

Merlin the Political, Spiritual and Romantic Shape-Shifter in Robert de Boron's, *Joseph of Arimathea*, *Merlin*, *Perceval: The Trilogy of Prose Romances* and Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*

Gloria Roxanne Buckley
Faulkner University, Montgomery, AL
Mercy College, Dobbs Ferry, NY

Abstract-*Merlin as an allegorical character has been dwelling in caves and forests casting spells and operating as a political, spiritual and romantic shape-shifter within our minds for centuries. Merlin's shape-shifting and clairvoyance dates back to Greek mythology with Tiresias who shape-shifts gender and sees all as a blind seer. Much like Merlin our early seer sees the future as it is happening and offers truthful forecasts of fate (Schutz 277). An examination of the Trilogy and The Faerie Queene shall reveal that Merlin whether rooted in Christian scripture or Christian Cabalistic Imperialistic white magic has remained throughout the centuries as a truly omnipresent shape-shifter through his props and has created a legend of spiritual, political and romantic transcendence. Robert and Spenser utilized Merlin for different purposes, Robert to foster Christianity and Spenser to foster the strength of the monarchy. Ultimately, both writers created a humanistic character that would change the course of events.*

Keywords- *Political; Spiritual; Romantic; Shape-Shifter*

In the twelfth-century, the French poet, Robert de Boron ("Robert") created the tale of Merlin and the grail in the trilogy, *Merlin and the Grail: Joseph of Arimathea*, *Merlin*, *Perceval*: the trilogy of Arthurian Romances attributed to Robert de Boron, translated by Nigel Bryant (hereinafter referred to as "the Trilogy") which is the first Arthurian legend rooted in Christian scripture and attributes the Holy Grail ("Grail") as the chalice or vessel used by Christ at the Last Supper. Edmund Spenser ("Spenser") in *The Faerie Queene* creates a Merlin still creepy in his cave but purely a seer of white magic and mysticism. Both Robert and Spenser's Merlin are magical incarnates who cast spells, use props such as the grail, magic mirror, magic armor and spear in order to change the shape of their recipient's political, spiritual and romantic destinies.

Robert's *Trilogy* sought to win Christians during the Crusades. Robert's Merlin was a Christian seer of transcendence or shape-shifting in the twelfth-century which meant abiding by the Church and Christian doctrine. While the Church would not condone "white magic", it did approve of an allegory that fostered the Holy Eucharist and Christ's immortality. Robert wrote the first Arthurian legend that is rooted in Christian scripture and attributes the Holy Grail ("Grail") as the chalice or vessel used by Christ at the Last Supper. The Grail is also the vessel in which Joseph of Arimathea ("Joseph") collects the blood of Christ from his wounds at Christ's crucifixion. (Robert 7, 19) (Harper 99) (Whitman 895).

Robert creates in Merlin a prophetic incarnation born of an incubus father and a virgin mother (Robert 51-3), therefore, Merlin as a hybrid incarnate unlike any other seer as previously written by Geoffrey of Monmouth or any other writers, Robert takes the reader through a prophetic Grail journey from the Holy Land near the River Jordan with Joseph and then brings the Grail to England with Arthur and Perceval.

Returning to the Holy Land when Jesus is betrayed by Judas and brutally crucified, Joseph who loved Jesus with his soul learns from Pilate that the Jews have crucified Jesus (Robert 18). Pilate gives Joseph Christ's vessel or chalice from the Last Supper and as Joseph removes the wounded, bleeding, savior from the cross, Robert writes that,

"Joseph held him in his arms and laid Him on the ground, cradling Him tenderly and washing Him most gently. And when he had washed Him, he saw His wounds still bleeding and was dismayed...then he remembered his vessel, and thought the drops of blood that were falling would be better in the vessel than elsewhere. So he placed it beneath Christ's wounds; and blood from the wounds I in his hands and his feet dripped into the vessel" (Robert 19).

Here for the first time, according to George McLean Harper who wrote the "History of the Grail" in 1893, "we

enter an atmosphere of apparently prevailing Christian Tone” (Harper 99). Robert is the first to apply scripture and religious history to the Grail legend. As Robert Hanning affirms, Robert gives his work an “appearance reinforced by the Grail’s pseudo-salvation historical dimension” (354). The reader is given pieces of Christ’s apostolic truths cloaked in a fictional journey.

During Robert’s time in France, the Crusades were underway and Christianity was being evangelized to the exclusion and even slaughter of those who supported Jewish teachings. According to Lisa Lampert-Weissing, Robert’s as well as many other Grail legends were a depiction of “Jewish perfidy against Jesus” (235). While the Hebrews established that the Old Testament and Christianity is connected to biblical history; Judaism is a religion that can stand alone. Yet the Jews are portrayed in Robert’s text as traitors such as Judas and Moyses who is swallowed by the Round Table because of his betrayal (Robert 35-9). Lisa Lampert-Weissing reaffirms the sacred circle of the Grail keepsers to the Christian concept of the Eucharist and the exclusion of the Jewish faith. All of which reverts back to the “secret Church” and secret communications with Jesus (Waite 62, 640).

Joseph was imprisoned for an extended period of time due to his “fidelity to Christ” (Harper 99) as well as accusations by the Jews that he had stolen Christ’s body when Christ had risen from the sepulcher that Joseph had placed him in (Robert 20). Christ appeared to Joseph and brought the vessel to him. Joseph was instructed to keep the vessel. Christ instructed Joseph that there should be only three keepers indicative of the Holy Trinity (Robert 22). Robert creates in Joseph’s visitation with Christ a spiritually historic treatise (Hanning 356) (Whitman 902). Entrusted with the Grail, Joseph comes to Britain and it is in Britain where the miracles and prophecies of Merlin begin.

