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The Vision of Robinson's Merlin

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The task of adapting or reworking an existing legend always poses a special problem to the creative artist. The legend itself presents a frame within which the artist can work, but the same frame which conveniently supplies a basic structure for the writer also presents implicit boundaries and limitations. The writer who approaches the Arthurian legend, for example, will find he confronts a general narrative structure—the rise and fall of Arthur's Camelot—with which the narrative structure of his work should remain fairly consistent. The extent to which the artist can create or modify is thus limited by the general frame of the dramatic situation. The narrative structure becomes a kind of constant, then; the central issue always becomes the matter of the writer's interpretation of the given narrative structure. It is ultimately a matter of why Arthur's kingdom falls which concerns the artist-interpreter, not whether it will fall. The task of the artist is to make the old legend into a new one, not by altering the legend's outer structure, but rather by reseeing and reinterpreting the basic elements of that structure.

Since the primary elements of a narrative based on existing sources will remain generally unchanged, the changes in characterization, point of view, and imagery, become central to the interpretation of an adaptation, for they reveal the ways in which the author is making the old legend new, the reasons why the author is choosing to retell and resee the existing legend. In this examination of Edwin Arlington Robinson's *Merlin*, then, I should like to describe how Robinson is reseeing his Arthurian source material, and then, by examining characterization and imagery, delineate the symbolic motif of vision and reflection which emerges to create Robinson's primary theme in the poem. It is from this theme of vision and reflection that Robinson's explanation of the downfall of Camelot is created.

Of the three long Arthurian poems Edwin Arlington Robinson wrote, *Merlin*, his first, is the one most original in its characterizations, and also the one least dependent on original sources for its narrative line. Both of the two major sources
Robinson followed, Malory’s *Morte D’Arthur* and Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*, describe Merlin’s final adventure with the mysterious Vivian, but neither presents the situation in exactly the same fashion as Robinson does.\(^1\) In Malory, Merlin is depicted as a slightly silly old man who is much infatuated with the young Vivian.\(^2\) Malory’s characterization of Merlin as an eager lover who “wolde nat lette her [Vivian] have no reste, but alwayes he wolde be wyth her,” is changed by Tennyson into that of a rather calm, benign old gentleman whose affection for Vivian, if it can properly be called affection, seems to stem more from a patient acceptance of her presence than any ardent passion on his part.\(^3\) His affirmation of feeling, “For me, I love you somewhat,” can not in any case be interpreted as over-positive.\(^4\) Tennyson’s Merlin is a man of reason and knowledge. He can see through Vivian’s cleverness as Malory’s Merlin could not. Tennyson’s Merlin, however, is trapped by Vivian in spite of his ability to recognize the danger.

It is in this “entrapment” of Merlin that Robinson diverges from both the early English and continental versions of the legend. Robinson’s characterization of Vivian alters the dramatic circumstances of the legend significantly. Malory’s Vivian, for instance, is not aggressive, and, in fact, is a little bored with Merlin’s attention. According to Malory, when Vivian does entrap Merlin forever, it is because “she was ever passynge wery of hym and wolde have bene delyverde of him, for she was aferde of hym for cause he was a devyls son, and she cowde not be skyft [rid] of hym by no meane.”\(^5\) Tennyson’s Vivian is the conscious seductress who attempts to secure from Merlin by charm the gift of knowledge that will allow her power over him. Robinson drops Tennyson’s characterization of Vivian as

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\(^2\) Vivian, like many Arthurian figures, has several names, and each name has several spellings. Robinson chooses the French form Vivian as did Tennyson and Matthew Arnold (in “Tristram and Iseult”), although he rejects the continental version of the story they choose in which Merlin’s final doom comes when he is sealed into an oak tree with a spell. Robinson’s creation of a kingdom for Merlin’s prison is distinctly original, for in Malory, Nyneve (Vivian) simply traps Merlin in a cave and seals the entrance with a boulder.


\(^5\) *Malory*, 126.
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seducer and creates instead a complex character who does not entrap Merlin or even force her will upon him in any direct fashion. Robinson’s Merlin, although he is a rational man similar to the figure presented in Tennyson, goes voluntarily to Broceliande and his fate. He is neither tricked nor seduced, and, most important, Merlin is free to leave whenever he pleases—an addition to the legend which originates with Robinson. It is because Merlin can leave, in fact, that Vivian does not become Merlin’s ultimate fate as she does in the two sources Robinson used. Robinson carries the story of Merlin past his encounter with Vivian and on to a new conclusion which presents a different interpretation of the fall of Camelot from either of his sources.

