

DOI: 10.31648/an.8759

Karolina Pasiut

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1490-2860>

Uniwersytet Jagielloński w Krakowie/ Jagiellonian University in Kraków

karolina.pasiut@doctoral.uj.edu.pl

Merlin and Nimiane: The Unifying Force for the National Unity of Britain at the Waning of the Middle Ages as Depicted in the Fifteenth-Century *Prose Merlin*

Abstract: The article analyses a special portrayal of the relationship between Merlin and Nimiane in the English fifteenth-century *Prose Merlin*. The power couple escapes from their previously distinct and sometimes morally dubious renditions to perform a new function that serves the nation-building of a reviving civilization. The political and religious inclinations of the anonymous author are visible in Merlin and Nimiane's almost impeccable conduct towards their sovereigns, God, and themselves. The article analyses the unique presentation of the two in the light of the political and social circumstances of the waning of the Middle Ages in Britain and contrasts them with a brief discussion of other medieval portrayals of the couple.

Keywords: political and religious inclinations, nation building, feminine power, social circumstances, medieval portrayals

1. Introduction

The wealth of Arthurian literature immortalized powerful kings, chivalrous knights, and marvelous females throughout the Middle Ages as the real heroes of the epoch. Yet, towards the end of the fifteenth century, one more prominent and unique story emerged among the multitude of similar narratives. The *Prose Merlin*¹ presents the eponymous figure who has so far been exploited as a backup character in Arthurian legends until assuming a leading role alongside King Arthur. In the legends, Merlin is much more renowned than being only a royal advisor: his magical skills, strategic abilities, and leadership activities place him in a crucial functioning position in the kingdom of Camelot, and beyond. When his path crosses with a beautiful maiden,

¹ I will be referring to John W. Conlee (1998), *Prose Merlin*. Published for TEAMS in association with the University of Rochester by Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University.

his life is transformed with his full compliance. Nimiane, elsewhere known as the Lady of the Lake, enters into a perfect communion with the magician to create an image of the impeccable relationship of a power couple. In the article, I would like to argue that the foundations for the story were more than a mere literary vision but a well-thought strategic plan that was to serve the English nation at the end of the Middle Ages, devised by the members of the royalty and the church. I will present briefly the previous literary portrayals of the couple, sketch the social and political background for the eponymous work, and finally analyse the selected aspects of the *Prose Merlin*.

2. Nimiane

Nimiane, also known as Viviane (in Old French), Niv(i)ene, the Damsel, Lady or Chief Lady of the Lake, and referred to in Malory as Nynyve, Nenyve, Nymue, Nyneue (Saunders 2010: 239), is a distinguished female representative of Arthurian civilization. As the successor to his knowledge, and a chief advisor to the kingdom after his entrapment, she is Merlin's female counterpart (Berthelot 2000: 75), the confidant of magical knowledge, feminine power, and chastity. A descendant of the Roman goddess Diana, Nimiane is associated with hunting, nature, innocence, purity, and chastity (Woods 1991: 93), but also with death, fertility, the underworld, the moon, or women's earthly struggles: labour and childbirth (Woods 1991: 290–292). Diana is also an embodiment of feminine power (Kaufman 2007: 58), a guardian of women in need; the goddess represents the natural world and to prevent breaching any natural laws, she might be barbarous, cruel, and ruthless (Librach 1983: 4–5). Nimiane is therefore partially a supernatural creature herself and in the Arthurian tradition, she functions as the chief Lady of the Lake (Kaufman 2007: 57), an intermediary between the lake, a magical realm, and Camelot. She surfaces out of the mysterious depths of the lake and exudes new, refreshing energy into the rigid masculine world. In most accounts, the Lady of the Lake stays in opposition to the literary villain Morgan because she builds rather than destroys: “Nyneve busies herself with protecting Arthur and the members of his court, ‘for ever she ded grete goodness unto kyng Arthure and to all hys knyghtes’” (Bates 1965: 34). She succeeds Merlin and becomes a new protectress of Arthur as an exception in the masculine ruling environment; she chooses to guard over Arthur because she “admires and pities him as a noble man and warrior” (Bates 1965: 37).

She supplies the king with the supernatural sword Excalibur which endows Arthur with exceptional power:

in, yonder is that sword that I spake of. With that they saw a damosel going upon the lake. What damosel is that? said Arthur. That is the Lady of the Lake, said Merlin; and within that lake is a rock, and therein is as fair a place as any on earth, and richly beseen; and this damosel will come to you anon, and then speak ye fair to her that she will give you that sword (Malory 2006: chapter 15).

