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## Gandalf and Merlin: J.R.R. Tolkien's Adoption and Transformation of a Literary Tradition

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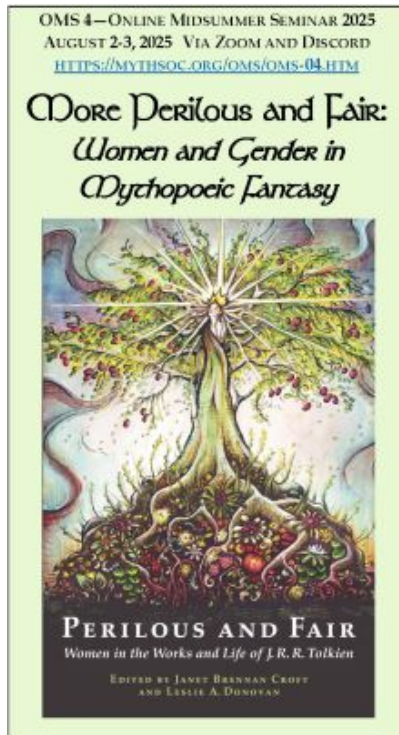
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## Gandalf and Merlin: J.R.R. Tolkien's Adoption and Transformation of a Literary Tradition

### Abstract

Concerns the roots of the wizard Gandalf's character in the legendary figure of Merlin, tracing Merlin's development through a variety of English and continental literature up through the twentieth century, and showing how various authors, including Tolkien, interpreted and adapted the wizard for their purposes.

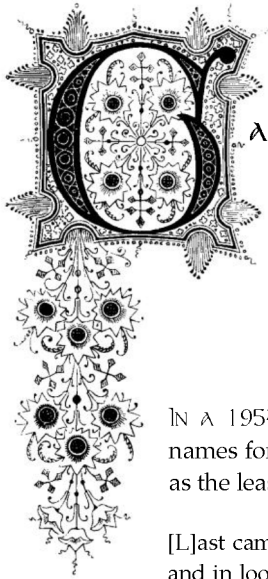
### Additional Keywords

Arthurian myth; Merlin; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Gandalf

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GANDALF AND MERLIN:  
J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S ADOPTION AND  
TRANSFORMATION OF A  
LITERARY TRADITION

FRANK D. RIGA

IN A 1954 ESSAY, DESIGNED ORIGINALLY to provide an index of names for *The Lord of the Rings*,<sup>1</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien introduces Gandalf as the least of the Istari, the messengers from Valar:

[L]ast came one who seemed the least, less tall than the others, and in looks more aged, grey-haired and grey-clad, and leaning on a staff. But Círdan from their first meeting at the Grey Havens divined in him the greatest spirit and the wisest; and he welcomed him with reverence, and he gave to his keeping the Third Ring, Narya the Red. (*Unfinished* 389)

As his modest and unassuming appearance both here and in the opening of *The Hobbit* suggests, Gandalf might appear at first to be little more than a rather eccentric, elderly traveler. But instead, as Círdan divined and as the reader rapidly discovers, he is a “wandering wizard” (*Hobbit* 13), whom Tolkien specifically identifies, both in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, as a member of the wizard tradition. And yet, despite a number of striking parallels with Merlin figures from the past, Gandalf is no stereotypical wizard. In his portrait of Gandalf, Tolkien has drawn on earlier texts and traditions, particularly those featuring Merlin, but he has not done so formulaically. On the contrary, Gandalf tests the limits and moves beyond the expectations raised by many previous Merlin figures, especially in his use of magic, his association with women, his relationship to power, and his pedagogical strategies. Moreover, he does not share the ambiguity of many previous portraits of Merlin as a figure who, as Yves Vadé notes, occupies an ambiguous space between good and evil. He is also

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Tolkien points out that his father wrote this essay, referred to as “The Essay on the Istari,” for an index of names. As Tolkien explains in a letter from 1956, “I worked at it for months [...] until it became clear that size and cost were ruinous” (qtd. in “Introduction,” *Unfinished* 12).

quite unlike Merlin figures who have been portrayed as evil sorcerers, necromancers, and agents of deception, as, for example, in Jean Cocteau's *Knights of the Round Table*.

The relationship between Gandalf and the Merlin tradition has received little focused attention in critical studies.<sup>2</sup> I will argue that this connection is of far greater significance than has previously been recognized. Gandalf shares many attributes with previous Merlin figures, but he is by no means a carbon copy of previous exemplars. Instead, he is a unique creation through which Tolkien explores questions of absolute power and freedom of choice, questions that emerge all the more clearly against the foil of previous portraits. As Peter Goodrich has commented, "one of the most fascinating aspects of the literature on Merlin is its multiplicity and how it transforms the core details of his legend to create a panoply of mages who are remarkably varied" (*Merlin: A Casebook* [Casebook] 3). Tolkien's portrait of Gandalf aptly illustrates Goodrich's claim that Merlin is a seminal figure, the point of departure for creative explorations of the concepts associated with wizardry, "that nonverbal space of consciousness which is the spawning ground of new fictional creations in archetypal modes" (*Romance of Merlin* [Romance] xiii). But unlike many Merlin figures who are, as Goodrich notes, "recognizably the same" (Casebook 3), Gandalf draws on the Merlin tradition while transforming it in significant ways.

Tolkien does not mention Merlin in his novels and uses the more general term "wizard" to refer to Gandalf. However, the parallels noted by Ruth Noel to Mallory's Merlin strongly indicate Gandalf's connection to Merlin.<sup>3</sup> But as I will argue, the connection encompasses much of the entire Merlin tradition. Since Merlin is the most ubiquitous wizard figure from medieval times until the present, he is certainly implied by references to wizards and wizardry. Goodrich emphasizes Merlin's central position in the wizard tradition: "No other wizard in western culture defines the occupation of magic as fully as Merlin, who from nonwizardly historical origins has developed over the centuries into the archetypal master of all arts and technologies" (*Romance* ix). Goodrich has emphasized seven primary roles frequently associated with Merlin figures:

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<sup>2</sup> For the most part, the Merlin tradition and its relationship to Gandalf are mentioned only in passing. To my knowledge, critical discussions are limited to Ruth Noel's brief listing of general parallels between Gandalf's role in *The Lord of the Rings* and that of Merlin in Mallory's *Morte d'Arthur*.

<sup>3</sup> Ruth Noel argues that Merlin and Gandalf both are "powerful, prophetic, inscrutable, and, suddenly, unexpectedly human"; each has "the responsibility for the fortunes of a nation and its future king"; and both have "obscure beginnings and mysterious endings to their lives" (109). She also notes that Merlin's early disappearance from *Le Morte Darthur* is parallel to Gandalf's death and disappearance at Moria (110). But see Miriam Miller who discusses shortcomings of Noel's claims.

"Wild Man, Wonder Child, Prophet, Poet, Counselor, Wizard and Lover" (*Casebook* 2). Yet Merlin figures, whether exemplars or avatars, do not share in all of these roles, and considerable flexibility is to be found in the tradition itself. Thus, the themes outlined above "continue to be recalled, refined, and expanded [...] encompassing new ideas and technologies" (2). Much like a literary genre, the material accrued to Merlin figures has developed into an ever-changing series of motifs and symbolic actions, a poetics in process on which writers have drawn to express often radically different religious, political, and philosophical views. As I will demonstrate, Tolkien's Gandalf participates in this process of renewal and transformation.

