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Merlin’s Puppet Regime: Magic and Power in *Le Morte d’Arthur*

This paper will argue that Merlin from Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur* (*LMDA*) is not a heroic mage or prophet but a powerful sorcerer with alternative plans. Merlin’s knowledge of things to come and his ability to influence Arthur to act put him in charge of the kingdom more than the king. I will perform a close reading on select scenes from *LMDA* to show how readers can view Merlin’s actions as less-than-honourable. I will also use a new-historicist approach to analyze Christian views of magic and witchcraft in England using Kors and Peters’s *Witchcraft in Europe 400-1700*. This close reading of *LMDA* with the historical perspective will prove how Merlin’s actions toward Arthur and his manipulation of the situations were not noble and, in fact, potentially treasonous.

Depictions of wizardry and magic in the fifteenth century differ from those of earlier and later periods, but the historical context in which *LMDA* was written absolutely affected Malory’s writings. During the late fifteenth century, England was in a state of turmoil due to invasions, coronations, and rebellions. The Arthurian legend is often discussed in terms of a grand, unifying monarch. Arthur was foreordained to unite the various tribal communities and bring peace to the land under one crown. However, Merlin is present at every important or critical step that leads to the birth and coronation of Arthur. I will argue that Merlin’s power is only beneficial if we believe that Arthur was the best man for the job, but that from an alternative historical perspective, Merlin’s actions are treasonous and terrifying, that the Arthur the Uniter was really a puppet that Merlin used to take over various kingdoms and hold the power.