As Joseph and his descendants transport the Grail to Britain, Merlin is born. Merlin is the son of a devil who impregnates his mother (a virgin) while she lay sleeping (she had forgotten to make the sign of the cross and the devil impregnated her) with Merlin (Robert 51-3). Wise to Satan, Merlin’s mother seeks out the cleric Blaise and confesses what has happened to her. Blaise blesses Merlin’s mother with Holy water and Merlin is subsequently baptized (54, 5). Because of Merlin’s incubus father and chaste mother, Merlin was able to see the past, present and future (Robert 60). As a hairy little incarnation at two years old, Merlin defends his mother in the face of justice by telling the judge to ask his own mother who his true father was and apparently it was a cleric who Merlin prophesied would drown himself upon hearing that the truth was revealed (Robert 57-61). This prophecy as many “valorizes Merlin’s authenticity” (Cooper 4). Apparently, his being a toddler seems to just add to the fantastic story. Merlin is depicted in both Robert’s and Spenser’s version as a spiritual prodigy born from an evil father and a chaste mother. He is blessed and

baptized and therefore becomes an incarnation of pure knowing of the past, present and future. A wise spiritual, political and romantic adviser. Both Robert and Spenser preserve Merlin in this spiritual light.

Merlin reveals that because he was fathered by a demon he can see into the past, present and future, and, Blaise’s baptism and blessings saved Merlin from a life of evil. Merlin’s hybrid parentage allows him to renounce evil and live a blessed life of redemption (Cooper 4). The “omniscience” (Griffin 91) of Merlin allows for him to foresee events and record those events with Blaise. Merlin is able to write his chronology with Blaise and the transmission is a way according to Miranda Griffin, “for the future to become the present which then become the past and the text we read is a recurrent crossing of the limit between Merlin’s divine prophetic powers and diabolic understanding of history” (92). In this space of transcendence Merlin weaves the truth in each encounter bringing Perceval closer to the Grail attainment.

The Grail is named after Joseph shares the miracles of the vessel. He names it the Holy Grail or Graal because it contains the blood of Christ which he believes is sacred. In addition to the Grail being indicative of the Holy Trinity; it is also indicative of the onset of monotheism (Jung 355, 56) (Nichols 160). Further, Merlin becomes the fourth divine soul attached to the Holy Trinity according to Emma Jung, who theorizes, “Merlin is an incarnation of the primal Father God in whom the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are embodied. This new dimension is the human and natural one that appears to signify the realization of the divine which has penetrated more deeply into our world” (Jung 356). Arthur Waite indicates that the Grail as part of the Last Supper and Christ’s blood weaves in Robert’s prose a series of secret communications with Christ through the Grail and the Holy Spirit (62). In that “secret church” where only Joseph, Arthur and Perceval share in the containment of the Grail as well as Merlin in his omniscient knowing is the sacred space to “teach the love of Christ and life everlasting” (259); the ultimate transcendence.

Here is the formation of the renunciation of evil and the early symbol of transubstantiation and as Stephen Nichols indicates a “mystical relic linked to Christ” (Nichols 161) is established. Transubstantiation or the conversion of the Eucharist into Christ’s blood was just becoming a doctrine in the Church during Robert’s time (Giffin 500). This is the core of Robert’s theme of redemption and renunciation of evil. Mary Giffin opines that “the new mystagogical theology was occupying the center of attention both on the continent and in England” (500). Robert bases the theological foundation for his Grail upon the mystery and miracle of Christ’s blood. Stephen Nichols has coined Robert’s work as “Theological Fictionality” (60) which is steeped in scripture truths and fictional spiritual exchanges with Christ.

As if being in the wave of mobile transubstantiation in the Grail’s movement over continents

wasn't enough for Robert's work; there is according to Stephen Nichols something more profound that Robert creates. Nichols points out that "Transubstantiation reenacts the mystery of Christ's procession into corporeality and return to the spiritual body. As witness to the Resurrection, the Holy Sepulcher was the most sacred site in Christendom" (172). It is this union that makes Robert's work unique. According to Stephen Nichols, the Grail "functions as a displaced symbol of Christ's tomb" (172). This is relevant to the idea of transcendence and instead of heresy; Robert has brought "Christ on Stage" (173). This backdrop is the spiritual arena in which Merlin acts as spiritual liaison to Arthur, Perceval and anyone in his path.

Merlin's shape changing and ability to manipulate events adds to the fiction of supernatural powers. For example, Merlin manipulates the conception of Arthur under deceptive means when his father (Uther) (unmarried to Arthur's mother) lies under guise as her husband and Arthur is conceived. As R. J. Stewart writes "we may see in the conception of Arthur an echo of the supernatural conception of Merlin; both occur in a situation where a woman does not know the true nature of her lover, both are matters of a high destiny linked to the land of Britain" (85). Much like Merlin's conception and guidance by Blaise; Arthur is protected by Merlin. Arthur proves his own supernatural strength by being the only one to pull the sword from the stone (Robert 109). Robert retains some of the romantic chivalry in the text with Arthur's as well as some of Merlin's own prophetic feats.

The text is sprinkled with Merlin's ability to weave in and out of danger relying upon his moral prophecies. For example, Merlin shows King Vortigern why his castle is sinking from flooding water under his castle and the ultimate fight of the white and red dragons. Vortigern had sent his men to kill Merlin and yet, Merlin is able to save himself just through his prophecies. Merlin prophesizes Vortigern's death due to his cruelty (Robert 75-79). The interesting time shift of Merlin's prophecies is that Merlin tells the future just as it is about to happen (Cooper13). In each prediction a moral lesson of redemption is cast upon its recipient. Merlin is the shape-shifter not only for his different incarnations, much like Jesus, but because he predicts the shifting of humanity and morality as it becomes a legend for each individual's mortality. Perhaps, each prophecy of death or change is a metaphorical reenactment of a redemptive crucifixion and resurrection.