In order to make my case, I will first provide a brief survey of representative texts from the Merlin tradition as it has changed over the centuries, focusing particularly on those themes and roles that pertain to Gandalf.<sup>4</sup> The survey will provide the point of departure for a discussion of Tolkien's wizard, showing that Gandalf's nature, actions, and philosophy parallel, yet transform, those associated with previous Merlin figures. Such a study will shed new light on Gandalf's significance and on Tolkien's exploration of key themes in his three-part novel.

The Merlin tradition has developed over many centuries. During medieval times, the figure we know as Merlin gradually emerged from a number of different traditions and cultures to become the quintessential wise man, prophet, and visionary. From medieval times until the present, he has functioned not only as a worker of magical spells and enchantments, but also as a tutor and counselor to kings, a shaper of destinies and dynasties. However, as Yves Vadé notes, Merlin for the most part remains ambiguous: "Having been born of a devil and a virgin, he occupies a [...] position between good and evil" (796), and as Goodrich enumerates, Merlin "may appear in forms from devil to angel, Antichrist to Redeemer, wise old man to lustful dotard, shaman to scientist, wild man to sage" (*Romance* xv). Thus, while he is often depicted as a powerful and positive force, his image is frequently undermined or tainted by his potential for evil. Indeed, in some cases, such as the *Post-Vulgate* of the thirteenth century, the darker side of Merlin comes to the fore and he appears as a sorcerer, necromancer, and agent of the devil.

In either his predominantly positive or predominantly negative roles, Merlin is shown to wield great power over the wills and destinies of human beings. Traditionally, his moral stature depends on how he uses his powers, whether for good or evil. As we will discover, Tolkien, in contrast to many early writers, critiques this binary view of the benign or demonic wizard by probing

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<sup>4</sup> The present overview is of necessity brief, since to provide a detailed account of the Merlin tradition would go far beyond the scope of the present paper.

the problems inherent in absolute power itself. Tolkien also critiques a longstanding tradition according to which Merlin's loss of power comes about through his love for a woman who becomes powerful by gaining access to his magic. Merlin's love is depicted as a weakness or obsession, leading to his unwilling—or willing—imprisonment or death. For Tolkien, by contrast, forceful women with supernatural powers are Gandalf's source of strength, protection, and healing, not instruments of temptation and destruction.

Some of the most influential texts in the Merlin tradition were produced by Geoffrey of Monmouth during the first half of the twelfth century. These writings laid the groundwork for subsequent depictions. Geoffrey introduced a legendary prophetic figure and sorcerer named Merlin in three different works: *The Prophecies of Merlin* (1135), later included in *The History of the Kings of Britain* (1135-8), and the *Life of Merlin* (1150). Geoffrey probably drew on at least two different traditions. In the *History of the Kings of Britain*, for example, Geoffrey indicates that Merlin was known as Ambrosius, thus connecting him with an earlier account, Nennius' *History of the Britons* (ca. 976 c.e.). According to Nennius, the child, Ambrosius, has no earthly father, but was born after his mother had sexual relations with an incubus or demon. Nennius also provided the basis for the tale of two dragons that would later become part of Merlin lore.<sup>5</sup> As a child, Ambrosius reveals to King Guorthigirn or Vortigern that the king's fortress is collapsing because two dragons are fighting each other below the foundations. Using prophetic powers, Ambrosius explains that the dragons portend the many years of struggle yet to come between the Saxons and the Britons (Vadé 796-7).

In addition to adapting the tale of the dragons and emphasizing Merlin's power of prophecy, Geoffrey describes how the wizard influenced the dynastic succession by concocting a magic potion which changed King Uther Pendragon's appearance into that of the husband of the Duchess Igera. He was thus able to lie with this virtuous woman without her knowledge and to conceive Arthur. While the deception is portrayed as a necessary means to provide for the birth of King Arthur, Merlin's pandering to King Uther's adulterous longings and his deceit of the virtuous Duchess Igera point to the ambiguous relationship of Merlin to good and evil which is to characterize numerous subsequent depictions. In addition to ensuring the succession, Geoffrey's Merlin is also portrayed as a counselor to Uther Pendragon and, subsequently, to Arthur. Merlin is particularly effective, since his great powers enable him to predict the future unfailingly, to change the shapes of human beings, and to aid in battles.

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<sup>5</sup> See Yves Vadé's discussion of the Nennius source (796-7) and its possible origins.

In *The Life of Merlin*, by contrast, Geoffrey appears to have drawn on a tradition of ancient folk legends surrounding the figure of a madman and prophet who lives in the forest and who is variously known in English, Irish, and Welsh sources as Lailokon, Suibhne, and Myrrdin (Goodrich 3-4; Stewart and Matthews 16-17). In Geoffrey's version, Merlin—perhaps a Latinization of the Welsh name Myrrdin—is portrayed as sorcerer and a Welsh King who goes mad and hides in the woods after a bloody battle where he witnesses the slaughter of family and friends. Although he returns to sanity and makes prophetic statements that prove to be true, he prefers to return to the forest, where he makes prophecies and has lengthy discussions about God's creation of the earth, the heavens, and the seas with Thelgesin, whom researchers have identified with the Welsh bard Taliesen. Although Merlin has a wife and sister, he deserts them in his madness. After regaining his sanity, he permits his former wife to remarry, only to return on the day of the wedding, turn mad once again, and kill his deserted wife's new bridegroom.

In his writings, Geoffrey suggests many of the major themes associated with Merlin: his fathering by a demon, his appearance as a child prodigy, his power of prophecy, and his roles as counselor and political mastermind who engineers the succession of King Arthur and legitimizes his kingship through magic. The "Wild Man" source points toward Merlin's ambiguous and often negative relationship to women. As Goodrich notes, the *History of the Kings of Britain* "became so popular throughout Europe that it established the primary features of the legend and started a vogue for Arthurian literature with Merlin as a permanent fixture" (*Casebook* 5).

From its British roots, the tales of Merlin passed into the French Romance tradition, beginning with the twelfth century Anglo-Norman, Wace, who translated Geoffrey's *History* into French as *Le Roman de Brut* (1155). The tale was then adapted and expanded by Robert de Boron (d. circa 1210). In his unfinished fragment, *Merlin*, Robert produces a figure that has even greater powers as a shape-shifter, a prophet, and a political mastermind than in Geoffrey's account. He is, moreover, a positive figure who has been fully incorporated into the Christian tradition as an emissary of God. Even as a young child, he states, "Our Lord has chosen me to serve Him in a way that I alone could do" (Robert 70). In relating the story of Merlin's begetting by an incubus, Robert reshapes the event as part of the history of salvation by depicting it as an infernal plot on the part of demons to create an anti-Christ. Merlin's birth would thus serve as a means to reassert the power of evil and original sin which had been canceled when Christ was born. Merlin's virginal and virtuous mother confounds this demonic plan by consulting her confessor, Blaise, who baptizes the boy and saves him from the power of the demons. His dual origins, as the son of a demon and a baptized son of God, provide him with complete

knowledge of past and future: his demonic father “bequeathed to [him] the power and intelligence to know everything that has been said and done” while God, “who knows all things [...] gave him the power to know the future” (Robert 60, 55). Further enhancing his semi-divine status, Robert makes Merlin into a Christ figure whose childhood parallels the events and episodes in the apocryphal *Infancy Gospels of Jesus*.