Central to Robinson's interpretation is the cosmology he develops within the poem. Merlin, in Robinson’s poem perhaps more than in any of the earlier versions, is the central visionary who perceives and understands the cosmos in which he operates. The prime force in Merlin’s universe he calls God, although it is never quite clear whether this God should be seen from a conventional Christian point of view as He might be seen in either Malory or Tennyson. Indeed, Robinson seems to make Christianity a peripheral issue in all three of his Arthurian poems. The Grail quest is sometimes alluded to, but it does not play a central role in any of the poems. It is not even clear that the “Light” which Lancelot follows into the sunset is a religious symbol. Lancelot’s light represents some sort of higher truth to be sure, but its associations with Lancelot’s visions of Galahad seem only to stress a purity of character, singleness of purpose, and ability to persevere that Lancelot lacks. It should also be pointed out that the God Merlin describes is apparently not an all-powerful deity, for there is another force in Merlin’s universe which is equal to God, or at least secondary only in some respects. That force is Fate. Fate determines the ultimate conclusions of life—not God—even though God is presumably life’s creator. As Merlin notes, “On Fate there is no vengeance. even for God.”

Fate and God then, control and dominate the cosmos in which man exists, and man becomes subject to their laws.

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Merlin, however, because he is a visionary prophet, assumes a position higher than man in this universe. Because of his unique nature, Merlin has seen farther backward and forward into Time than an ordinary mortal. Merlin's ability to see beyond the surface of things is constantly juxtaposed against the visionary limitations of the common man. The poem begins, in fact, with Dagonet's question to Gawaine, "what look ye for to see/ So far beyond the faint edge of the world?" (p. 235). Gawaine replies that he is attempting to look through Time, but of course he is unable to accomplish this feat; he can only see what lies immediately before him. Each knight, from Bedivere, who thinks he sees the shadow of Camelot's fall, to Lamorak, who can "see no other than a stinking mess," strains to peer into the future of Camelot, but none save Merlin can actually accomplish the task. So Merlin occupies a position which must be superior to those men around him who lack his powers, while remaining inferior to the two dominant forces of God and Fate.

Merlin has achieved his visionary superiority over other men because he has been able to transcend Time, the third major force in his cosmos. Merlin, because he has, as he says, "played with time," has not seen only the surface of things as Gawaine has, but has instead transcended them. And yet Merlin's victory over Time is only a temporary one. Finally in the poem he must admit to himself his defeat. He was once young, but the hand of Time grips his shoulder and then he is old; Time has conquered him. Merlin has not been able to hold back his "unseen angel," and when his moment of revelation comes, Merlin discovers that his angel's name is Change, and he learns that he must submit to a force stronger than either he or Vivian. Although Merlin has been able to hold Time at bay up to a point, he must finally prove inferior to this force and allow Time its vengeance.

If Merlin must finally succumb to Time and Change he still retains his superiority over mankind because he has once seen. Vivian must be placed on a plane nearly equal to Merlin in this respect; her visionary powers are similar to his, but they do not surpass his. Merlin knows that Vivian is wise in a world where most men possess only limited vision. "She saw beyond them all,/ As I did" he remarks, certain that Vivian is a least
his equal (p. 310). Vivian’s vision has caused her to create a golden exile in Broceliande — an Edenic garden of cherry blossoms and silvery fish. Her refuge of isolation attempts to close out all knowledge of Arthur and his tottering kingdom. Her world of Broceliande is an ideal world, and Camelot is not; “much is lost/ Between Broceliande and Camelot,” she notes.

Vivian’s vision has been as far-reaching as Merlin’s, but she has been able to make less sense of what she has seen. It is Merlin who has wisdom, she feels, discounting her own powers as only sight for distant things. It is he who must bring order to Broceliande and the vision she has rejected because of her inability to understand it. She, like Merlin, has apparently stepped beyond Time, although it would seem that Vivian’s powers, because she constantly fears growing old, rest primarily on an attempt to escape Time rather than defeat it. Her pleas to Merlin reveal this when she tells him that they “are out of Broceliande if they are to survive. Merlin tries, but fails. He Time/ And out of tune with Time.” He must hold them in Broceliande if they are to survive. Merlin tries, but fails. He is able to preserve their paradise for twelve years, then Change finally breaks the spell.

Merlin, because he is the central figure in this cosmology, because he is the visionary prophet who can both see and understand what the citizens of Camelot cannot, comes to his own revelation about the universe during the course of the poem — a revelation which he has not previously seen, simply because he has seen too far and has looked beyond it. The nature of Merlin’s vision — what it is he has come to know and see — becomes the central theme of Merlin, and it is around Merlin’s vision that the narrative revolves. To understand the nature of the truth Merlin discovers, however, we should examine first the nature of the personal relationships Robinson has created within the poem.