As R.J. Stewart writes in *Merlin the Prophetic Vision and the Mystic Life*:

The theme of evil and retribution makes stirring tales, but the subtle implication of the tale of Vortigern leads us to the magical and spiritual laws of inner development. Vortigern's failure to connect his innermost self, his reality, causes the energies of that reality to

approach him outwardly; not through any motive of vengeance (though this may be the superficial expression) but through an ultimate law of balance and harmony. That which is broken down is then rebuilt. Merlin is the agency of king-making and king breaking, both for Vortigern and Arthur (85).

It is Merlin's capacity to transform the inner workings of a human being for the good of all men that creates in him a prophet and guide to the Grail. However, if evil is the inner workings of the individual, Merlin as in Vortigern's case will tell the truth and allow the retribution to occur.

Ultimately after many conquests Arthur is crowned king and his Knights of the Round Table are established as a symbol of unity. Merlin takes on a shaman or medicine man existence, the "Celtic druid" (Jung 360). Merlin is the prophet and spiritual healer through his guidance of Arthur and represents the transformed self. This transformed self is even depicted in the Round Table, according to Emma Jung which is the oldest form of unification-the circle (399).

Perceval is the grandson of Bron (the "Fisher King"), Arthur's brother-in-law and whether it is spiritual nepotism that Robert plays out or the close adherence to the Holy Spirit's directive of Grail transmission through descent; Perceval is able to sit in the empty chair at the Round Table despite Joseph's earlier warning (Robert 119). Additionally, Perceval fails miserably upon his first visit to the Fisher King's castle and doesn't ask the requisite question regarding the purpose of the Grail (Robert 141- 42). Robert presses the theme of renunciation of sin, fear, and for Perceval a long journey into the forest with many adventures until he returns again and ultimately does ask the question and the ailing Fisher King is miraculously healed (154-5). In Perceval's final quest the bleeding lance and Grail symbolized Christ's prophecy to Joseph while in prison. Bron teaches his grandson the entire secret communications from the Holy Spirit (Robert 145). Perceval is redeemed and his Holy transcendence as well as Bron's takes place (145). The gentle salvation of Perceval takes on as Stephen Nichols believes, "a fictional phantasmatic romance" with the Grail legend itself.

Arthur upon being wounded in battle is taken to Avalon to heal. He vows to return (Robert 171). According to William Nitze, Avalon takes on an archetypal place of healing and spiritual transcendence. William Nitze is of the opinion that the cure of the Fisher King once Perceval touches the Grail is evidence of disenchantment converted into enchantment (Nietze, "What did Robert Write" 4). The spiritual medicinal Holy powers of the Grail are the catalyst for the transformation of psychic, spiritual and physical health. Robert becomes therefore, as Waite describes: "the devotional poet" (95) setting forth "the sacramental mystery of real presence" (95) through the Holy Spirit and the gifts of prophecy.

Perceval retreats to his castle in the forest for a life of contemplation as he remains the spiritual warden of the Grail. Robert indicates that Perceval then “lived a saintly life and he was often visited by the Holy Spirit” (Robert 171). Arthur remained in Avalon, Gawain was killed and the Knights of the Round Table ended (171). The Grail quest having ended and the last link in the chain of spiritual custody completed; Merlin resides in a small abode near Perceval. Blaise stays in his writing site of Northumberland until further instructions are given by Merlin. Yet, Merlin’s final path is nebulous and left essentially open-ended.

Emma Jung presents an interesting theory as to why the Round Table must end. She asserts that this is the end of chivalry (384), she indicates that “the Round Table not only represented the coming era of the Holy Spirit but also the existing world of chivalry” (384). It is a change in history that she claims “chivalry had reached its zenith, however, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, had even passed it, so that in the decline of the Round Table we can detect a premonition of the approaching end of chivalry, a world which, with the coming of the Renaissance, had to give way to the bourgeois social order” (384). Thus, Perceval remains in the Grail Castle and abandons chivalry for God. The Round Table lost its mystical or spiritual quality and Perceval enters a new realm of spirituality. Emma Jung asserts that this realm is a refuge away from the world and that “it is not only the opposites of worldly versus spiritual matters that are moving apart but also those of the individual and the collective” (385-6). Here, according to Emma Jung is the making of the “Renaissance and the increase in consciousness and to which the Reformation bears historical witness” (386). Merlin remains a hybrid of spiritual humane symbolism bridging a time period that blends from the Renaissance and Reformation.

Robert writes in his final pages, “then Merlin came to Perceval and to his master Blaise and took his leave of them” (171). He tells them that God doesn’t want him to appear to people again but, he doesn’t die, “until the end of the world” (171). It is here where the door is open by Robert for the development of the theme of transcendence and unification of the soul. While much conjecture could be made as to Merlin’s final destination, Robert, or the revisionist created a path in a word without origin, “Esplumoir” (172). Merlin’s final words are as follows: “I shall live in eternal joy. Meanwhile I shall make my dwelling-place outside your house, where I shall live and prophesy as Our Lord shall instruct me. And all who see my dwelling-place will call it Merlin’s *esplumoir*. With that Merlin departed; and he made his *Esplumoir* and entered in, and was never seen again in this world” (172). The foot note in the text which is derived from William Nitze’s interpretation of *Esplumoir* is “this untranslatable-and probably invented-word has wonderful resonances. Its root is the shedding of feathers, implying moulting, transformation, renewal” (172). William Nitze

in his article “The *Esplumoir* Merlin” indicates that the word may be derived from medieval falconry combined with a metaphor for a caged bird or mew (69). He interprets Merlin as a “shadow”, “reaper” or as an incarnation that transcends but is caught in the “Other World” (69). The word is a metaphorical word for a spirit of another world still in this world yet in transformation. The similarity to Jesus in the gospel of John is clear in being in this world but not of it.