To Blaise, his advisor and supporter and a counterpart to Joseph in the life of Jesus, Merlin dictates an account in which he functions both as historian and prophet. Through his magical powers, he aids King Uther in defeating the Saxons; he ensures the succession by helping Uther to father Arthur in an adulterous meeting with the Duchess Igera; and he arranges to have Arthur raised in secret so that he can be revealed as the true king through the magical sign of the sword in the stone. He also initiates the building of the Round Table and chooses the knights of the Grail. As a counselor and military advisor, he does not simply give advice and leave the king the freedom to choose. Instead, he acts as a powerful lord who insists on the absolute obedience of those he advises. As Uther Pendragon states, he always attempts to “obey [Merlin’s] every command” (Robert 92), and he assures Merlin, “You should know I leave all decisions to you” (93). That Uther Pendragon is almost a puppet of Merlin is demonstrated when the King is in a coma on his deathbed: Merlin brings about a supreme miracle by making the King speak once again. What appears almost as an act of ventriloquism is revealing in its implications for Merlin’s role throughout his time as a counselor to the King. Although Robert’s narrator insists that Merlin is the instrument of God, the wizard’s dubious dealings in helping Uther to have an adulterous relationship with Igera and, later, to deceive her and take away her son, suggest the ambiguity that haunts this figure.<sup>6</sup>

Two subsequent medieval French manuscripts, the *Vulgate*, also known as *L’Estoire de Merlin* (ca. 1240), and the *Post-Vulgate*, also known as *Suite Huth* (ca. 1240), continued the tale and may have been based on missing material originally developed by Robert. In the *Vulgate* and the *Post-Vulgate*, Merlin’s powers are further enhanced since he not only masterminds the succession, but he is also the primary influence on Arthur. He is the diplomat, strategist, and general. During battles, Merlin controls the weather by creating storms and fog

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<sup>6</sup> Merlin uses a form of blackmail to ensure Igera’s compliance in handing her child over to Merlin. She does not know that it was King Uther Pendragon who lay with her on the night that she conceived her child. However, she does know that it was not her husband. Shame would therefore prevent her from protesting about the disposition of the child. Merlin advises, “Sire, make sure Igerne never knows you lay with her or fathered the child. That way she is surer to turn to you, and it’ll be easier for me to acquire the child” (Robert 101).

to foil the enemy. Although he bears no weapons during battle, he carries Arthur's dragon banner which breathes flames to terrify the enemy. He can shift shape at will, appearing in numerous guises, and he creates magnificent illusions as entertainments for the woman he loves.

Both the *Vulgate* and the *Post-Vulgate* introduce the figure of a woman: Viviane in the *Vulgate* and Niniane in the *Post-Vulgate*. Both versions introduce Merlin's loss of power at the hands of a woman.<sup>7</sup> In the *Vulgate*, Merlin loses his powers and is imprisoned by Viviane, a young woman who wishes to learn his magic spells. He does not resist her because, as he states, "I am so overwhelmed by love for her that I could not leave her" (*Vulgate* Vol. 1, 416).<sup>8</sup> Although he is content in living only for her love, Merlin thus loses his former power and field of action in the public arena. In the *Post-Vulgate*, by contrast, both Merlin and his lover, this time named Niniane, are seen in a much darker light. Niniane uses Merlin to gain access to magical powers by pretending to love him. In reality, she detests Merlin as the irredeemable son of a devil. Merlin's negative potential is amplified in this version. He is portrayed as a lecherous old man in his dotage. He lusts after Niniane and submits to her power because he "hoped to know her carnally of her own volition and to have her maidenhead" (*Post-Vulgate* Vol. 4, 245). Merlin is no willing prisoner of love in the *Post-Vulgate*. Unlike Viviane who confines him in a loving prison, Niniane casts a spell on him while he is asleep, then has him thrown into a tomb from which there is no escape. While Vivian returns to be with her lover, Niniane leaves him to his solitary fate.<sup>9</sup>

Thomas Malory drew on Robert's *Merlin* and the *Post-Vulgate* for his *Morte d'Arthur* (1485). Malory includes stories of Merlin's prophetic and magical powers. The wizard's role, however, is much reduced; even though he has a strong significance as a counselor and a tutor. As Peter Goodrich observes, "[Merlin] is in the tale primarily to teach the king and lend the imprimatur of

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<sup>7</sup> As Goodrich notes, these two continuations of the Merlin tale expand upon the ambivalent nature of Merlin as the son of a devil. "Not only is he the product of unholy masculine lust who sometimes aids and abets it with the kings Uther, Arthur, and Ban, but he also meets his demise by succumbing to lust, or love, himself" (*Case Book* 11).

<sup>8</sup> His only fear is not the loss of freedom, which he willingly accepts, but the loss of her love now that he is her prisoner: "Lady you have indeed tricked me if you do not stay with me, for no one but you has the power to undo this tower" (*Vulgate* Vol 1, 416-17). But she returns to him constantly, and at this point "the story falls silent [...] about Merlin and his lady love" (417).

<sup>9</sup> "Then she had him taken by the feet and the head and thrown upside down into the hole where the two [dead] lovers lay. Then she had the stone put on top. When with some difficulty they had replaced it, she began to work her spells and so joined and sealed the stone to the sarcophagus by magic and strength of words that there was never afterwards anyone who could move or open it" (260-61).

destiny" (*Romance* 164).<sup>10</sup> Malory follows the *Post-Vulgate* in showing Merlin as falling into dotage, blinded by his desire for Nenyve, one of the Ladies of the Lake, who wishes to learn magic from him. As in the *Post-Vulgate*, she imprisons him in a tomb from which there is no escape. This imprisonment marks the end of his great powers.<sup>11</sup> In Malory's account, as in the *Post-Vulgate*, Merlin's ambivalence as a character with potential for both good and evil is foregrounded, and in his loss of power at the hands of a woman, the wizard appears less powerful and more human.

During the Renaissance, Merlin's role was expanded to include that of scientist, magus, and natural philosopher. For Edmund Spenser, for example, Merlin was the Renaissance magus, both a prophet and an artist who created a mirror which imaged the entire world, showing all things truly. He also created a shield of diamond for Arthur which not only destroyed illusions by showing things as they really are, but was also impervious to enchantments (Spenser I.vii, 35). However, during the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, Merlin was frequently reduced to little more than a stereotypical figure. As Goodrich notes, "there no longer seemed to be a place for the mage other than as a fanciful figure of popular superstition in vulgar sideshows" (*Casebook* 23). William Rowley, claiming to have collaborated with Shakespeare, produced *The Birth of Merlin: or The Childe Hath Found His Father* (1620), a farce in which Merlin's prophecies alternate with the irreverent interpolations of a clown.