She also helps to retrieve the weapon when it is stolen. When Morgan and her lover, Accolon, plot against the king to “put not on [him] this mantle till [he] have seen more” and deprive him of his power (chapter xvi), Nynyve sees through their scheme and rushes to win the weapon and its scabbard back for its first owner. She openly condemns Morgan for her unfaithfulness and kills the traitorous man, her sinful companion. To assist Arthur, Nynyve furnishes his great knight Lancelot with teachings about knighthood, chivalry, and respect for women which will popularize Arthurian glory in the world (Ciavolella 2014: 36).

The Lady of the Lake proves capable of aiding in and exercising power directly – she is a “fierce maiden”, a huntress, not to be guided by any man (Berthelot 2000: 67). Her literary figure manifests as a witch, sorceress, and enchantress when she manages to lull the greatest magician Merlin and take over his role to become a symbolic spokesperson for women’s rights. Not only does she teach but also acts for damsels in need, safeguards them, and introduces rules to protect female inhabitants of the realms. In the credible attempt to improve conditions for women, the Lady is an intermediate between the lake, the supernatural realm, and Arthur’s court, a firm stronghold; she tries to reconstruct their relations and pursues the introduction of changes in Arthur’s rule (Kaufman 2007: 58). Herself a “chivalric figure”, Nynyve is a heroine acting like a knight who shields the lake – an organization of women with power and political influence (Kaufman 2007: 56–57). She affects changes within Arthur’s kingdom and forces to the surface what has been shrouded in mysterious, watery exile (Kaufman 2007: 57). Nimiane passes her judgments and desires to both be the law and to break it. She famously interferes in the wedding ceremony between Arthur and Guinevere by sending a pack of animals: a white stag, a brachet, and black dogs hunting them, a “strange and a marvellous adventure” (Malory 2006: chapter 5). She enters the scene as mighty as the divine, feminine energy “in patriarch excess at Arthur’s court” (Kaufman 2007: 58) to take her toll on everybody gathered at the service. When needed, she stands for Guinevere and defends her at the trial (Kaufman 2007: 61), showing

support for female solidarity and involvement in the well-being and fair treatment of her female contemporaries. She is a representative of the divine feminine power balanced by the masculine-dominated aspects of ruling (Kaufman 2007: 57–58). As a strong determined woman, she is not to be misused or deceived, or overcome by men's desires (Fries 1994: 8), and imposes new power stepping in.

Nynyve is a particularly original and exceptional woman due to her dubious nature: she is the helper involved in the kingdom's matters, the "protective goddess", but also a "selfish, ruthless, desiring, and capricious" oppressor if her interests demand it (Kaufman 2007: 56). Her double function of "life-sustaining" and "death-dealing" switches according to her needs (Kaufman 2007: 56–58). Literary medieval history preserved stories where the Lady has been accused of being Merlin's mistress. Her ruthless and emotionless calculations deceived him, led him on, and subordinated Merlin so that the enchanted old man revealed all his wisdom to her (Fries 1994: 9). She is thus a demon tempting Merlin, an embodiment of an otherworldly fairy lady who can transform into a "nigromancer" (Goodrich 2000: 105, 240). As inferred, she aims to bind men's bodies, imprison them by enchantment and execute her feminine and sexual power over them (Goodrich 2000: 192). These indicate an image of a hostile, antagonistic, selfish woman who intentionally traps Merlin and leaves the kingdom unprotected, vulnerable to its numerous enemies (Fries 1994: 9). The traditional outlook based on some folk beliefs suggests that a male magician transfers power to his partner through sexual intercourse (Goodrich 2000: 105) but Nynyve refuses to exchange her body and give up her chastity (Kaufman 2007: 62). She rejects Merlin's sexual advances and deprives him of his status as a man. When in *Lancelot* Merlin falls in love with her for the first time, she becomes the predator who lures the vulnerable sage to a delusive place, a magical manor, not-a-lake (Berthelot 2000: 64) rejecting his advances. The fact that he develops a special liking towards her highlights her cruelty in leaving him vulnerable to her wishes: "I have left, for your company, King Arthur and all the noblemen of the kingdom of Lorges, of which I was a lord, and I have had no profit out of following you" (Knight 2016: 78–79).

On the other hand, Nynyve knows about Merlin's traditional ways of deceiving women in return for their virtues and hence decides to punish the male predator (Berthelot 2000: 73). His false allegations and Nynyve's liaison with him make her despise him; she cannot accept his sinfulness: he exults "in his power", boasts about "God-like infallibility", and does not regret nor repent his sins (Knight 2016: 69); he misuses the prophetic gift to avoid the fate, he does not want to change (Berthelot 2000: 73). As a fair and respectable figure, Nynyve refuses to become

“a male construct” according to Merlin’s liking and suffers “pain, confusion, and anger” (Gilbert/Gubar 2020: 296) to educate herself on Merlin’s knowledge and experience as long as it does not threaten her independence. Gradually, she takes over his role at the peak of the Arthurian civilization of which he was a creator and is successful because “when knowledge is most important, most close to taking control, that is when it is most vulnerable to some form of limitation or repression by power” (Knight 2016: xi), she can step in.