As we have already noted, almost all of the characters in Robinson’s Merlin are straining to see something. They are all seeking a something from beyond themselves which will help order and explain their lives. What each character finds, or believes he finds, constitutes his own small “vision” of what has a definite value in the universe which he perceives. Arthur, for instance, as king, has become a symbol of order for those
whom he rules. Yet Arthur, in Merlin’s opinion, forgot the importance of the example he set for the world, and those who have turned to Arthur to have their vision of order fulfilled must now be disappointed. As Sir Kay says, “the King is dead;/ The man is living, but the King is dead./ The wheel is broken” (p. 248).

Just as Arthur the King represents an ideal which gives balance to the lives of the people he rules, so does Merlin fulfill Arthur’s need for an understanding and reassuring ideal force. Merlin is fully aware that the King still believes Merlin is Fate. What Merlin also knows, of course, is that he is not Fate, nor able to change Fate; he is only a visionary, and he explains this to Arthur before leaving Camelot in search of Vivian. Still, Arthur continues to believe in Merlin’s supernatural powers, and it is not until after Merlin’s return to Camelot ten years later that Merlin can say to Vivian, “now Arthur knows/ That I am less than Fate” (p. 259).

Vivian, though she sees farther than Arthur, must also ground her faith in Merlin’s powers. She has dreamed of him since childhood she admits; she has placed him far above her and longed for the day she would meet him face to face. She wishes him to teach her of life, for until he arrived she had wearied of the feast of life and its glories. “You are Merlin,” she continually repeats to him, and the magic of the name and all the wizardry it holds obviously has a special significance to her. Indeed, she stands in awe of his legendary fame at their first meeting, stunned with the realization that this is actually Merlin who confronts her. The information which Vivian wants from Merlin — “what I am, and why I am” — is essentially the same information which Arthur, and in fact the rest of Camelot, wants from him. “What I am and why” becomes the ultimate vision each of the characters which exists below Merlin in the cosmological scale is striving to attain. In Merlin, all are certain, the final answer must lie, for he is the visionary who has seen beyond them all. The final irony of Merlin’s situation, of course, is that he too is peering into that same darkness and must strive to find answers to order his own existence.

Merlin goes to Broceliande willingly in Robinson’s poem, and as we have noted earlier, the fact that Merlin is not “trapped” alters the dramatic situation considerably. There is
a sense of resignation to Fate within Robinson’s Merlin as there is in Tennyson’s Merlin. But there is also a kind of willingness to submit implicit in Robinson’s version which one does not find in earlier versions of the legend which describe Merlin as trapped. Robinson’s Merlin seeks something from Vivian just as she seeks something from him. She only has to tell him that he will never be old and he believes her. At their first meal her beauty transfixes him so that he cannot see beyond her crimson gown. It is especially Vivian’s eyes which fascinate Merlin, however, and when they flash across the table at him, those eyes blind him to the rest of the world.

“What I am and why” is the question which Merlin, like Vivian, wants answered, and he believes that she, unlike he, must have the answer. Vivian denies this, but Merlin awed by her presence does not believe. He has become a prisoner and his gaze reflects helpless submission to her authority, even though she tells him that he must rule, believing he is ruled by her. What Merlin has not yet realized, of course, is that Vivian, to whom he feels he finally must submit, sees herself as secondary to the magic of Merlin. Both Vivian and Merlin are seeking an ultimate value and ordering for their lives, and they each find that value in the other. At their first meeting both seekers stand gazing, each finding in the other’s eyes the answer for which he has been searching, “a gleam/ Of what eternity had hidden there” (p. 263).

Merlin’s search for a vision which will explain his being is answered, he believes, in the eyes of Vivian. Vivian’s vision is fulfilled in Merlin; Arthur’s world is ordered through his belief that Merlin has the answer; Camelot turns to Arthur for its vision of the ideal king. All feel they have a glimpse of an ideal which will order their lives; all finally are disappointed, for what Merlin comes to realize is that although everyone is certain the person immediately above him in Camelot’s chain of being has an answer, no one in fact does. Yet Merlin, coming to understand that Vivian, whom he hoped would cast some light into the shadows through which he was striving to peer, can in fact supply no answers which will order his world, finds a final value to order his existence in just that very truth. Merlin discovers the visions that men have believed they have seen are in essence reflected visions. Man’s ability
to posit an ideal truth with which he can order his life becomes for Merlin the ultimate value. What is important is that man believes in the ideal, not whether the ideal can finally be proved to exist. Man defines himself through his creation of an ordered ideal and subsequent submission to that ideal. When man tries to ground his ideals in an absolute truth, man's framework of definition will collapse, for man will find that the quality of greatness he believed to exist outside of the presence of his own being, finally derives from that being, and is a reflection of it rather than a thing apart. It is when one's faith in an order begins to break down that self-definition stumbles, and the order finally collapses.