Helen Adolf in her article, “The *Esplumoir* Merlin: A Study in its Cabalistic Sources”, while in agreement with William Nitze’s interpretation, compares Merlin’s transformation with the prophet Elijah and the entry into the refuge of God’s sanctuary as described in the *Zohar* as paradise (179). Merlin’s *Esplumoir* is a sacred space of transformation where Merlin’s vision of the past, present and future is seen through the “super soul” (179) of transformation in the “dwelling of God” (179). Helen Adolf compares the basis for transcendence dating back to the Kabbalah and Jewish mysticism. Robert may have touched upon a symbol of unification of the soul and redemption that has its origins in the *Zohar*. This interpretation would fly in the face of the anti-Semitism so prevalent in Robert’s time. Perhaps, Robert was aware of the *Zohar* and did camouflage his metaphor with an untranslatable symbol.

Helen Adolf indicates that “it’s natural that Robert would have knowledge about Elijah and the access to some Jewish sources for only there do we find, in connection with eschatology and the Messiah an “otherworld abode, called the Bird’s Nest” (175). According to Helen Adolf: “The Bird’s Nest in Hebrew “*Kan Zippor*”, appears in two medieval texts: in the *Zohar* and in the apocalyptic writing *Seder Gan Eden*” (175). Helen Adolf finds similarities between Merlin and the Messiah. Both are able to see the past and future (170) and both are considered to be “the Holy super-soul” (178). Clearly, a being above others as God-like is the symbol of both Merlin and the Messiah.

Helen Adolf suggests that “in Jewish folklore and belief-as with many other nations-there is a close connection between the soul and the winged denizens of the sky” (178). Therefore, we enter not only the spiritual world of transcendence, but perhaps, a social and religious transcendence beyond the factions of religious groups during this time of “deep religious unrest all over Europe and in all ranks of society” (192). Perhaps, Robert was secretly bridging the gap between all faiths with his term *Esplumoir*.

Merlin’s transcendence may very well reach beyond the dogma of religion. Miranda Griffin indicates that Merlin’s gift of prophecy is evidence of his ability to juggle within himself the coexistence of the inheritance of supernatural powers and the ability to carry the word of God. Miranda Griffin believes *Esplumoir* is “the possibility of a new incarnation, a new shape, a metamorphosis” (93) that do peacefully coexist.

Laurence Eson asserts that Merlin's captivity as a caged bird in transformation is possible as Nitze and Adolf theorize. Additionally, he claims that "at a more profound level it is apparent that we are concerned here not only with the jargon of medieval falconry, but also with an archaic stratum of narrative preserving shamanic elements. The Esplumoir may perhaps be interpreted as the site at which Merlin transformed into the shape of a bird of prey as a means of journeying to the Otherworld to obtain esoteric knowledge" (89). Emma Jung joins William Nitze and Helen Adolf in the transformative aspects of Esplumoir. Emma Jung also sees Merlin as a shaman or medicine and spiritual healer (356, 360). Esplumoir takes on a deeper meaning than perhaps Avalon as a place of healing and transcendence. The difference is that Avalon is mentioned in many subsequent texts as well as previously. Esplumoir remains with Robert (Nitze "Esplumoir Merlin" 72). Perhaps, only Merlin's soul is worthy of such sanctification. A place where Robert indicates the Holy Spirit speaks to him and visits Perceval (Robert 171, 2).

The knowledge or experience shared out of the pages of Robert's Grail tells us as Arthur Waite explains that "it is the mystic rather than ascetic because it does not deal with the path of detachment, so much as with the path of union" (Waite xiii). Joseph, Merlin, Arthur, Blaise, Brons and Perceval are touched by as Arthur Waite reflects, "the book of the Divine Voice which speaks through the Sacred Vessel" (Waite 291). Thus, transcendence arises out of the literature by the prophecies of Merlin who guided Perceval to the Grail and kept a spiritual watch for as much time on this earth as shall exist (Robert 172). Emma Jung perceives Perceval's and Merlin's isolation as follows:

In spite of Perceval's strange-seeming, virtuous, medieval monastic retirement, the fact that he has his cloister and his church, i.e. the Grail Castle, for himself, so to speak, could indicate an aspect of something which has come ever more into prominence since the Reformation: the idea of man's unmediated relation to God (386).

Robert's narrative of transcendence is a gift handed down in truth and time about renunciation of evil, redemption in Christ's suffering through his blood as contained in the Grail. Robert's message remains as one of transcendence with Merlin and Perceval to that sacred place in all our souls.

Perhaps, in different Messiahs and Gods the path leads back to the conversation that never ends; the conversation within one's soul. Merlin's Esplumoir is perhaps the unification, the conversation for all our souls. Or is it? Robert leaves Merlin as a protector of the Grail keeper Perceval, awaiting further directive from God. However, later in the Renaissance period Spenser's Merlin remains a hybrid offspring of good and

evil practicing white magic in his dark, otherworldly cave. Spenser's Merlin is in commune with God and also with the Queen ("Gloriana"). His goal is divine preservation of the Monarchy and not the Grail or Christ's Eucharist as in Robert's tale. Spenser sought to win the praise of Queen Elizabeth I by capitalizing on her chastity and ideals for monarchy, marriage and courtly love. Spenser was influenced according to Frances Yates, by the "Christian Cabalists, via Grippa-Giorgi-Dee" (Yates 209) which ultimately is the praise of "Elizabethan Cabalism" (209).

Merlin appears in Book III of Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* as living in a "dreadfull place: it is an hideous hoolow caue (they say) ...a balefull Bowre for fear the cruell Feend should thee vnawres deuowre" (III.iii.26). He resides in a creepy remnant from the wiles of the Lady of the Lake from Arthurian romance where he is condemned to the underworld. Yet, Spenser also states "for Merlin had in Magicke more insight, then euer him before or after liuing wight. For he by words could call out of the sky both Sunne and Moone, and make them him obay...the feend do quake, when any him to them does name" (III.iii.27). Both Robert's Merlin and Spenser's Merlin are magical incarnates who cast spells, use props such as the Holy Grail, magic mirror, magic armor and spear in order to change the shape of their recipient's political, spiritual and romantic destinies.