In John Dryden's *King Arthur* (1691), Merlin is less a mythic personage than a stock figure who makes a flamboyant entrance on stage, descending on a chariot drawn by dragons and accompanied by spirits. Merlin is opposed by the heathen wizard, Osmond, who represents the demonic aspect of the wizard tradition. In a sense, Dryden splits Merlin into two, the beneficent Merlin and the demonic Osmond, a splitting that anticipates Tolkien's wizards in *The Lord of the Rings*. Dryden's Osmond is as flamboyantly evil as his Merlin is good. Osmond seizes and attempts to rape the hapless heroine, Emmeline, who describes him as an evil, deformed monster, a "dreadful thing" and a "fiend" whose "grizzly look" and "shaggy beard" horrify her (Dryden 185). Dryden's Merlin concludes the play with a magical illusion to entertain the audience. The spectacle includes Greek Gods and pastoral personages, as well as allegorical figures of Britannica and British heroes (197). The play was so popular that it was revived 45 years later under a new title, *Merlin, or the British Enchanter* in 1736. At this time, Queen Caroline established a grotto called "Merlin's Cave," where a pseudo-Merlin

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<sup>10</sup> As indicated above, Noel has discussed a number of parallels between Gandalf and Malory's Merlin.

<sup>11</sup> As Martha Asher comments in her notes to the *Post-Vulgate*, "Malory condenses the post-Vulgate version to the bare bones. Merlin is 'assoted'; Nenyve is 'wery of hym' and 'aferde'" (Vol 4, 261 n. 5).

gave consultations (Stewart and Matthews 165-6). The Merlin of Dryden's play and the campy Royal soothsayer exemplify the eighteenth century's trivialization of Merlin.

In the early nineteenth century, with the Romantic Movement's interest in folklore and medieval texts, Merlin underwent a revival, primarily in his positive role as a mage and druidic sage. Many medieval texts previously neglected were republished by Walter Scott in Britain (1802-3), providing the basis for new versions of Merlin. "By Tennyson's day, interest in the mage had reached such a pitch in some quarters that he had been reclaimed, not only as an attraction of romanticized travel literature, but as the archetypal Druid of pre-Christian British religion" (Goodrich, *Casebook* 25). Nineteenth-century writers frequently focused on his power as a creative force, as a prophet and poet. Although Tennyson drew on the *Vulgate* and Malory's Merlin to depict the wizard's loss of power through his love for a woman, he later shifted his view. In a later poem, "Merlin and the Gleam" (1889), Tennyson represents Merlin as the ever-questioning poet who follows "the Gleam" of poetic, religious, and philosophical inspiration.

In 1860, Edgar Quinet, an influential French historian, philosopher, and critic, published a lengthy work entitled *Merlin, The Enchanter*. Quinet's Merlin is more powerful than any of those who had gone before. He is a god-like figure who creates entire civilizations and who is the source of all arts and sciences. Quinet's Merlin, who has the power of life after death, continues his existence in a tomb which forms a huge underground kingdom as large as all of Europe. With his superhuman powers, he builds all of the famous landmarks of Europe, including San Marco in Venice, the Alhambra in Grenada, and the Cathedral in Cologne. In addition to works of architecture, Merlin produces all the great masterpieces of French literature. The great writers are nothing more than scribes who "copied and transcribed" what the enchanter had already created (qtd. in Bernard-Griffiths 504).<sup>12</sup> Quinet also reverses expectations in his portrait of the enchanter's relationship to Vivian. Instead of portraying Vivian as the cause of his downfall and loss of powers, Quinet makes her the source from which all his powers derive.<sup>13</sup> Before he loves Vivian, he has no magic powers. As he states to King Arthur, "I love, and it is because of that love that I have received my magic power. If I had never loved, despite my knowledge drawn from Taliesin, I would

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<sup>12</sup> "[I]ls «n'ont fait que copier [et] transcrire.»"

<sup>13</sup> As Quinet notes in *Merlin, the Enchanter*, "Love did not produce its ordinary effect in Merlin. It did not make him idle" ["L'amour n'avait point produit dans Merlin son effet ordinaire: il ne l'avait pas rendu oisif"] (qtd. in Bernard-Griffiths 483).

never have been able to accomplish more than others" (qtd. in Bernard-Griffiths 494-5).<sup>14</sup> Viviane, however, does not play an active role in the story itself.<sup>15</sup>

In the twentieth century, numerous accounts of Merlin continued the tradition. Guillaume Apollinaire saw in the thirteenth century Merlin of Robert de Boron an image for human and poetic creation. In his novel, *The Rotting Enchanter* (*L'Enchanteur pourrissant*, 1904), Merlin is immured by the Lady of the Lake, but his decaying body holds out the promise of new life. His poem, "Merlin and the Old Woman" ("Merlin et la vieille femme" from *Alcools*, 1913), again returns to Merlin as a source of the creative. As Merlin claims in that poem, "The son of Memory that is Love's peer [...] He is surely my son my immortal work," but he can only arise with the coming of Vivian—until then, "For ever I live beneath the hawthorn flowers" (*Alcool* 98-99). Jean Cocteau's play, *The Knights of the Round Table* (*Le Chevaliers de la table ronde*, 1933), on the other hand, portrays a dark, deceiving Merlin. At the opening of the play, under Merlin's spell, King Arthur's court is an illusory world, where all are deceptively happy. When Galahad breaks the spell, the court is returned to reality. Although, in his "Preface," Cocteau leaves it to the audience to decide which is preferable, illusion or reality, in the play, Arthur exclaims, "I would rather have real deaths than a false life" (284). Merlin here, like Sauron in *The Lord of the Rings*, has drawn the life-force from the land, but he has also rendered it a fool's paradise.

Two modern renditions of Merlin require special mention because they were written by Tolkien's Oxford friends and colleagues, Charles Williams and C.S. Lewis. While the previous discussion of the Merlin tradition proceeded by implication, here we have direct biographical evidence of Tolkien's thorough knowledge of the Merlin figure. As members of the Inklings, an informal group that met twice weekly in Lewis's rooms and at a local pub, Williams, Lewis, and Tolkien knew each others' work thoroughly. Williams, for example, borrowed the entire *Lord of the Rings* manuscript to read and comment on, while Lewis wrote the first reviews of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien was certainly familiar with the work of Williams and Lewis on the Arthurian tradition, as all of them were writing Merlin fictions at approximately the same time. Williams published two books of Arthurian poems, *Taliessin through Logres* (1938) and *Region of the Summer Stars* (1944). At the time of his death, in 1945, Williams left unfinished *The Figure of Arthur*, a non-fiction study on "the matter of Britain." Lewis's biographers, Roger Green and Walter Hooper, tell us that

<sup>14</sup> "[J]'aime; c'est pour cela que j'ai reçu mon pouvoir magique. Si je n'aimais pas, malgré ma science puisée auprès de Taliesin, je ne pourrais rien de plus que les autres." The translation is my own.

<sup>15</sup> See Simone Bernard-Griffith's discussion of Quinet's view of Eros and Agape as the moving forces which bring about metamorphoses in nature and in history toward a harmonious ideal.

Lewis delighted in reading and rereading Arthurian stories, including modern versions. In 1945, he published his Williams-influenced novel, *That Hideous Strength*.