Arthur, confident that Merlin can make sense of his dilemma, finds his abstract ideal can ground itself on no absolute truth. Merlin can do nothing more for Arthur than show him what he already knows. Merlin becomes Arthur's mirror just as Arthur is the mirror for Camelot. Arthur, Merlin's “mirror for the world” reflects the values of Camelot, and when his kingdom sees him begin to falter, it too begins to collapse. This is what the insensitive Lamorak does not see when he roars that “half the world’s half crazy.” Lamorak cannot understand why “one damned scratch” can paralyze the kingdom. Merlin can see that the flaw of the king whom he made to be a mirror for the world is only a reflection of a world which is flawed. What Merlin cannot see until Vivian points it out to him is that the reflected visions of Camelot and Arthur are analogous to his own search for an ordering of existence. Merlin is a visionary, but he is in the final analysis a human being too; because he is not immortal, he must share with Vivian in mankind’s Fate. Telling Vivian his story of Arthur, Merlin says there is no man or woman for whom the story of Arthur is not the story of the living sin. “I thought my story was the common one,” he adds, “For common recognition and regard” (p. 290). In his statement that all the world has partaken in a vision which has only reflected its own existence, in his belief that the “story,” if not necessarily the sin, is a common one, Merlin has implicated both himself and Vivian, as she quickly points out to him. “I meant the world,” he groans in reply. “I meant the world . . . not you — not me” (p. 291). But it is too late. “This world of yours,” says Vivian angrily, “Will surely be the
end of us. And why not? I'm overmuch afraid we're a part of it, — ” (p. 292). What Vivian then goes on to say to Merlin reveals that she perhaps has understood the nature of this reflected vision better than he. Arthur's kingdom is tottering, but it is not the specific ideal of Arthur that really matters; it is mankind's ability to create an ideal and then follow it which is important. Vivian sees this and therefore finds no special sympathy in her heart for Arthur and his tragedy; new kings will come into being, new visions and new kingdoms. As she leaves Merlin, hinting that now she has brought a “Tree of Knowledge” into their Edenic paradise, she says to him that the world will see its reflection in Arthur, and then the world “will say its prayers and wash its face,/ And build for some new king a new foundation” (p. 293). Vivian knows that the world will always find a new ideal, a new measuring-stick, a new guide. What endures is never the particular ideal, but always the abstract search for one. It is Change that Merlin has been unable to hold back, and when this truth comes upon him, he decides he must leave Broceliande, for he has just discovered he can leave. He has been his own jailer — not Vivian. Vivian no longer represents the ideal ordering which he was seeking, and the self-imposed prison he has created for himself he now recognizes as only the reflected bond of his own willingness to submit. He has but one more story for her, and that is simply “I am old.” Then, the spell which he himself had created suddenly broken, he leaves Broceliande for a last return to Camelot.

When Merlin returns for the last time he chooses to tell his story to Dagonet, the fool of Arthur's court. Merlin confesses that when he began to shape Arthur's future he thought he could see in every man,

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a groping thought
Of an eternal will, strangely endowed
With merciful illusions whereby self
Becomes the will itself and each man swells
In fond according with his agency. (p. 307)
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This “groping thought” by which man defines himself causes a new union to be formed between Merlin and Dagonet. Dagonet, whose fear is that he has been a groping thought that never developed, takes on a new king — Merlin — who sees
in the twisted visions of the fool an ironic reflection of his own role as a prophet and visionary. “I do not ask,” Merlin tells Dagonet, “that you see what I see./ Where you see nothing; nor do I require/ Of any more vision than is his [Arthur’s].” (p. 309). Merlin has learned not to ask for an ordering of life from another human being, for he has seen what other men have seen, and what Dagonet has experienced — that man is essentially alone in the universe with the dreams of his reflected essence existing beyond him as an abstract ideal, gleaming in the distance like enchanting will-o’-the-wisps. Merlin, because he was more than human, saw beyond the illusion the human condition creates. When he realizes that being more than human involves the loss of the innocent vision of those who believe, Merlin sees himself as alone. Yet, like the citizens of Camelot, Merlin too has the ability to wash his face and begin again. Merlin’s “self” is all that he has seen which other men have not. And that self, alone except for its dreams and illusions, must once again cling to an ideal and make itself believe it is no longer alone by defining itself in terms of someone or something else. Merlin still sees “two fires” in the distance — the “torch of woman” and “the light that Galahad found.” These fires will some day save them all Merlin tells Dagonet. The “torch of woman” is Merlin’s metaphorical description of Vivian — the visible Fate which has entered his life. The “light” of Galahad’s quest represents the other superior force in Merlin’s cosmos — God. His faith in these two abstract ideals continues to order his life. In a human framework, of course, Merlin now has Dagonet to replace Vivian and Arthur. Dagonet and Merlin, mutually dependent, define their beings by creating an orderly framework of existence within which each can function. When they define their relationship to each other, their framework of existence established, King and Fool wind their steps away from Camelot into the darkness.