3. Merlin

Merlin the magician is a prominent representative of the Arthurian kingdom, its sage, royal advisor, wizard, and prophet. His literary history shows his abilities to advise as well as to orchestrate the events for Arthur and his knights, often having the decisive voice in any decision-making. A blend of an otherworldly father and a pious mother, his renditions differ in the good and evil nature of his deeds so that not only respect, joy, and hope but also apprehension or fear accompany his name. He does not wish for the position of the main character in charge, but either way rules in hiding, secretly. Merlin is usually viewed as the one whose powers depend on being separate from others, dwelling in a secluded science of wizardry: an old sage appearing in case of emergencies (Goodrich 2000: 94). When this prominent personage succumbs to the female charm of a beautiful Nimiane, his life transforms and she takes the freedom to interfere with his character.

If Nimiane is presented as if she was fighting for women’s rights, Merlin becomes a symbolic scapegoat for all men’s demerits. But when only he is the evil one, Nimiane is presented as an innocent, talented, wise, and good Christian, the opposite to Merlin, who can be characterized as a “hairy, (...) swarthy (...) black bile” (Goodrich 2000: 96). He is indeed infamous for being a lady’s man with no respect for female chastity. The questionable figure as portrayed in the *Suit Post Vulgate* behaves cruelly and unscrupulously by trading women’s virginity for his secret knowledge or seducing victims with magic lessons and practice (Goodrich 2000: 61). Because of his diabolic father, Merlin has a demonic rape embedded in his nature (Goodrich 2000: 95–96) that varies to different degrees depending on the rendition; nevertheless, he could be seen as desirous and lustful not only for Nenyve but also Morgana le Fay and other women (Goodrich 2000: 239). The majority of his pursuers, aspiring students are women, willing to seize his wisdom at any price; “it seems for instance a well-established fact in the *Prophecies de Merlin* that

every damsel who wishes to learn some magic has but to come and offer herself to Merlin” (Berthelot 2000: 71–72). Merlin might have been luring and deceiving numerous female victims for his pleasure partially because of his nature, deriving from wild, primary roots back in the Welsh tradition. His prototype was a man of a forest, the Welsh Myrddin, whose existence among savage beasts, secluded from the civilization, made him liable to natural impulses with no regard to moral restrictions (Goodrich 2000: 95). By combining supernatural and humane features in the figure, he is prone to temptations both demonic and earthly.

Merlin displays an unquenchable lust for Nynyve’s “maydenhode”, longing for the acquisition of her body as his exclusive property (Berthelot 2000: 62), even more so when she openly refuses it. Potentially, he might also be afraid of her potency, the new energy entering the scene, which simultaneously comes from the depths of the primeval lake where only women rule. Merlin experiences “the infantile dread of maternal autonomy” that Nynyve as a seductive and energy-stealing power has (Gilbert/Gubar 2020: 34). Mythical sorceresses and cruel goddesses “as the Sphinx, Medusa, Circe, Kali, Delilah, and Salome” were haunted for centuries by those who tried to seemingly emulate “duplicitous arts” (Gilbert/Gubar 2020: 34) of the male. The masculine vilification denounced them just like the Amazonian women for domination, rejection, or destruction of the male (Montrose 1988: 36) while women were just acting out on what was done to them. Merlin and Nimiane’s controversial relationship, with him voluntarily giving up his inborn energy, show how men are “dependent upon women: upon mothers and nurses, for their birth and nurture; upon mistresses and wives, for the validation of their manhood” (Montrose 1988: 36). All in all, this could be a reason why the so far decisive force in the whole kingdom of Camelot is terrified to lose his position to energy somehow embedded in his nature.

4. The *Prose Merlin*

The Prose Merlin is a work written in the middle of the fifteenth century in Middle English, surviving in a single manuscript in Cambridge University Library MSff.3.11. (Conlee 1998: 1) as a direct translation from the French section of *Merlin* in the Old French Vulgate Cycle. Its five sections had been composed between 1210–1230 and can be divided into two parts: the one derived from the Old French poem *Merlin*, by the French author, Robert de Boron, and the second, a sequel to Robert’s poem (Conlee 1998: 1–2). The story is a late Arthurian work, but innovatively focuses

on the figure of a magician whose actions lead to the events preserved in a well-known Arthurian cycle; it presents Merlin's life traced down to the events even before his birth, in a biographical-like order. The story is an important element of the late medieval Arthurian cycle, where Merlin was reinforced to serve the crown, the church, and the public.

