

Legend vs. pop culture: the dual characterization of merlin



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Merlin has existed as the quintessential imaginary magical figure for centuries. Recognizable by name before even the writing of Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*, the Merlin figure pervades art throughout time, featured in numerous books, paintings, and films. Although the general consensus on Merlin's demeanor persists as his being a wise, mysterious counselor, a second version of the character has arisen due to animated children's films, specifically Walt Disney's *The Sword in the Stone*. This film's portrayal of Merlin as a kooky, strange hermit who borders on foolishness at times has influenced many other adaptations of the character including the one depicted in DreamWorks' *Shrek the Third*. While an eccentric and odd Merlin opposes his traditional characterization, the medium calls for the necessity of Merlin being presented this way. As animation's target audience is generally children, the realistic and dark aspects of the character are dropped in favor of entertainment and appeal. This opposing characterization both adds and detracts from the canonical Merlin, infringing on the legendary perception of him while adding more depth and arguably more mystery to the character. J. Hillis Miller's "Narrative" argues that society craves the same story in repetition, so the skewing of the traditional aspects of the cultural figure not only adds a form of entertainment but also forces the new Merlin to act in conjunction with the old. Due to animated films altering the character of Merlin, a dual characterization has arisen which both adds and detracts from the original Merlin described in Arthurian legends and alters the character's overall canonical personality.

Merlin in the *Morte D'arthur* offers an example of the traditional "Merlin" figure. Sir Thomas Malory's wizard character is mysterious, wise, and drives

the plot along. Upon his first introduction, it appears that Malory assumes his reader already understands who Merlin is as he offers no exposition on the character and merely immediately thrusts him into the action. Merlin then occasionally pops into the story, giving King Arthur advice and exhibiting some magical power. Even when not directly in the story itself, other characters refer to Merlin in reverence and remembering his power. While Malory never explores the extent of Merlin's personality or power, it is stated that he has powers of disguise and prophesy along with extensive knowledge of both magical and real elements. Merlin himself never reveals aspects of his character beyond being a wise counselor who obeys his king, and little of Merlin's own story is written in Malory's work. Unlike other versions of Merlin, Malory's character acts solely as the static and one-dimensional sagacious, mysterious sorcerer who is necessary for the plot to continue at times.

While Malory's Merlin offers the traditional perception of the character, Walt Disney's film *The Sword in the Stone* introduced a different version of Merlin. Unlike the unexpected visitor role Merlin plays in the *Morte D'arthur*, Disney's Merlin has a much greater role in Arthur's life, guiding him for essentially the entire movie. While this Merlin also acts as a counselor for Arthur, he is both a friend and holds more power over Arthur and his decisions. He also possesses great wisdom, however, unlike the foreboding and stiff Merlin Malory presents, Disney's Merlin is silly, clumsy, and absent-minded. Although he possesses the power of prophecy, this ability, along with many others, is not entirely full-proof. This Merlin offers little mystery, instead playing the role of a kooky old man. Despite the extreme discrepancies between Malory and Disney's characterizations of Merlin, the

Disney version of the character has become quite popular, enough so to be included in Arthurian parody.

DreamWorks' *Shrek the Third*, a children's film which parodies Arthurian legends, takes both versions of Merlin previously discussed, spoofs the original, and furthers the ridiculousness of the character introduced in *The Sword in the Stone*. DreamWorks' Merlin plays little role in the plot itself, existing what appears to be solely an opportunity to spoof another Arthurian aspect of the legends. While aforementioned Merlins played the role as mentor to Arthur, this aspect of Merlin is unnecessary in the film as the titular character Shrek fulfills this role. Instead, the film parodies this aspect of Merlin by portraying him as insane, mentioned that he was once a teacher before his "nervous breakdown" (*Shrek the Third*). This Merlin eats rocks, is quite dramatic, and wears cliché Merlin attire—wizards hat and robe, however, this is also spoofed. DreamWorks' version of Merlin is not the great and powerful sorcerer as described in previous lore, but rather possesses more mediocre "special effects"-type magic and doubts himself and his abilities. Even when he performs more advanced magic, it only works partly as to add to the comedic elements of the film. DreamWorks' foolish characterization of Merlin represents how much the idea of who Merlin is has changed over time, especially in thanks to children's films.

The change of Merlins characterization overtime is mostly due to the necessity of adapting the character to the films' targeted audience.