Charles Baskervill traces Spenser's allegory of the fairy queen as a symbol of the "new England under Elizabeth" (49). The history and origination of the "devices and speeches at Kenilworth which served as entertainment for the Queen" (54) and also as a form of flattery. He indicates that the "whole conception of the Fairy Queen at Woodstock was appropriate to English fairy tradition of pomp and splendor" (52). The notion of a fairy queen was filled with pageantry at Woodstock and Leicester. Spenser adopts this "mixture of patriotism, his interest in ancient English poets, and his love of allegory and romance" (54). This backdrop provides the political and poetic influence of Spenser's creation.

Merlin as divine shape-shifter is discussed in Spenser's first introduction of the mirror or "charmed looking glass" (III.iii.29) (Berger 40) wherein Merlin tells Britomart that her view in the mirror is a "straight course of heavenly destiny, led with eternall providence" (III.iii.29) (40). Harry Berger points out that "thus the way the fates find, the web they spin, will depend partly on the framework laid by the human will" (40). However, Merlin's hand remains prophetically steady even in the face of human will.

Merlin provides the mirror with the vision of Britomart's future husband Artegall with the hope that Britomart will provide "thy fruitful Ofspring, shall from thee descend" (III.iii. 29). The "of divine providence" but also free will requires the "cooperation from man" (Berger 40). Merlin makes Britomart "aware of her

responsibility not only to herself and Artegal but also to the larger historical plan" (41). It is here where we see the true purpose of Merlin's prophecy is for the political, spiritual and historical future of England. Harry Berger opines that Britomart shall "cross over from lovesick virgin to founding mother, from individual figure to historical symbol" (42). Harry Berger point out that "Britomart's "hard begin" is also Britain's, and their fulfillment, which lies well in the future, depends on their experiencing and transcending the limits of early culture, its criteria and sensibility" (44). Britomart transcends in battle and spirit throughout Books III and IV as a female virgin knight.

Spenser's Merlin is seen as a "living presence in the poem" (Blackburn 186). Merlin is the poet. While Merlin remains a prophet, he is more as William Blackburn writes "an artificer, and a figure for the artist, that Merlin is most important in *The Faerie Queene*; in this poem, his most famous creation is a mirror which is also an image of the entire world. It is as the creator of this world of glass that Merlin illuminates the central concerns of the poem" (186). The central concern is the peace and lineage of the throne and the truth in all things (187). Spenser's mirror is "a world of glass, an artifact at once mirror and microcosm" (187). William Blackburn agrees that "as Kathleen Williams remarks, "in seeing Artegall in the armour of Achilles (III. li. 25), Britomart sees not an illusion, as she supposes, but a truer vision of his essential quality than she could gain in a sight of the man himself" (189). William Blackburn further states that "in *The Faerie Queen*, as in the romances, Merlin's art serves the cause of truth and order" (189). It is here where the development of political, spiritual and romantic shape-shifter is formed.

William Blackburn explains Merlin's creation of Arthur's shield in Book III and writes that the shield made of brilliant diamonds like the mirror is a reflective prop that dazzles and shines, reflecting "all things truly" (187) and "for thy it round and hollow, shaped was, like to the world it selfe, and seem'd a world of glass" (Spenser III, ii,19). Blackburn writes that the resemblance to Britomart's mirror is "interesting" (187). He writes that "it tells us that the real significance of Arthur's shield is to be found, not simply in its relationship, to anything in Spenser's sources, but it's relationship to the mirror. The magician's art-an art apparently compatible with Christian Orthodoxy" (187). Perhaps, the best categorization for Merlin in both works is not just soothsayer, but, rather, truth- sayer!

Spenser's use of Merlin's mirror and consequently Britomart's acquisition of magical powers in her spear to save and conquer all perpetuates "Merlin's visionary magic" (Cheney 2). Magic is associated with divinity and "essential to Spenser's definition of monarchy" (2). Thus, a union of political preservation, order and divinity occurs in Britomart's experiences through Merlin's influence. Patrick

Cheney opines that "Britomart's idealized experience with Merlin and her active use of magic in Faeryland figure a visionary ontology in which the lover's image of the beloved within imagination is seen to have its origin in a divinely ordained spirit, and in which this spiritual image, if understood, motivates the will to virtuous action. Good magic thus figures the Book's central idea: Chastity derives from understanding the unity of human desire and divine will, earth and heaven" (3). Here spirituality, romance and politics combine. The beauty of Spenser is that divinity, purity, love attaches to a universal understanding and appreciation. Divinity is not just Christian concepts but humane concepts.

Patrick Cheney opines that Spenser uses Britomart's mirror and magical spear in Book III and Arthur's magical armor in Book I as the catalysts for "bringing truth to light" (7) in order to follow the divine path ignited by Merlin. In both books, Merlin, has provided the tools for Arthur and for Britomart to "spiritualize a universal experience that especially attracted the Renaissance-love at first sight" (28). The idea that "in its essence, good magic is integral to Spenserian allegory because it's mysterious pattern of transforming vision into action" (28) and both Robert and Spenser blend love and goodness with a spiritual ideal.

With respect to Merlin's political influence, Howard Dobin provides a wonderful account of John Dee ("Dr. Dee") who Spenser may have used as a model for his Merlin. Dr. Dee was a scholar, intellect, astronomer, mathematician who charted out prophecies and advice for Queen Elizabeth I and while she protected him, the people ultimately burned his home which housed thousands of the greatest manuscripts and books in England. He was a political prophet for the Queen.

