

Tales of King Arthur

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In Thomas Malory's *Tales of King Arthur*, the character of Merlin offers a mixed bag of allegorical meanings. On one level, he can be viewed as representative of mankind's baser instincts and failings, and his magic a channel through which these qualities become manifest. On another level, however, Merlin's magic can also be seen as an agent of celestial forces, a conduit that brings what is fated to fruition.

The magic that Merlin works on behalf (or seemingly on behalf) of King Uther Pendragon embodies, for the most part, the darker elements of human nature and magic itself. Knowing that Pendragon lusts after Igraine, wife of the rival Duke of Tintagel, Merlin arranges for Uther to make love to Igraine in the guise of her husband, extracting a promise that the child they conceive together will then be given to him. In doing so, Merlin acts not for the greater good of King or country, but rather in his own self-interest: "... to fulfil *my* desire, ye shall have your desire." (28, italics added)

Why does the magician require that this particular stipulation be satisfied for the deal to be struck? Certainly there is an element of human cruelty in his request; in allegorical terms, this provision can be seen as the greedy desire to take what is most precious from another. Yet, if Merlin can also be thought of as the flawed "emissary" of a mysterious but ultimately moral universe, then the reader might logically conclude the price of satisfying an immoral desire is steep indeed -- a connection Malory's medieval audience certainly would not have missed. Though Merlin has assured Uther that young Arthur will one day be King, the father nonetheless loses the chance to shape the character of his own son. By the time Arthur *does* ascend to the throne, Uther is dead. And Merlin must have known as well that offspring born of a "corrupt union" is likewise destined to be undermined by similarly degraded behavior. This is precisely what happens, of course, when King Arthur (echoing his father's lechery) unwittingly sleeps with his half-sister and then attempts to destroy the child they begat together.

Still, if we can see Merlin as the instrument of fate -- a concept that hardly precludes misfortune -- then his sorcery and its consequences may represent "the will of God" (whatever that is!) Recall that when Uther fell ill for the last time, Merlin responded to the pleas of the King's barons thusly: "There is none other remedy, but God will have his will," and, as if to make the linkage between his occult practices and divine will explicit, he adds, "but look ye all, barons, be before King Uther to'morn, *and God and I shall make him to speak.*" (31, italics added) It should be obvious too that were it not for Merlin's magic, however nefarious, Arthur never would have been born, and the fate of the kingdom as a whole would have went unfulfilled. As your notes suggest, the inscription on the stone "is not a promise to make someone king but to reveal the one who already is the... divinely ordained, fated... king." The magic of Merlin, therefore, might be perceived allegorically as both a "mirror" or amplification of man's less admirable characteristics, *and* as an imperfect but necessary mediating device between human beings and the divine.