The *Prose Merlin* puts Merlin's life as the main focus and tracks it down to the moments preceding his birth: the devils' council plans to create their offspring, but Merlin's mother purifies him from any sinful blemishes, baptizes, and turns him into God's servant. The unwanted connections to devilish powers as well as the divine grace of God leaves a mark on the child, endowing him with a supernatural aura from the very beginning: he is an amazing toddler, a boy, and a young man whose fame is quickly spread and wisdom recognized. Distinguished from the moment of his birth, he chooses to use his abilities to build the great kingdom of Camelot in the Christian faith, and hence he furnishes its subsequent sovereigns with visible help: he is close to Vortiger, Utherpendragon, Pendragon, and finally Arthur who all rely on his council, and do not dare to oppose his supernatural intuition; relying heavily on his advice, Arthur comments "I thinke on that I trowe I have loste Merlin, and that he will never more come to me; for now hath he abiden lenger than he was wonte [...] I hadde kever lese the cite of Lorges than hym" (Conlee 1998: 322). The power bestowed on Merlin by God allows him to catalyze circumstances and intervene in time. He faithfully serves people in need but he never abuses his authority nor involves himself in any dubious affairs; he is "beyond sexual blandishment" (Goodrich 2000: 94). Merlin never becomes a ruler himself, even though he could achieve the position as a successful conductor of punishment, and justice (Foucault 1980: 116), but he does not desire royal authority for himself. Merlinian wisdom, control, and influence over everybody he encounters is a gift to the whole of Camelot. Hoga and Lipińska highlight how acquiring such a hero in the community was particularly attractive, cherished, and anticipated (Hoga/Lipińska 1987: 17). He is privileged to exercise power that exceeds mere waging or withdrawing from military actions: it allows for pleasure, knowledge, things, and discourse to be produced (Foucault 1980: 119). The sorcerer is "frequently involved in prompting the actions of the other characters, orchestrating events, and heading off catastrophic situations" (Conlee 1998: 7); he earns his trust by using his powers for good, which is precisely how he cooperates with others and why they surrender to all his wishes. Merlin participates in creating a new reality, he is the sole expert on the past, present and future: his presence legitimizes the events.

Fulfilling a variety of roles among his contemporaries, Merlin departs from his superior position to rest and surround himself with Nimiane, his apprentice and successor.

Merlin pairs with Nimiane, and they create a unique union. Even though the previous controversies around the couple are not to be resolved or fully justified, as their motifs have been mutually exclusive while relying on justified premises, their literary past cannot stop their evolution into a new perspective. Previously, their love story was variously conveyed as an evil partnership of two predators or even an offender-victim relationship with a varying reference point of who was the harmed one. Regardless of these, a fine example of their portrayal that is devoid of any blemishes in the *Prose Merlin* cleanses the dubious atmosphere around them and presents the impeccable image of a power couple that by its nature should serve national and religious before literary purposes.

Their relationship fills people with admiration rather than disgust resulting from their dissensions. They are of strong personalities but join to become prominent representatives of Camelot because this time, when Nimiane steps into the scene of the *Prose Merlin*, she transforms Merlin's life for the better. The sage is an already established persona, an advisor to a powerful imperium: he administers it and moves around the country to help others in need until he finally approaches the forest of Benoyk. Upon seeing a beautiful maiden near the fountain in the forest, he falls for Nimiane at first sight, just like Palamon and Article seeing Emily down from the prison cells in Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale*; she appears to him just like "an echo of paradise, the springtime of the human race" (Woods 1991: 284). The dweller of the Forest of Brioke, a priestess of Nature (Woods 1991: 284) in the woodland realm of Dionas, Nimiane is a beautiful woman who enchants Merlin right away. Her father Dionas, whose faithful service to King Ban was rewarded by marrying into the royal family, also received forested lands, "the Foreste of Brioke" (Conlee 1998: 183), where he dwells, hunts, and thrives in nature. He enjoys the love of his overlord as well as supernatural guardianship of his godmother, the goddess Diana. She frequently visits and advises Dionas; she prophecies that his offspring will be born with a gift to attract the wisest man on earth: she guarantees her "knowledge and skills" "by the power of necromancy" (Conlee 1998: 68–69) from that man. That is how Nimiane, the yet unborn child, is already directed towards knowledge, pure, natural existence (Conlee 1998: 106), and blissful life.