Frances Yates asserts that "*The Faerie Queene* is a great magical Renaissance poem, infused with the whitest of white magic, Christian Cabalist and Neoplatonic, haunted with a good magician and scientist, Merlin (a name sometimes used of Dee), and profoundly opposed to bad magicians and necromancers and bad religions" (Yates 127). The ancient influences of numerology, mysticism, "planetary cosmology" (Yates 99) were at play during Spenser's creation of *The Faerie Queene*. Dr. Dee was at his influential height in England and of the Queen when Spenser was writing. Frances Yates describes Dee's influence as "Dee had a politico-religious programme and it was concerned with the imperial destiny of Queen Elizabeth I" (Yates 99). This imperial destiny was rooted in an "Arthurian mythical reformed empire" (99) in which "the Tudors with their mythical British associations" (99) were building a British monarchy that surpassed the Pope and even the Church.

Even before Dr. Dee, according to Frances Yates, “Arthur was the supposed descendant of Brut and the chief religious and mystical exemplar of sacred British imperial Christianity” (100). It is no wonder that Merlin in both Robert’s Trilogy and in Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* uses every mystical force to preserve Arthur’s reign. Merlin’s power over Britomart and Gloriana in *The Faerie Queene* assured that the lineal descent of the monarchy would occur. In this regard, Merlin serves as both a political and romantic influence. His spells, so to speak, are the supernatural marriage arrangements for the good of England.

Merlin in Spenser is considered Dee’s counterpart (Dobin, 2-8). Dee had a glass globe that would be analogous to Britomart’s “glassie globe” (5). Howard Dobin reveals the prophetic attributes of Merlin and states that “Merlin gained a considerable reputation as a political prophet when his oblique predictions were translated into the vernacular in England and throughout medieval Europe. Merlin’s prophecies played an important role in the politics of England well into the seventeenth century” (21). However, the Church found such prophecy demonic, by the time Spenser published *The Faerie Queene*, Dee’s popularity had faded into “poverty and semi-banishment” (Yates 126). The witch craze was under way and Dr. Dee fell out of favor.

Howard Dobin also explores how Spenser portrays Merlin’s cave as an eerie underground bog of screeches and fiends and a place to be afraid of entry. This identification of Merlin plays into the idea of conjurer and sorcerer. Yet, he also portrays Merlin as a soothsayer writing symbols in the ground, laughing and guiding Britomart and Arthur to their destinies by providing magical props and outright prophecies to follow in order to reach their ordained destinies as well as the destiny of England. Merlin remains from Arthurian romance an eerie paradoxical symbol of divine shape-shifter and one who is feared, yet, embraced for his wisdom.

Once again, the Lady of the Lake and the “Celtic Underworld” seems to lead to “the realm of Gloriana which is two-fold: England in historical allegory; the Celtic Otherworld in the fairy aspect” (Greenlaw 107). Britomart claims that she has left Britain and come to “Faery lond” to see the “famous knights and ladies that inhabit the realm” (107). Edwin Greenlaw opines that “Spenser fuses the well-known romance and folklore conception of a land of enchantment, difficult of access, with a quite arbitrary and literal conception of England as the scene in which the action of his poem takes place” (107). This serves as the backdrop for Merlin’s own enchantment. The future of England lies in the unions sparked by Merlin between Gloriana (“the ‘rule’ of England) and Arthur and Britomart (“British power and the warlike might of England”) and Artegal (120). Edwin Greenlaw analyzes the political symbolism of the two unions and states that

“in the union of Britomart and Artegal, British might and British justice, Spenser found the strength that was to free England from the menace of Spanish tyranny and the mission that was to make her the champion of those who were oppressed. In the union of Arthur and Gloriana the native race regained the realm from which it had long been dispossessed” (122). Thus, Merlin’s magic and prophecies create the romantic unions which support the political solidarity needed in England.

Tracing Book III, Spenser mixes medieval romance, longing, more or less the chasing of a shadow or image in a glass all for the preservation of what Philip Hardie claims is “one of the Virgilian Parade of Heroes located in a figurative Underworld. The vision in this case is one that is both motivated by desire, of a straightforwardly erotic kind, and is itself a vision of the product of that desire once it will have been satisfied” (147). Britomart in her looking glass supplied and enchanted with Merlin’s touch “is presented with the irresistible vision of ‘a comely knight’ (147), Arthegall, and falls hopelessly in love with this ghost, the ‘shade and semblant of a knight’ (III.ii.38)” (147). Later when Britomart has born a son from Artegal and Artegal ultimately dies, she is again left with a ghost or image but she has achieved the political purpose of creating a dynasty (Hardie 147-48).

Phillip Hardie indicates that “this is a tale of Britons first defeated by the Saxons, and then returning gloriously with the dynasty of the Tudors, culminating in the reign of Britomart’s most recent descendant, “a royal virgin” (III.iii.49), Queen Elizabeth” (148). Hardie indicates that “Britomart’s desire to be united with the shadowy Arthegall is the trigger for Merlin’s parade of British worthies” (148). We see therefore how much influence politically and romantically Merlin plays even though he appears to have a small “bit part” in appearance, yet, generations of consequences! Philip Hardie indicates that “the Spenserian desire has a more intimate connection with the historical review, since Britomart’s love for Arthegall will be the efficient cause of this line of descendant, heroes who will be the lasting embodiment of that love” (148). This analysis joins the spiritual, political romantic aspects of the poem.

These concepts go beyond the obvious ideas of marriage, chastity, and order. What Spenser and Robert have achieved through Merlin was to bring the reader into the realm of Marriage “not only from a positive social value, but various spiritual symbolisms. The meeting of God and Soul, the relationship of Christ and Church, these are also involved in bonds of love” (100). Britomart finds her destiny in a mirror supplied by Merlin in a dark cave. Robert brings Perceval to the love of Christ through the Holy Grail. Spiritual emblems are abounding. While each Merlin dwells in caves and forests seemingly of shadows and darkness each sheds light upon the souls of the beneficiaries of their magic.

Focusing on Book III and IV of *The Faerie Queene*, the influence of Merlin in the transcendence of Britomart, from the “Virgin Knight” to the mother of destiny in “Faery Lond” and England is captured in her interactions with Merlin’s mirror which becomes more than just a looking glass but a seeing glass. Britomart grows up in many ways and with her magic mirror and spear where destiny and grace lead her is in search of Artigall her love. In Book IV her courtly adventures and Xena-like warrior fight with Artegall seals her fate and the fate of England as they fall in love and ultimately pass on descendants to control Tudor England.