In both Williams and Lewis, Merlin becomes the instrument of action. Williams's two collections of Arthurian poems deal not only with the ordinary, finite world, but also with the spiritual world beyond, "the region of the summer stars." In these volumes, Merlin is a supernatural agent working to accomplish Christian ends. The poet Taliessin, in "The Calling of Arthur," meets Merlin and Brisen, the children of Nimue, who are "Time and space, duration and extension" (Williams, *Taliessin* 129). As Merlin explains, he and his sister Brisen are to establish the holy kingdom of Logres, an ideal Britain where men and women can be complete and integrated. But like all finite creations, Logres can, and does, fail to maintain this ideal. In *That Hideous Strength*, Lewis depicts Merlin as a force from the medieval past, who, with his "Atlantean magic," takes an active and decisive role in a modern struggle between good and evil. Both the power of evil, represented by the demonically controlled NICE, and the power of good, represented by the company of St. Anne's, are eager to enlist Merlin and his powers, the one to enslave human beings and the other to ensure their freedom. Lewis suggests that the ambiguity of Merlin's origin, from a pure mother and a demonic father, leads both NICE and the company of St. Anne's to believe that Merlin will support their respective causes. In both Williams and Lewis, Merlin uses his extra-human powers to direct the fate of humankind, and while both stress the importance of free will, their Merlin figures intervene directly through magic into human affairs in order to achieve their goals. As we will see below, Tolkien's conception of Gandalf focuses to a greater extent than Williams and Lewis on the question of free will, and by foregrounding Gandalf's role as a teacher, he de-emphasizes the role of the wizard figure as a powerful magician who uses his powers to change human destinies.

The above overview, while necessarily brief and schematized, does provide insight into recurring themes, abilities, and accomplishments associated with Merlin figures from medieval times onward. A multi-faceted figure, Merlin is most frequently shown to have come from ambiguous origins, both good and evil, and to have immense magical and occult powers. He has accurate and even astounding abilities to know the past and predict the future, a feature common to almost all accounts and variations on this figure. Many accounts, especially Robert's *Merlin* and Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, emphasize his role as a tutor, counselor, and shaper of destinies. Merlin is frequently reputed to have the power to return from the dead or to live beyond his death. When depicted as a positive force and shaper of nations, he is often viewed as a visionary and prophet, as in Geoffrey's *History of the Kings of Briton*. Later, in Spenser's portrait, he is the epitome of the Renaissance man, the magus and the artist, while

Quinet's *Merlin the Enchanter* presents him as creating great works of art and architecture and being gifted with extraordinary visionary powers. Later still, in Apollinaire, he is a source of creation. In the works of Tolkien's friends and colleagues, Lewis and Williams, he is portrayed as a powerful, positive figure who shapes human destinies and who directly intervenes in human affairs in order to defeat the forces of evil and to help bring about the good. When depicted in negative terms, by contrast, he is viewed as an agent of evil, such as we find in Cocteau's *Knights of the Round Table*. In all accounts, whether positive or negative, he is portrayed as a figure who does not hesitate to use his often immense powers to achieve the cultural, social, and political ends he has envisioned.

Tolkien's Gandalf shares many of the roles and the attributes of the above Merlin figures, but he is more than simply an echo or carbon copy. A Maia, and therefore a semi-divine figure, he has great powers. He is, like the medieval Merlin, a general, a strategist, and a military advisor. He acts as a teacher and counselor, guiding the peoples of Middle-earth in their struggle against the forces of evil. He supports the succession of the true King, Aragorn, just as Merlin validates and supports the kingship of Arthur. Like many Merlins of the past, including Robert's child prodigy who foils King Vortigern's soothsayers and Dryden's Merlin who overcomes the wicked wizard, Osmond, he is contrasted to his evil counterparts, Sauron and Saruman. In several key areas, however, Tolkien has brought about a transformation of the Merlin tradition. Tolkien's departure from Merlin themes clearly emerges if we examine his origins as a member of the Istari, his use of magic, his relationship to women, his limited exercise of power, and his mission as a counselor and teacher.

### **Gandalf's Origins and the Role of the Istari**

In distinguishing the Istari from figures in the Merlin tradition, Tolkien takes pains to distance himself from the word "wizard," which he nonetheless uses in both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. In one of his letters, he states that the English word "wizard" is not adequate to describe his concept of wizardry; indeed, he claims that it is actually a misnomer, an imprecise translation of the Elvin word "*istari*" (*Letters* 207). He thereby signals his attempt to create something new and original which cannot be contained or limited by connotations associated with the word wizard. The origin of the Istari provides a key to a major alteration in the focus of the tradition, particularly when compared to the ambiguous origins of Merlin figures.

Traditionally, Merlin's ambivalence as a figure poised between good and evil is traced back to his origins as the son of a demon father and a virtuous mother. Although his baptism in Robert's version makes him an emissary of Christ, even here Merlin plays dubious roles as pander and deceiver who

literally kidnaps young Arthur from the child's mother and helps Uther Pendragon to blackmail her into silence. In the *Vulgate* and especially the *Post-Vulgate*, the evil of his origins haunts him. Niniane, in the *Post-Vulgate*, rejects him and kills him mainly because he is the "devil's son." Merlin's potential for good and evil is thus situated in his half-infernal, half-divine origins which continue to influence his behavior and destiny.

Tolkien, by contrast, shifts the focus from the two forces at war in Merlin's birth to the freedom of choice granted to Gandalf as one of the Istari. In his 1954 "Essay on the Istari," published in *Unfinished Tales*, Tolkien provides an overview of the five Istari or wizards, the emissaries sent by the Valar, the immortal Lords of the West, "who still took counsel for the governance of Middle-earth" (*Unfinished* 389). When Sauron, one of the fallen Maiar and a disciple of the vanquished Lord Melkor (Morgoth), begins to increase his power and his "shadow [...] began first to stir again," the Valar, or Holy Ones, decide to send five Istari, who are "members of their own high order, but clad in bodies as of Men, real and not feigned, but subject to the fears and pains and weariness of earth, able to hunger and thirst and be slain" (389). The fact that the five are "clad in bodies" of real human beings makes them subject to temptation, to error, and to failure. Tolkien thus introduces freedom of will and choice as an essential element of the Istari figures. Their penchant for good and evil, for success and failure, is based not on their origins in Valinor, but on the choices they make once they have arrived on Middle-earth.

Tolkien calls on several Merlin traditions in his depiction of the fates of the different Istari, figures who act as foils for Gandalf and who highlight his differences from traditional wizards. As Christopher Tolkien indicates in the notes to the 1954 essay, two of the Istari, the "Blue Wizards," disappear into the East and are never heard from again (*Unfinished* 392). However, the remaining three represent different, and contrasting, aspects of the Merlin tradition. One of the Istari, Radagast, who is of a lower order than the others, becomes enamored of the birds and creatures of the forest and thus resembles the wild man of the forest from early Irish, Scottish, and Welsh legends. However, this vocation proves to be a dead end, since it prevents Radagast from working with the peoples of Middle-earth. Hence he fails in his mission (*Unfinished* 392) and becomes the credulous instrument of Saruman's dark designs (*Unfinished* 394).

Curunír, later known as Saruman, by contrast, is considered the leader of the Istari. When he appeared before the Valar to be sent on the mission, he was "of noble mien and bearing, with raven hair, and a fair voice, and he was clad in white; great skill he had in works of hand, and he was regarded by well-nigh all, even by the Eldar, as the Head of the Order" (*Unfinished* 389). However, once he assumed human form, he like the other Istari, could "fall away from [his] purposes, and do evil, forgetting the good in the search for power to effect it"

(*Unfinished* 390). Saruman succumbs to the lust for power for its own sake and comes to represent the epitome of the sinister necromancer who, contrary to his own ambitions, serves the purposes of the Dark Lord. He thus becomes, through choice, a representative for the darker aspect of the Merlin tradition.