Because Merlin also thrives in foresty environments, he enters Dionas's realms and is enchanted with a godly descendant dwelling there. To impress the maiden, Merlin shows off spectacular charms and spells, which gather a crowd of the

marvellous company that surrounds the magical circle, singing, cheering, playing music, and dancing, as if depicting Merlin's inner state of love (Conlee 1998: 185). The meadow blooms in exuberant flowers, exotic fruits, and trees that surround Nimiane, visibly impressed with the "merveilles that never woman cowede so many" (Conlee 1998: 164–165); her father and his knights also experience the impressive magic (Conlee 1998: 185). The girl falls for Merlin and enquires about his teachings, and so she becomes a "clerke", a diligent assistant scrupulously writing the knowledge down (Conlee 1998: 186). Merlin keeps going back and forth to the forest to teach the girl about his magic. The relationship is presented as serene, based on their mutual respect and an exchange of knowledge for loyalty and pure love; Merlin is very surprised with the unexpected feeling (Saunders 2010: 63–65), unknown in such a form before, but he cherishes her company. Merlin fulfills all his promises, and upon returning to Nimiane, he "teaches hir ther a pley that she wrought after many tymes, for he taught hir to do come a grete river over all theras her liked, and to abide as longe as she wolde" (Conlee 1998: 187). Nimiane is a faithful apprentice, exceptionally aware of the mechanisms necessary for Merlin's successful career – in Foucault's understanding, she ensures his glory and writes down anything he passes on to her, preserving his great deeds in history, which is the way to govern statements issued by the governing power (Foucault 1980: 112). She patiently awaits the magician, and by obtaining the spell of staying untouchable by other men, she commits herself to the only man who "loved hir merveillously wele" (Conlee 1998: 222).

In their relationship, Merlin personally supports the persistent raising of fresh feminine energy. Nimiane's delicate feminine voice (Kłosińska 2010: 15) does not deter but encourages Merlin to transfer his knowledge to her. Despite her initial position of "the angel in the house" (Gilbert/Gubar 2020: 596), she docilely relies on Merlin's promises and patiently gains his experience, during which she gets through the process of self-definition so that when her independent pursuits (Gilbert/Gubar 2020: 296) begin, she will be fully furnished. However, she is in no way dangerous or threatening towards Merlin: he consents to the transfer of knowledge and authority, and she flourishes in creating her female version of power adjusted to Merlin's requirements (Kujawińska-Courtney 1998: 104). Merlin and Nimiane both reach for power but each of them a different type of power and at a different time. While the former fulfills a variety of roles in the kingdom, he is an advisor, strategist, healer, magician, and benefactor, Nimiane faces the patriarchal definitions (Gilbert/Gubar 2020: 229), and as his successor, she challenges the male possession of power relating knowledge (Foucault 1980: 52) and realizes her ambitions of a powerful

yet gentle female. Nimiane, in French “I shall not lie”, does not attempt to deceive but derive from what is freely given to her. Nimiane and Merlin’s portrayal from the *Prose Merlin* allows both to be equally involved and loyal partners, entering a free union of two spirits.

5. The *Prose Merlin* – nation-building importance

The *Prose Merlin* was composed in the late Middle Ages when Europe was filled with the sense of a looming end of the epoch, reflected or caused by the unease of ongoing territorial or tribal violence, skirmishes, plaques, natural disasters, and wars which decimated the population; the third of people on the continent died. The turn of a new era was also disastrous for the English, who experienced wars within the island, dealing with Celts, and conquests of Wales, Ireland, and Scotland, which all resulted in bloodshed, deaths, and other atrocities among innocent people. After the Black Death, England suffered from the consequences of the decline of population, and economic and social realities were tragic. The resentment towards “the luxury and corruption of the Church” and the lavishness at court enlarged (Halliday 1965: 67), and the poor and the rich rebelled signaling thorough transformations of the established norms to come.

The role of the Pope was shattering. The English saw him residing in Avignon, France, which simultaneously made the taxes flow partially to the French court (Halliday 1965: 49), and in the face of their hostility, the resentment became unbearable. The state of the Church, with no spiritual authority, triggered the “decline of standards” (Halliday 1965: 72) of religiousness among its worshippers. When Wat Tyler, a leader of the Peasants’ Revolt, called everybody “men formed in Christ’s likeness” (McDowall 2013: 48) people started to believe that God made everybody equal and feudalism might have been an incorrect and unfair construct; the authority in either the head of the state or the head of the church collapsed. While the development of religious writings in fourteenth-century Britain encouraged people to pray individually and interpret faith on their own (McDowall 2013: 49), John Wycliffe and his Lollardy movement translated Bible from Latin, believing that everybody had a right to read the Scripture in the comfort of one’s home and understanding the text independently from strict Church renderings. All of these contributed slowly but surely added to the general attitude of individualism and personal responsibility.