Britomart is the allegory of Christian humanism and poetic transcendence. Merlin as divine shape-shifter is the poet, artist, who leads the divine providence from his creepy cave through Britomart’s looking glass; her magical spear and Arthur’s magic armor in Book I into battle, romance and regeneration. Books I, III and IV reveal how Merlin creates political magic, order, divine intervention and a courtly love story all wrapped up in a poetic romance of stanzas. The end result is the path to Renaissance fairy lore in Shakespeare, Henderson and other writers. The order of the monarchy reigns in Fairy Lond!

Britomart indicates in *The Faerie Queene* that she has left Britain to come to Fairy Lond (Greenlaw 107) in search of the fancy knights. Marjorie Swann indicates that this “fairy lore” (452) creates a “time honored social order” (452). Swann states that “drawing on medieval romances, writers complimented Elizabeth and her successors by portraying them as “faery” monarchs. Enshrined by Edmund Spenser, the allegory of England as “Faeryland” constructed the members of the Tudor dynasty as descended from native British-“faery”-lineage” (452).

Susanne Wofford in agreement with Keith Sagar, sees Britomart’s contemplations in the mirrored globe as a retreat into an inner realm. Her realm for love, motherhood, and destiny (10-11). Even later in Book III as Britomart rescues Amoret out of the House of Busyrane, she defies evil and fights off physical harm. This is a symbol of Britomart’s inner strength and devotion to her vision or dream of Artegall. In Book IV she fights almost to the death and Artegall is revealed to her before she defies destiny and could have killed him.

Wofford sees the female knight of chastity as a “gender allegory” which perhaps, is a praise of the Queen. Merlin has tossed this path for Britomart who bravely follows. Within this contemplative sanctuary, destiny and good will are joined. Britomart’s transcendence takes her through courtly knighthood adventures and ultimately shaping the destiny of England with “Ofspring”.

Additionally, Christian humanism takes flight in that Britomart represents “a religious virtue, a specifically Christian concept of chastity and love” (Woodhouse 199); while Robert’s Christian humanism

was Christ-centered. Spenser’s adoption of Christian humanism shows itself in that “grace came to perfect nature, an idea including discipline and a miraculous remedy for man’s fall; that well-being must be defined in terms of the two orders simultaneously, and that what was for man’s good as a natural being could not be to his detriment as a supernatural or vice versa” (196). This coexistence of grace and natural order is also in Robert’s *Trilogy*. Just as Britomart and Arthur must fight for their ultimate love and almost fall from grace or could be killed; Perceval is side-tracked with battles in the forest, beautiful women luring him away from his goal. Yet, everything returns to the natural order. The chaos and topsy turvy order of things is indicative of the divergent views of the Christian Church during the emergence of the Protestant Reformation and Calvinism (196). The “holiness of the Red Cross Knight” and the chastity of Britomart remain Spenser’s allegory of grace and natural order. For Robert, the Crusades were well underway for the preservation of Christianity. Perceval’s pursuit of the Grail is that crusade or journey within the twelfth-century.

Woodhouse states that “from the first Britomart is dedicated to the love of Artgeall, and like a Shavian heroine she sets out to get him, obedient to a principle at work through all nature and symbolized for Spenser by the myth of Venus and Adonis and, on the human level, by the myth of Cupid and Psyche” (214). In both works these forces are at play and instigated by none other than Merlin for Britomart and for Perceval in pursuit of the Grail. A.Woodhouse goes on to say that Britomart does in fact represent “transcendence and unification” (215). Perceval is also transcended from an ordinary young man to a spiritual soul living in the forest with Merlin nearby in his “Esplumoir” protecting the Grail. The spirit of the Christian soul. Shape-shifter or soothsayer, magician or keeper of the Grail each artist created allegorical characters of entertainment but, most importantly of historical unity and flattery of Medieval and Tudor England; Spenser in beautiful poetic adventures of love, chastity and marriage and Robert in castle adventures in pursuit of the Grail.

In both Robert and Spenser’s works the shape-shifting of Merlin’s underworld and powers create a divine path towards truth and love. Spenser is creating hope for lineal descents of the throne. Both writers created transformation, transcendence through a little divine intervention and his magical props. However, Spenser’s Merlin is not Christ-centered but rather Queen-centered.

Signe Cohen writes that Robert’s Merlin creates “a Merlin with significant supernatural powers and, in particular, shape-shifting abilities. He builds Stonehenge by magic, helps Uther become Arthur’s father, and places the infant Arthur in his secret foster home” (56). All of the shape-shifting changes the shape of history and the lives of each character for the betterment of humanity.

Cohen also notes that even Spenser in *The Faerie Queene*, “mentions in passing that Merlin possess the magical “Mirror of King Rhyence,” which allows the observer to see whatever he wishes” (57). King Rhyence just happens to leave his mirror for Britomart to find her handsome knight and change the course of destiny. Both Spenser and Robert reach beyond any other classics to create innovative images that promise to transcend time, religion, the monarchy and most importantly, the human soul.