Generally designed for children, such films rely on stereotypical tropes as to allow for juvenile audiences to understand the plot and characters. If the

Merlin character was the powerful, mysterious figure he is in *Morte D'arthur*, <https://assignbuster.com/legend-vs-pop-culture-the-dual-characterization-of-merlin/>

he would not fit into a children's film where generally "good guys" are more lighthearted and open. As children's films call upon certain types of character, Merlin's personality must then be changed as to appeal to the target audience. Similarly, the animated style of the films requires a specific type of character that differs from the traditional characterization of Merlin. Since animation removes the realism from the story, so must the realistic aspects of the characters be removed. Therefore, the original version of Merlin is dropped in favor of a more fantastic adaptation as to befit the medium; the loss of the realism associated with the dark and mysterious figure allows for the addition of more comedy and imaginative aspects of the character.

Also, if Merlin were similar to his Morte D'Arthur counterpart, there would be no shock factor for those that know the canonical version of the character thus removing some of the comedy related to him. This would also detract from the entertainment, making the targeted audience bored and unamused by seeing an adult as normally seen in everyday life. As this man is an elderly wizard, an authority figure in society, he must have a sense of absurdity in order to appeal to children while also appealing to adults who know what the character normally is and add to the comedy/parody of the film(s). Therefore, the foolish adaptations of Merlin appeal to all audiences, both young and old, which also allows for the characterization to become popular.

By having such a ridiculous version of the character become so common in pop culture, this adaptation of Merlin infringes upon the original canonical version of the sorcerer. What was once only perceived and referenced as the <https://assignbuster.com/legend-vs-pop-culture-the-dual-characterization-of-merlin/>

epitome of wisdom and magic, children's films have warped into a silly, old man trope. Not only do these adaptations of Merlin seemingly reduce him to a static figure meant only for entertainment, but also allow for a silly Merlin to become the "original" version of the character for many. Many children's first introduction to the character may be through these comedic films which then infringes upon the canonical character, effectively instilling a new "original" Merlin, depending on the generation, and slowly replacing the Morte D'arthur version of Merlin as the primary characterization.

Although these comedic Merlins do detract from and somewhat replace the Morte D'arthur Merlin, it could be argued that by introducing the new trope—Merlin being a kooky hermit—allows for the character to be adapted for modern audiences and expanded upon, thus making him more dynamic and perhaps even more mysterious as his true nature is debatable. The adaptations of Merlin revamp the character and make it something new while still relying on its past interpretations. Miller's chapter "Narrative" discusses how "we need the same story over and over" (70) for we crave recognizable content as it asserts "the basic ideology of our culture" (72). In this way, the adaptations of Merlin that make him out as foolish rely on the basic human desire for repetition of a familiar trope through people's past experiences with the character whilst offering a new and interesting version to keep audiences interested. Then, as the "new" Merlin is assimilated into the culture and story canon, the new character traits become associated with the character and craved by audiences to be repeated.

As the new adaptation of Merlin becomes more used in our culture, it does not override the preexisting ideas of the character, but rather adds to the <https://assignbuster.com/legend-vs-pop-culture-the-dual-characterization-of-merlin/>

cultural interpretation of Merlin instating a dual characterization. The Morte D'arthur-type Merlin still prevails as a recognizable character, known for power, wisdom, and magic, but once *The Sword in the Stone* warped this version of the character to create a new adaptation, making Merlin kooky, foolish, and magically unreliable, he lost his aspects of realism and thus sank further into a mythical lore of our culture. By having opposing versions of the character so present in our culture, the character can be adapted however the adapters see fit like with *Shrek the Third* who chose to further the ridiculousness of Merlin as introduced in the Disney film. While the newer Merlin characterization does detract from the original canon version, it cannot be ignored that through the existence of another perception of the character, Merlin becomes more dynamic and a more mysterious figure as his nature does not have a consensus. By having a dual characterization of Merlin, thanks to animated children's films, the character appeals to a wider audience and modernizes the character, making the Arthurian legendary figure relevant in modern culture.

Works Cited

Malory, Thomas, Sir. *Sir Thomas Malory's Morte Darthur: A New Modern English Translation Based on the Winchester Manuscript*. Trans. Dorsey Armstrong. Anderson: Parlor Press, 2009. Print.

"Merlin." *Disney Wiki*. N. p., n. d. Web.

"Merlin (Shrek the Third)." *WikiShrek*. N. p., n. d. Web.

Miller, J. Hillis. "Narrative." *Critical Terms for Literary Study*. Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1995. N. pag. Print.

<https://assignbuster.com/legend-vs-pop-culture-the-dual-characterization-of-merlin/>

Seanny, and Liambonez. " Ask John: Why is Animation Associated with Children's Entertainment?" AnimeNation Anime News Blog. N. p., n. d. Web.

Shrek the Third. Dir. Chris Miller. DreamWorks, 2007.

The Sword in the Stone. Dir. Wolfgang Reitherman. Walt Disney, 1963.