The lower rank people revolted against taxes, and the unfair and forceful dealings of English kings; when the countryside lost agricultural laborers due to plaques, famines, or natural calamities, manual workers began to understand the value of their job so that the dissatisfaction with the exploitation became obvious. The Peasants' Revolt provoked realizations of one's worth and ability to change; though the rebellion ended quickly, it was a warning which allowed the peasants to control London (McDowall 2013: 49). Simultaneously, the nobility rebelled against the kingship, and the War of Roses nearly destroyed the king's position; "after 1460 there had been little respect for anything except the power to take the Crown" (McDowall 2013: 55).

The established, medieval position of a ruler as blessed and chosen by God had weakened; the mentally struggling Henry VI (1421–1471), the deposition of Richard II, and the ongoing conflict with the French, strongly violated the role of kingship. When Edward II was deposed in 1327, the taboo around the monarchy was broken; such an unprecedented event invalidated the unwritten rule about the king's immunity. King, the head of the state, gradually stopped receiving unquestioned and unanimous respect. As an institution, the court committed numerous flaws which excluded the traditional view of a regal power received from above. Also, the continuous struggles with France turned out to be a waste of money and the lives of people who did not have direct interests in the fights, which were political games within the ruling classes. The loss of Gascony in 1453 and the looming French overlordship caused disgust towards the hostile country but also showed the growing disappointment with the court. The islanders started to recognize their independence and the need for more rights since the unfair feudal system was falling. The shift within the class division destructed the nobility after the War of Roses and enabled new social groups to grow into power (McDowall 2013: 58–61), which drew from the experience of unity against oppression.

The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries showed the spread of literacy and the development of the English language; rejecting French, writing, and printing in English (William Caxton 1467) strengthened the feeling of "Englishness" (McDowall 2013: 64). The time of the reign of king Edward III and his eldest son, the Black Prince (McDowall 2013: 45), was an age of chivalry with military successes and restoring royal authority. Numerous because popular, legends of king Arthur left portraits of ideal rulers, chivalric knights, and nations united under one banner (McDowall 2013: 45) rooted among the audiences. The court of Edward III saw there the opportunity to restore its past glory: the Order of the Garter, the Round Table on St George's Day at Windsor Castle, ceremonies, and chivalric code

(McDowall 2013: 45) had been reintroduced and adapted in the English fashion. The Hundred Years' War, the revolt in Wales in the late Middle Ages, and the death of Wallace were other milestones to call for something new, which later turned out to be a national spirit and a new sense of patriotic identity.

I believe that the scheme of the restoration of a revised royal power over an integrated and prosperous society is reinforced in the Merlin and Nimiane story from the *Prose Merlin*. The work was meant to be realized for the audiences of one nation. Their love and its transformative force over other circumstances were what the royalty and church tried to retain and graft within the reviving society. They last in a loving and sin-free union that bring out the best in them: a lot of Merlin's spectacular magical abilities are revealed during his contacts with Nimiane, and she helps to preserve his deeds. His magic becomes a bargaining chip to win Nimiane's attention, which she abundantly bestows upon him, trusting and enjoying his company. They want to see each other, and exchange oaths; "Merlin and the maiden hadde be longe togeder" (Conlee 1998: 186), "ensure that youre love shall be myn" (Conlee 1998: 187). When in the end, Nimiane conjures a magical mist, "smoke of myste" (Conlee 1998: 326), a sort of bubble, Merlin voluntarily surrenders, pleased to spend the time with her exclusively. He loves her more than himself and patiently waits for her magic to trap him, ensuring that "[...] all shall falle as it behoveth to falle [...] discomfort you nothings" (Conlee 1998: 326). Though Merlin ends up entrapped and unable to escape, Nimiane does not intend to replace him wholly because she is not willing to possess all his skills; Merlin never bequeaths Nimiane his prophetic or scriptural abilities: she can interpret but does not foresee (Berthelot 2000: 77). When his life in Camelot ends, he leaves peacefully and content because Nimiane takes control of the affairs in his name. She spends time divided between the kingdom and the magical castle with Merlin, so most probably, she can consult current affairs with the sage.