Reference

- [1] Adolf, Helen. “The Esplumoir Merlin: A Study in its Cabalistic Sources.” *Speculum*.21.2. (April 1946): 173-193. *JSTOR*. Web. 13 October 2016.
- [2] Baskerville, Charles Read. “The Genesis of Spenser’s Queen of Faerie”. *Modern Philology* 18.1. (1920). 49-54. Web. *Jstor*. 2 Dec. 2016.
- [3] Berger, Harry Jr. “The Structure of Merlin’s Chronicle in the Faerie Queen III (iii)”. *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*. 9.1 (1969). 39-51. Web. *Jstor*. 28 Nov.2016.
- [4] Blackburn, William. “Spenser’s Merlin”. *Renaissance and Reformation*.4.2 (1980). 179-98. Web. *Jstor*. 10 Dec. 2016.
- [5] Cheney, Patrick Gerard. “‘Secret Power Unseen’: Good Magic in Spenser’s Legend of Britomart”. *Studies in Philology*.85.1. (1988) 1-28. Web. *Jstor*.19 Dec. 2016.
- [6] Cohen, Signe. “A Postmodern Wizard:The Religious Bricolage of the *Harry Potter* Series”. *The Journal of Religions and Popular Culture*. 28.1 (Spring 2016). 54-66. Web. *ProQuest Research*.22 August 2017.
- [7] Cooper, Kate. “Merlin Romancer: Paternity, Prophecy and Poetics.” *Romantic Review*. 77. (1986):1-24. Web. *ProQuest Research*. 2 May 2016.
- [8] De Boron, Robert and Nigel Bryant translator. *Merlin and the Grail: Joseph of Arimathea, Merlin, Perceval: the trilogy of Arthurian Romances attributed to Robert de Boron*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer. 2005. Print.
- [9] Dobin, Howard. *Merlin’s Disciples: Prophecy, Poetry, and Power in Renaissance England*. California: Stamford University Press. 1990. Print.
- [10] Eson, Lawrence. “Odin and Merlin: Threefold Death and the World Tree.” *Western Folklore*. 69.1. (2010): 85-107. *JSTOR*. Web. 13 Oct. 2016.
- [11] Giffin, Mary E. “A Reading of Robert de Boron.” *PMLA*. 80.5. 1965: 499-507. *JSTOR*. Web. 4 Oct. 2016
- [12] Greenlaw, Edwin. “Spenser’s Fairy Mythology”. 15.2 (1918) 105-122. Web. *Jstor*. 6 Jan. 2017.
- [13] Griffin, Miranda. “The Space of Transformation Merlin between Two Deaths.” *Medium Aevum*. 80.1(2011):85-104. *ProQuest Research*. Web. 27 July 2016.
- [14] Hanning, Robert W. “Arthurian Evangelists: The Language of Truth in Thirteenth-Century French Prose Romances.” *Philological Quarterly*.64.3 (1985) : 347-65. *Interlibrary Loan*. Web. 28 August 2016.
- [15] Hardie, Philip. “In the Steps of the Sibyl: Tradition and Desire in the Epic Underworld”. *Materiali e discussion per l’analisi dei testi classici*. 52. (2004). 143-56. Web. *Jstor*. 19 Dec. 2016.
- [16] Harper, George Mclean. “The Legend of the Holy Grail.” *PMLA*. 8.1 (1893): 77-140. *JSTOR*. Web. 3 Oct. 2016.
- [17] Jung, Emma, and Marie-Louise von Franz. *The Grail Legend*. Princeton U.P., (1998): 1-419. Print.
- [18] Lampert-Weissing, Lisa. “Why is this Knight Different from All Other Knights? Jews, Anti-Semitism, and the Grail Narratives.” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*. 106.2 (2007): 224-247. *JSTOR*. Web. 3 Oct. 2016.
- [19] Nichols, Stephen G. “Political Grail: On Theological Fictionality.” *MLN*. 126.4 (2011):1-22. *ProQuest Research*. Web. 29 August 2016.
- [20] Nitze, William A. “The Esplumoir Merlin.” *Speculum*. 18.1 (Jan. 1943):69-79. *JSTOR*. Web. 13 Oct.2016. (“Esplumoir Merlin”).
- [21] Schutz, Alfred. “Tiresias, or Our Knowledge of Future Events.” *Collected Papers II*. Springer Netherlands. 176.277-293. *Proquest Research*. Web. 28 August 2017.
- [22] Spenser, Edmund. *The Faerie Queene. The Complete Works in Verse and Prose of Edmund Spenser*. (London, 1882) by Rita S. Bear. University of Oregon, Renaissance Edition. Web. <http://www.Luminarium.org/renaissance-edition/raleigh.html>
- [23] Stewart, R. J. *Merlin the Prophetic Vision and the Mystic Life*. California: R.J. Stewart Books. 2009. 85. Print.
- [24] Swann, Marjorie. “The Politics of Fairylore in Early Modern English Literature”.*Renaissance Quarterly*.53.2 (2002). 449-473. Web. *Jstor*.19 Dec. 2016.
- [25] Waite, Arthur Edward. *The Hidden Church of the Holy Grail: its Legend and Symbolism*. London: Rebman Limited. 1909. 1-712. Print.
- [26] Whitman, Jon. “Transfers of Empire, Movements of Mind: Holy Sepulcher and Holy Grail.” *MLN* 123.4 (2008). 895-923. *Proquest Research*. Web. 29 August 2016.
- [27] William A. Nitze. “What Did Robert de Boron Write?” *Modern Philology*. 41.1 (Aug.1943):

JSTOR. Web. 13 October 2016. ("What Did Robert Write").

- [28] Wofford, Susanne Lindgren. "Gendering Allegory: Spenser's Bold Reader and the Emergence of Character in the 'The Faerie Queen III'". *Criticism*. 30.1 (1988). 1-21. Web. Jstor. 19 Dec. 2016.

- [29] Woodhouse, A.S. P. "Nature and Grace in the Faerie Queene". *ELH*. 16.3 (1949). 194-228. Web. Jstor. 28 Nov. 2016.

- [30] Yates, Francis. *The Occult Philosophy in Elizabethan Age*. New York: *Rutledge Classics an imprint of Taylor & Francis* . (2001). Print.

Author's Biography



Gloria Buckley has been a practicing attorney for 30 years. Her poetry and prose has been published in various literary magazines. She holds a BA in English Literature, MA in English Literature (2017 Mercy College), JD in Law and is a PhD candidate in the Great Books Honors program with a literature concentration at Faulkner University