Lord Sauron is not a member of the Istari, but a Maia who turned away from Valinor and became the servant of Morgoth on Middle-earth. He is also portrayed as making a choice which turns him into the wicked counterpart of the Merlin portrayed in Quinet's *Merlin the Enchanter*. We cannot know whether or not Tolkien was familiar with Quinet's specific text; however, he was certainly familiar with the concept of a wizard who attempted to wield absolute power over his subjects. But instead of portraying the all-powerful wizard in a positive light, as the embodiment of civilization and as a creative force such as we find in Quinet, Tolkien depicts Sauron as the epitome of evil who destroys civilization and enslaves the wills of those who serve him. For Tolkien, as we will demonstrate in our discussion of Gandalf, absolute power, and even the will to absolute power, corrupts both master and servant. Instead of building civilization, Sauron lays waste to it. He destroys the very landscape which becomes a barren desert. Sauron embodies the corrosive nature of raw power as it affects human beings, their societies, and the earth itself. Tolkien thus reinterprets the all-powerful wizard in a negative sense by focusing on his pernicious use of power to enslave rather than to free.

Gandalf, by contrast, does not seek to become the all-powerful wizard who wrenches destinies to his own ends, who uses his magical powers to change the course of history, and who requires, as in the case of Robert's Merlin, absolute obedience to his commands. As a member of the Maiar, divine beings who are of the order of the Ainur, Gandalf has gifts and powers much like those of traditional Merlin figures. Indeed, his abilities seem to connect him strongly to the Merlin tradition, and yet we find important differences that point toward Gandalf's unique role in *The Lord of the Rings*. Because of his defense of freedom of choice and moral agency, Gandalf has a much more complex relationship to prophecy and magic, to women, to power, and concomitantly to his role as counselor and teacher.

### **Gandalf, Prophecy, and Magic**

All traditions and texts depict Merlin as the consummate prophet who foretells the future with great accuracy. Robert de Boron and the *Vulgate* show him as having full knowledge of both past and present, while Quinet portrays a Merlin with god-like powers of foresight. If Gandalf were true to this tradition, we would expect him to have extraordinary powers of prophecy, knowledge, and foresight. But this is not the case. Tolkien's wizard has strong premonitions and a keen ability to trace out the repercussions of an action, but he has little skill

in predicting the future. Gandalf, for example, has no knowledge that Sauron will be able to regain his strength and return to power after being defeated at the Battle of Mirkwood. He also fails to read Saruman's motives correctly, leading to his own imprisonment. This misreading of Saruman prevents him from helping the hobbits take the Ring out of the Shire before the Ringwraiths are on its trail. Furthermore, he neither predicts nor prevents his own death, proving beyond a doubt that, whatever he may be in Valinor, on Middle-earth as one of the Istari, he is an incarnate being, subject to all of the frailties and failures that flesh is heir to. As Tolkien explains, when the Istari came to Middle-earth, they had to "forgo might, and clothe themselves in flesh so as to treat on equality and win the trust of Elves and Men. But this would imperil them, dimming their wisdom and knowledge, and confusing them with fears, cares, and wearinesses coming from the flesh" (*Unfinished* 393). Gandalf is thus more human than previous Merlin figures.

Gandalf also differs from previous Merlin figures in his use of magic. Like his wizard predecessors, Gandalf has great magical powers, especially after his return from death. But he seldom uses them. Merlin figures in the past had used these powers to shape the destinies of kings and to wrench the future to their own ends, as in Geoffrey's and Robert's accounts of Merlin's intervention to ensure the succession of Arthur. They had created great buildings and vast underground kingdoms, as in the case of Quinet's enchanter, and they have had the power to become the source of creativity, as in Apollinaire. Gandalf, however, is completely atypical in using these powers infrequently and only under great duress. When the dark visions in the *palantir* lead Denethor to despair and madness, Gandalf commands the defense of Gondor without using his special powers. In fact, he leaves the battle in the hands of ordinary people in order to save the life of Faramir from his father's insane attempt to burn both himself and his son on a funeral pyre. The few times when Gandalf actually does call upon his powers are striking because they occur so seldom. When Wormtongue challenges him in the court of Théoden, pressed for time as the attack of Saruman's forces grows imminent, rather than waste words, Gandalf renders this evil counselor unconscious with his staff. Outside the gates of Minas Tirith, he is forced to save Faramir from the Witch-king by using his brilliant white light magic. There is no time to wait for more ordinary measures. For the most part, however, Gandalf keeps his powers concealed. Even in the battle with the Balrog, Gandalf ultimately kills the creature with physical force.

### **Gandalf and Women of Power**

Gandalf's relationship to women is radically different from Merlin's. In the Merlin tradition, women have been frequently depicted as the wizard's fatal weakness; passion and love are portrayed in a negative light as curtailing his

activities, neutralizing his power, and even destroying him. In the *Vulgate*, which introduces this theme, he is portrayed as losing his powers willingly as the prisoner of his beloved Vivian. In the *Post-Vulgate*, as in Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, Niniane, with whom Merlin is infatuated, learns his secrets, exploits him, and then entombs and murders him. Only occasionally is this relationship viewed in a positive light: Quinet glorifies the wizard's love as the source of his powers, while Edward Arlington Robinson portrays Vivian as a woman seeking wisdom who does not attempt to trap the wizard. In the case of Gandalf, by contrast to the late medieval treatments, his entrapment and death are not brought about as a result of his relationship with a woman. Instead, he is imprisoned by a fellow wizard and later dies during his battle with a male monster, the Balrog.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, the emphasis is thus shifted away from women and love as a source of Gandalf's weakness and death. Tolkien removes the wizard's questionable roles as pander and doting fool. Nor does Tolkien show love itself as the source of Gandalf's great powers, with the woman acting merely as the catalyst for them. Instead, Tolkien alters tradition by showing powerful women as actively promoting, protecting, and healing Gandalf. When the Istari are selected, Gandalf is reluctant to put himself forward. When he agrees to go after the encouragement of Manwë, it is Varda who recognizes his importance, emphasizing that he is not the third in choice and implying that he is first (*Unfinished* 393). Galadriel also recognizes his importance, wanting him to head the White Council. She helps to heal him and return him to life after his battle with the Balrog. Gandalf sees not only Varda/Elbereth as a source of power, but he also calls on the strength of Galadriel. When freeing Théoden from the spell cast upon him by Saruman's servant, Wormtongue, Gandalf sings a song in praise of Galadriel, much as one would call on the aid of a higher power. Gandalf's relationship to women in some ways represents Tolkien's approach to women throughout his writings. For Gandalf, as for many of Tolkien's male characters, women enhance his power, a power he uses to nurture the people of Middle-earth.

### **Gandalf and Absolute Power**

Tolkien uses Gandalf's power untraditionally to make a paradoxical point: Gandalf must renounce magical power in order to free the peoples of Middle-earth and to teach them how to develop their own powers. Tolkien stresses this same point in his "Essay on the Istari," when he states that the Istari, as emissaries of the Valar, were "forbidden to reveal themselves in forms of majesty, or to seek to rule the wills of Men or Elves by open display of power, but coming in shapes weak and humble were bidden to advise and persuade Men and Elves to good, and to seek to unite in love and understanding all those whom Sauron [...] would endeavor to dominate and corrupt" (*Unfinished* 389).