The relationship between Merlin and Nimiane as presented in the *Prose Merlin* is distinct in its lack of deception, abuse, or sexual liaisons, the lovers are faithful, and even though their roles shift, they stay a power couple throughout. Neither Merlin nor Nimiane is an ordinary mortal; they derive from their supernatural ancestors, and hence their deeds are also extraordinary. Even though in the end the student has outgrown the teacher, the master text is mastered by his text (Goodrich 2000: 111), the transfer of power occurs naturally due to the transformative power of love (Saunders 2010: 192). The appearance of the *Prose Merlin* on a tear of the Arthurian cycles might not have been coincidental. Merlin turns out to be a unifying element, a cementing material to the kingdom. He is supposed to bond ideologically

with those from the lower to upper social classes. The exceptional portrayal in the *Prose Merlin* focuses particularly on his development in a biographic-like manner and develops the figure fully; pairing him with Nimiane allowed the picture of a perfectly Christian union who cares for their state to sound strongly among the audiences who needed consolidation of values and spiritual encouragement among the tragic circumstance. The *Prose Merlin* makes it possible to see both the country and nation with people uniting under the fair, benevolent, and strong royal authority (Helgerson 1988: 332). It does strengthen the sense of “local and national identity at the expense of an identity based on dynastic loyalty” (Helgerson 1988: 332); these knowledgeable advisors, Merlin, and his successor Nimiane, as imagined in medieval, feudal Europe, are to guide the powerful as great grand English viziers.

Merlin is an indispensable element of the kingdom but knowingly passes his experience on to his female counterpart. The British kingdom, which had been dealing with numerous hardships at the end of the Middle Ages, needed reinforcements for a better future. The historical events from the period reflected in the problems that Arthur and his kingdom had to deal with found their resolution in the always victorious figure of Merlin. The ongoing conflicts within the British Isles, rebellious nobility, dissatisfaction of the lower classes, or constant alertness in contact with the French, weakened the role of kingship, which was not always capable of not only adjusting to but also coping with the acceleration of emerging issues. The two characters from the dawn of the Arthurian stories were developed and presented as figures in a blissful union wielding a variety of functions that led the prosperous nation ahead. A wizard, a prophet but also a royal advisor, together with his faithful student, acted on behalf of all social groups, strengthening the national bonds within the country. Preserving the image of the couple in a literary piece allowed their impact to penetrate people of different social statuses who read or listened to medieval romances, which strongly shaped the understanding of the world around the community (Rouse 2015: 40). Romances were not “frivolous” stories with entertaining, pleasing elements common for convivial activities such as playing chess, singing, or socializing (Coleman 2013: 161): regardless of the various nature of romances, the genre should not be underestimated as a literary form primarily because of its popular appeal. They transformed into more realistic texts, guide-like sources of advice to their contemporaries (Rouse 2015: 40). Over time romancers had to adjust their contents not only to particular audiences, their statues, and professions but also to geographical locations, which brought into life a variety of contexts and also details of the stories that circulated. They were “commenting on ‘reality’ to constituting a ‘reality’” (Bäumli 1980: 265).

Fifteenth-century Britain upheld Merlin as a guardian over the recovering kingdom, an important reminiscence of the past medieval glory. His literary prophecies were crucial in legitimizing contemporary political decisions as they were vehicles for dominant ideologies (Flood 2016: 3). Prophecies workings in literary texts were more powerful than mere propaganda. The anonymous author of the *Prose Merlin* could convey particular beliefs about how Britain was or should be (Flood 2016: 3–4), at the will of his sponsors, overlords, or whoever he was liable to. The late fifteenth century saw a “high political literature” written to unify the island within one sovereign, the “totus insula”, or “Ynys Prydein” (Flood 2016: 6) place. Medieval audiences were interested in astrology and reading signs from the outer world and very eagerly read about prophetic visions; deciphering meanings or bestowing the significance on the surrounding reality was a popular and engaging form of entertainment as much as dealing with reality. Sovereigns and church representatives could utilize the delight of their subjects in symbolism, hidden messages, and an urge to unravel them, to control their content throughout the epoch. Regardless their social status, the recipients heartily appreciated the supernatural dimensions Merlin and Nimiane displayed, which made them proper media for subliminal messages.

The morally impeccable sage and his partner in a national-spirited story served as a consolatory medium. The *Prose Merlin* shows the Lady of the Lake taking over Merlin’s role and transforming into his successor almost naturally, in an unobtrusive manner. She begins as his apprentice, observes, learns, and notes down his actions like a legitimizing force (Cawsey 2001: 99) but also encourages his creative energy outburst. The function of the scribe allows Nimiane to become a female writer (Kłosińska 2010: 14), voicing her rendition of the sage’s life. In such a role, the female tradition is created (Kłosińska 2010: 14). Merlin is perfectly aware of the transition and his looming end, but he is not the one to oppose it – contrary to his previous portrayals, he is patient and reconciled with his fate. His acceptance enables the feminine power to enter. The *Prose Merlin* might have been an answer to the historic process of the waning of the Middle Ages which brought irreversible changes in the history of Britain. A royal advisor Merlin, and his replacement Nimiane, were supposed to be a consolatory element to people in crisis: their well-established role in the legendary English court reminded the past glory of the English monarchy and inspired its restoration after the heavy mishaps. Their impeccable and right behavior was crucial to the author, his overlords, and his audiences. Both Merlin and Nimiane were purified from any blemishes and presented as partners who can restore peace, well-being, and national spirit.

