizes that if he were to go with Nenyve, a sorceress, his demise would follow, yet instead of resisting his death, he accepts it. Although Merlin has G-d-like ability, he does not have a G-d complex. He modestly accepts his powerlessness both in the life of others, and accepts his mortality. The humble nature of Merlin, as well as his selflessness, depicts Merlin as a hero.

Merlin exists to allow for Arthur's conception, to aid in Arthur's ascension to king, and to keep Arthur in that position of King of the Britians. Merlin begins the story causing the conception of Arthur, and becoming responsible for his upbringing. Merlin, via Uther naming Arthur his heir and the sword of the stone, aids Arthur's ascension to king. As Merlin's job of making Arthur king finishes, Merlin's role becomes a passive aid to Arthur, only to ensure he maintains king. Merlin obtains no retribution for his actions, showing utter selflessness. Merlin's prophesy telling shows his modesty. As both selflessness and modesty are heroic qualities, Malory portrays Merlin as a hero.

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## Reflection:

The first step I took in revising my paper was to look at grammar errors. One mistake I made multiple times involves the word "however." I thought phrases beginning with the word however were a dependant clause, and as such could be fixed to the end of an independent clause with a comma, however I now know it is actually an independent clause, so it must be attached with a semicolon. I then moved onto the argument in my paper. My arguments was that Merlin existed in the book only to make Arthur king; however that deviated too far from the topic where I should have proved Merlin a villain or hero. When revising my paper, I reworded my thesis to change my argument. I felt as if I added a paragraph toward the end of the paper arguing how Merlin's actions as described in the other bodies proved heroism, I could make the two tailed argument that Merlin's role in *The Morte D'Arthur* was to make Arthur king, and that role proves his heroism. In my preliminary essay, I also felt I did not make clear my argument, and as I decided to tell the story chronologically it seemed more to be plot summery.