This important paradox extends to Gandalf's relationship to the Ring of Power. Merlins of the past have had powers similar to those represented by the Ring, and they have not hesitated to use them to create kingdoms above and below the earth and to change the course of history. Gandalf, by contrast, refuses to use the Ring. In modifying the wizard tradition, Tolkien shows that Gandalf must renounce power in order to use it appropriately. By depicting the absolute power represented by the Ring as a negative and destructive force, Tolkien unmasks the problems inherent in the power it represents. Gandalf recognizes that, regardless of the user's intentions or character, the Ring can never be used for good. Because they understand its corrupting influence, Gandalf and Galadriel refuse Frodo's free offer of the Ring and the absolute power it represents. They both recognize the Ring as a temptation, since they would begin to wield it for good only to be corrupted by its power. Boromir does not have the same level of insight into the destructive nature of the power offered by the Ring. In attempting to take the Ring from Frodo, Boromir believes he wants to use it for good, but, in order to obtain the Ring, he attempts to force the will of another and thus commits an act that encroaches on another's freedom. For Boromir, even the longing for the Ring corrupts him.

Gollum, from the outset, is almost totally corrupted by its influence. His corruption is expressed in his willingness to kill for the possession of the Ring and in the physical changes caused by possessing it. Even Frodo, at the moment of triumph, fails to accomplish the deed he has set out to do, to cast the Ring into the fires of Mount Doom. The Ring has exhausted his moral strength during the protracted struggle. Even though Frodo does not use the Ring for its power, simple contact with such power taints the bearer. Gandalf tells Denethor, who believes he could have used the Ring successfully, "You are strong and can still in some matters govern yourself [...] yet if you had received this thing, it would have overthrown you" (*LotR* V:4, 796). Unlike Denethor, his son Faramir is "wise enough to know there are some perils from which a man must flee" (IV:5. 666). Gandalf understands that he, himself, is not exempt. As Tolkien writes to Eileen Elgar in a letter dated September, 1963, "Gandalf as Ring-Lord would have been far worse than Sauron. He would have remained 'righteous', but self-righteous. [...] Gandalf would have made good detestable and seem evil" (*Letters* 332-3).

The real danger of using the Ring, then, comes from its power to force the wills of others, and ultimately, to corrupt the will of the user. This is the problem Tolkien implicitly critiques in previous depictions of Merlin figures: their absolute power causes them to negate the will of others. As Tolkien writes in his letter to Naomi Mitchison, "The supremely bad motive is (for this tale, since it is especially about it) domination of other 'free' wills" (*Letters* 200). In his depiction of the Ring and its relationship to power, Tolkien shows that to force the wills of others is to deprive them of freedom and to enslave them. Because

they are not free agents, slaves cease to be moral beings. Forcing the free will of others, even though it be 'for their own good,' corrupts the enforcer by the very act of coercion.

The evil of absolute power and the accompanying desire to control the wills of others represent the greatest evil in Middle-earth. By taking issue with the concept of absolute power itself, Tolkien also distances himself from the concept that absolute power, as wielded by Merlin figures of the past, could be either good or evil, depending on the uses to which it was put. For Tolkien, absolute power in itself is an evil, since it necessarily corrupts those who wield it and destroys those who are enslaved by it.<sup>16</sup> This view is expressed in his depiction of Morgoth, Sauron, and Saruman, for whom the drive for power is associated with tyranny and slavery. In his use of power, Gandalf is quite unlike any other Merlin figure from the past and quite unlike the evil Merlin figures Tolkien himself depicts. Whereas previous Merlin figures embraced power, Gandalf recognizes its inherent and inescapable dangers and thus renounces it.

So when Gandalf leads the small army that sets out for Mordor, he does not hope to win through magical power or strength of arms. Instead, he develops a final strategy that allows the seemingly weak to bring about the greatest victory, not through magical intervention but through wisdom. As early as the Council of Rivendell, Elrond had observed that "[the] quest may be attempted by the weak with as much hope as the strong," adding, "small hands do [such deeds] because they must, while the eyes of the great are elsewhere" (*LotR* II:2, 262). Elrond, in effect, adumbrates Gandalf's final strategy. The battle cannot be won by strength of arms and Gandalf will not win by magic. His strategic plan is a feint serving to deflect Sauron's attention away from Mordor and Frodo so that Frodo can destroy the Ring. Gandalf marches into the trap Sauron has set for him, but Gandalf knows his enemy. Sauron cannot imagine that anyone would want to destroy the Ring and thus to renounce its power. Nor can he imagine that any important quest would be given to the weakest of his opponents. Gandalf's keen insight into the lust for power rather than magical intervention helps to determine the outcome.

Gandalf's principal work, then, must be to act as counselor and tutor to the free peoples as they struggle against Sauron. In teaching them how to resist and defeat Sauron, he helps them to prepare for the struggles to come in the Fourth Age, the Dominion of Men. In helping them, however, he is careful not to encroach upon their freedom, or they will cease to be moral agents. In a world

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<sup>16</sup> The only exceptions are the Valar, who do not desire to enslave others. But even they are subject to temptation, as the case of Morgoth, a former Vala, demonstrates. By succumbing to the desire to control the wills of others, he loses his status and place in the Blessed Realm, and brings about his own final destruction.

where the "evil of Sauron cannot be wholly cured, or made as if it had not been" (*LotR* III:8, 537), moral agents must, according to Tolkien, freely will the good which can never be fully established or permanent in the finite world of time. At the end of *The Return of the King*, Gandalf explains to his companions the meaning of moral actions in a world where good can never be established permanently:

Other evils there are that may come; for Sauron is himself but a servant or emissary. Yet it is not our part to master all the tides of the world, but to do what is in us for the succor of those years wherein we are set, uprooting the evil in the fields that we know, so that those who live after may have clean earth to till. What weather they shall have is not ours to rule. (V:9, 861)

In a world where evil cannot be fully eradicated and where the guidance of the Istari cannot remain permanently as myth passes into history, individual men and hobbits must learn to choose wisely in order to do that good that can be done with the time each is given.

### **Gandalf as Teacher and Counselor**

Gandalf's relationship to power is strongly linked to his role as a teacher. In the past, Merlin figures had been portrayed both as teachers and as counselors. However, as in the case of the Merlin figures portrayed in Geoffrey and the *Vulgate*, for example, they seldom curtailed their own powers for the purposes of pedagogy. Indeed, they frequently stepped in with magic potions to determine the destiny of kings, and they did not hesitate to override the will of others in order to achieve their ends. Robert's Merlin demands absolute obedience, and he demonstrates his power over King Uther by making the king speak words furthering Arthur's succession, even though Uther is in a coma and on the brink of death. Merlin figures seldom explained themselves, seldom asked questions, and seldom showed patience with those they counseled. Those who doubted the wisdom of their words and advice suffered, or even died, as a result.

For Gandalf, perhaps his most important task is that of teacher and counselor. But in contrast to previous figures, he does not exercise this role in the typical Merlin fashion, demanding obedience to his commands and requiring precise observation of his instructions. Furthermore, like an ordinary teacher, he does not have access to the past and the future. Instead, he both discovers and provides knowledge in ordinary ways, and he shares that knowledge with others so they can help themselves. When he begins to suspect that Bilbo's ring is Sauron's Ring of Power, he does not rely on visions. Instead, he buries himself in Isildur's manuscripts, researching the truth of the Ring. In preparing the hobbits, especially Frodo, for the quest, he gives them the information they need and the

knowledge of the dangers they will face. Unlike Saruman who uses others merely to gain knowledge that will further his self-serving ends, who scorns the instruments he uses, and who cares nothing for their individual character or ethnic stamp, Gandalf sees and loves individuals in their context. He learns the languages and enjoys the history and customs of the peoples of Middle-earth. Treebeard has remained his friend because, unlike Saruman, Gandalf has both learned from and shared his learning with the Ent.