The anonymous author conveyed a patriotic attitude and expressed feelings needed for national unity. The chastity preserved between Merlin and Nimiane highlighted the Christian overtone in the text, which legitimized the revival of the national spirit under God's guidance. The crown, as well as the church, considered them worthy enough to celebrate and reinforce their history – the characters become new national and political elements in the English chronicles, political prophets, and specialists in national matters (Knight 2016: 96).

Bibliography

- Bates, G. (1965), *The Roles of Merlin, Morgan, and Nynve in "Morte Darthur": The Supernatural in Arthur's Tragedy*. <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4634&context=etd> [accessed: 05.01.2023].
- Bäumli, F.H. (1980), *Varieties and Consequences of Medieval Literacy and Illiteracy*. *Speculum* 55/2: 237–65. DOI: 10.2307/2847287.
- Berthelot, A. (2000), *Merlin and the Ladies of the Lake*. *Arthuriana* 10/1: 55–81. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27869521> [accessed: 05.01.2023].
- Cawsey, K. (2001), *Merlin's Magical Writing: Writing and the Written Word in "Le Morte Darthur" and the English "Prose Merlin"*. *Arthuriana* 11/3: 89–101. DOI: 10.1353/art.2001.0062.
- Ciavolella, M. (2014), *The Lady of the Lake*. <https://www.unistrapg.it/sites/default/files/docs/university-press/gentes/gentes-2014-1-36.pdf> [accessed: 10.01.2023].
- Coleman, J. (2013), *Audience*. In: Turner, M. (ed.), *A Handbook of Middle English Studies*. Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell: 155–169.
- Conlee, J.W. (1998), *Prose Merlin*. Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications.
- Flood, V. (2016), *Prophecy, Politics and Place in Medieval England: From Geoffrey of Monmouth to Thomas of Erceldoune*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer.
- Foucault, M. (1980), *Power/Knowledge. Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–77*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Fries, M. (1994), *From the Lady to the Tramp: the Decline of Morgan le Fay in Medieval Romance*. *Arthuriana* 4/1: 1–18. DOI: 10.1353/art.1994.0018.
- Gilbert, S.M./Gubar, S. (2020), *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Have, Connecticut: Yale University Press.
- Goodrich, P.H. (2000), *The Erotic Merlin*. *Arthuriana* 10/1: 94–115. DOI: 10.1353/art.2000.0003.
- Halliday, F.E. (1965), *A Concise History of England*. New York City: Viking Press.
- Helgerson, R. (1988), *The Land Speaks: Cartography, Chorography, and Subversion in Renaissance England*. In: Greenblatt, S. (ed.), *Representing the English Renaissance*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press: 327–363.
- Hoga, J./Lipińska, B. (1987), *Zabić czarną kurę. Czarownicy, znachorzy, lekarze*. Warszawa: Krajowa Agencja Wydawnicza.
- Kaufman, A.S. (2007), *The Law of the Lake: Malory's Sovereign Lady*. *Arthuriana* 17/3: 56–73. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27870845> [accessed: 10.01.2023].
- Kłosińska, K. (2010), *Feministyczna krytyka literacka*. Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego.
- Knight, S. (2016), *Merlin: Knowledge and Power Through the Ages*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.

- Kujawińska-Courtney, K. (1998), *Feministyczna krytyka literacka: Teorie i praktyki*. Pamiętnik Literacki 89/3: 99–113.
- Librach, R.S. (1983), *The Cloak of Romance: Love and Death in "The Knight's Tale"*. Interpretations 14/2. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23241507> [accessed: 10.01.2023].
- Malory, T. (2006), *Le Morte D'Arthur*. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1251/1251-h/1251-h.htm#-chap77>. [accessed: 14.12.2022].
- Mcdowall, D. (2013), *An Illustrated History of Britain*. London: Pearson Education Limited.
- Montrose, L.A. (1988), "Shaping Fantasies": Figurations of Gender and Power in Elizabethan Culture. In: Greenblatt, S. (ed.), *Representing the English Renaissance*. Oakland, California: University of California Press: 31–65.
- Rouse, R.A. (2015), *Emplaced Reading, or Towards a Spatial Hermeneutic for Medieval Romance*. In: Perkins, N. (ed.), *Medieval Romance and Material Culture*. Martlesham, UK: Boydell & Brewer: 41–58.
- Saunders, C.J. (2010), *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval English Romance*. Martlesham, UK: Boydell & Brewer.
- Woods, W.F. (1991), "My Sweet Foo": Emelye's role in "The Knight's Tale". *Studies in Philology* 88/3: 276–306. DOI: 4174398.