Unlike Saruman and Denethor, he knows the limits of his wisdom and perhaps of wisdom in general. When Merry and Pippin volunteer to go on the quest during the Council of Rivendell, Gandalf notes that they have no idea of the perils they face. He concludes that friendship, not wisdom or knowledge, may be the better quality needed for such important work. He also recognizes that Bilbo's exercise of mercy and pity in not killing Gollum, when it might have seemed wise and even just to do so, has played an important role in Bilbo's resistance to the Ring's corrupting power, and that mercy and pity may be powerful forces in determining the outcome of their struggle against Sauron's bid for totalitarian power. As Gandalf tells Frodo, "My heart tells me that [Gollum] has some part to play yet, for good or ill, before the end; and when that comes, the pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many—yours not least" (*LotR* I:2, 58). Gandalf consults his heart in this matter, not his head.

As indicated earlier, although Gandalf has access to magic, he seldom uses it and, as Tolkien shows, for good pedagogical reasons. His most important task in fighting Sauron is to train the people of Middle-earth, who do not have access to magic, how to fight evil on a human level. During the filming of *The Return of the King*, Ian McKellan, who plays Gandalf, wanted to know why he was doing hand-to-hand combat with orcs. "Why am I hitting these people and not just blasting them with my staff?" Director Peter Jackson responded, "The batteries have run out" ("Words" D2). What happens when the batteries run out, when the magic is no longer available? This question points to the crux of the matter. As Tolkien suggests, when the magic goes, human beings will be thrown back on their own natural resources. As a teacher of those who have no magical powers, Gandalf demonstrates in word and deed how to overcome the enemy without magic. To do otherwise would be to teach them what they cannot possibly learn.

Thus, unlike Merlin figures that are profligate in their use of magic, Gandalf not only uses magic sparingly, but he goes so far as to deflect attention from wizardry in order to emphasize the importance of working through ordinary human means. When Gandalf is credited with the victory at Helm's Deep by wizardry, he is quick to deny that wizardry had a part. The most he claims is that he counseled his friends and relied on the speed of Shadowfax to bring reinforcements. Significantly, he adds, "your own valour has done more"

(III:8, 530). This statement is not just modesty or flattery. It expresses the truth of successful teaching, which turns on planned obsolescence. The teacher recedes as the student advances. By his words and actions, Gandalf has taught others to choose wisely and to have the courage to persevere in those choices, and once he has taught them well, his role is over. So, after Sauron's defeat, he could tell Aragorn that he, Gandalf, must leave: "The Third Age was my age. I was the enemy of Sauron; and my work is finished. I shall go soon. The burden must lie now upon you and your kindred" (VI:5, 950). Even more pointedly, as he rides with the hobbits toward the Shire, which now needs to be rescued from Saruman and his henchmen, Gandalf explains:

"I am not coming to the Shire. You must settle its affairs yourselves; that is what you have been trained for. Do you not yet understand? My time is over; it is no longer my task to set things to rights, nor to help folk to do so. And as for you, my dear friends, you will need no help. You are grown up now." (VI:7, 974)

What better words can a successful teacher give to his students: "You have been trained" to accomplish the task on your own, and "you are grown up now."

### Final Considerations

By examining the wizard tradition in relation to Tolkien's portrait of Gandalf, it becomes clear that Tolkien has used the portraits that came before as a point of departure and a foil. And while there are many parallels to Gandalf in the wizard tradition, the differences are striking. Tolkien is quick to point out that while Gandalf has a playful, magical side, he is far more than the magician perceived by the Hobbits. While he has freedom of choice to do good or evil, as the contrast to Saruman shows, Gandalf is no evil sorcerer. That view of Gandalf is promulgated only by such characters as Gríma Wormtongue, whose credibility is undermined by their desire to discredit those who oppose Sauron, or those such as Denethor and Théoden whose minds have been overturned by Sauron's and Saruman's power. Tolkien thus departs significantly from John Dryden's eighteenth century portrait which limited Merlin's role to that of a mere sorcerer and from Jean Cocteau's twentieth century Merlin who is nothing more than a charlatan and deceiver.

Above all, Tolkien takes issue with previous views of Merlin's power and infallibility of foresight, especially as represented in Quinet's Merlin, whose powers of prediction are so acute that he is able to write the great novels of French literature long before their authors were born and whose magical power is so great that he has created all of the famous landmarks of Europe. Gandalf, by contrast, is eminently human, with human failings and limitations. He makes

mistakes. He even dies in combat with the Balrog, and when he returns, it is not by his own supernatural powers, but through the intercession of the Valar and the healing powers of Galadriel (III:5, 491). Above all, Gandalf intentionally veils his powers and limits his use of magic so that he can act as a true teacher and counselor, that is, one who teaches others how to become independent rather than one who does things for the pupils he mentors. This particular quality sets him apart from such all-powerful figures as the Merlin depicted by Quinet, who continues to live after death in a great kingdom beneath Europe, or as the medieval Merlin depicted by C.S. Lewis, a figure whose victory in modern times over the forces of evil is never much in doubt. Tolkien takes issue with previous Merlin figures and their relationship to power, particularly in pitting Gandalf against Sauron, the epitome of the evil sorcerer who seeks to be all-powerful and who destroys both the land and of the wills of his subjects. Absolute power, as represented by previous Merlin figures, is subjected to scrutiny and tacitly critiqued in Tolkien's text; it is found to be an evil in itself, a form of coercion which destroys individual free will and thus the possibility of moral choice.

Tolkien was not independent of what went before. He was fully aware of the wizard tradition, particularly as represented by the figure of Merlin, and he incorporated that awareness in his creation of Gandalf. In addressing the relationship between Gandalf and the wizard tradition I have focused on two questions. What is the wizard tradition? And what is Gandalf's relationship to this tradition? In looking at the wizard tradition we see that the wizard's role can be defined by a number of recurring characteristics. However, whenever we examine a specific wizard in an individual text, we discover that his role differs either slightly or greatly from that of other exemplars. In the case of Gandalf, he clearly has family resemblances to Merlin figures, yet he remains individualized and independent within the tradition.

The reason for Gandalf's differences from other wizards resides in his primary function within Tolkien's narrative. By emphasizing Gandalf's role as a counselor and tutor who must prepare men and hobbits, not only for the present struggle, but also for the future, Tolkien has underplayed the traditional wizards' power of magic and prophecy and stressed his human characteristics. This is a significant departure from many depictions of Merlin. As an incarnate spirit, subject to all the joys and pains of the human condition, Gandalf must instruct his charges by word and deed in a manner they can understand and emulate. That is, he must be a human teacher. And while he occasionally uses his magic powers, if he were to blast the Orcs with his staff, he would be calling on powers unavailable to men. In participating in the Merlin/wizard tradition, Tolkien finds support and inspiration for his own creation. And through his concept of free will and moral agency, he modifies that tradition in such a way that it has now been forever changed.

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