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Legitimizing Magic in *The Birth of Merlin*

Bastardy, adultery, and infidelity are topics at issue in *The Birth of Merlin* on every level. Unfortunately, most of the critical examination of these topics has not extended beyond the title page. In 1662 Francis Kirkman and Henry Marsh commissioned the first known printing of the play from an old manuscript in Kirkman's possession. The title page of their version attributes the play to Shakespeare and Rowley, and generations of critics have quarreled over the legitimacy of that ascription. Without any compelling evidence to substantiate the authorship of Shakespeare and Rowley, many critics have tried to solve the dilemma from the other end. Just as in the play Merlin's mother spends most of the first act inquiring of every man she meets whether he might have fathered her child, these scholars have attempted to attribute the play to virtually every dramatist and combination of dramatists on record. Beaumont, Fletcher, Ford, Middleton, and Dekker, among others, have all been subjected to the literary equivalent of a blood-test; analyses of their spelling and linguistic preferences have been made in an effort to link them to *The Birth of Merlin*.¹ Unlike the hero of the drama, however, the play itself is still without a father, though it does have a birthdate in 1622, as has been demonstrated by N.W. Bawcutt.²

Debates over authorship are not particularly uncommon in early modern studies, but the question of who fathered the legendary Merlin, the topic of the play, is more unusual and more interesting. The answer the text provides is not particularly startling. Elizabethans and Jacobean writers inherited most of their Merlin lore from two medieval writers, Geoffrey of Monmouth and Robert de Boron, and the author of *The Birth of Merlin* draws upon both in his representation of Merlin's origins. These borrowings have caused some trouble to critics of the play because they have led to the exploration of the drama primarily as a piece of Arthurian literature. Certainly the play permits such examination, but the Arthurian background is much more of a starting point for the author's designs than a summation of them. In *The Birth of Merlin* the playwright³ makes the unusual argument that magic, even or

despite being demonic in origin, may still be a legal, legitimate, and responsible resource for a good king. The playwright qualifies or tempers the potentially subversive nature of this argument — which flies directly in the face of English law and Christian tradition — in two ways. First, he vests the magical powers not in the king himself, but in his counselors. Second, the playwright employs a complicated strategy of comparison, which deconstructs the dichotomy of good and bad, moral and immoral. He represents a variety of situations in which stereotypically virtuous choices are shown to have unexpectedly corrupt or problematic consequences in order to suggest antithetically that stereotypically wicked choices may similarly have surprising, which is to say rewarding, results.

This variety of situations has been taken by some critics not as a testament to the complex and challenging imagination of the playwright, but instead as evidence that the play is of singularly poor quality, an inadequately conceived blend of styles, sources, and textual revisions.⁴ In part this derogatory analysis can be related to the problem of the play's authorship. Critics struggling to prove that the play ought not to be considered part of the Shakespearean canon have concentrated on demonstrating weaknesses in the text. When analyzed simply as an early seventeenth-century play and not, however, as a pretender to greatness, the play yields an intricate and intelligent structure.

The play is frustrating because it seems to promise a very thoughtful organization. Not only are there four clear plot lines within the play (Constantia's and Modesta's romances, Joan's attempt to find a father for her child, Aurelius's and Uter's entanglements with Artesia, and Vortigern's struggle to hold the kingdom) but there are also four distinct representations of female chastity (virginal Modesta and Constantia, pregnant Joan, married Artesia, and adulterous Artesia), four models of kingship (Aurelius, Vortigern, Uter, and Arthur), and four examples of magicians (Anselme the Hermit, Proximus, Merlin, and the Devil). What seems a very natural attempt to seek a sort of symmetry in the play — one woman, one king, and one magician in each of the plot lines, proves impossible. The play avoids, even defies, drawing simple parallels and comparisons and is instead based on a more flexible, but more convoluted, set of juxtapositions of behaviors and networks of relationships. One way to draw a pattern out of this complex mesh is to examine how each of these plots and each of these sets of characters works to legitimize or even valorize the magician Merlin as an individual and the role of magicians more generally.

In the critical history of the text, the roles of the women have been the cause for the greatest concern because there is little precedent for them. Rather

than viewing the women as superficial additions to the plot, critics and audiences should view the cluster of women thematically. Each of the women's stories depicts an attitude toward female chastity or virtue. This collection of possible options or behaviors would not be particularly unusual were they not arranged to highlight the merits of a woman who in a more typical play would be damned for her position as an unwed mother.

The Birth of Merlin begins with the attempts of Cador and Edwin to secure the hands of two noble maidens, Constantia and Modesta. These women cause the most concern to commentators because there is no apparent historical model or source behind them and because their actions in the play are virtually unprecedented in early modern drama, Constantia is eager for marriage; Modesta, however, is suspicious, not of her specific suitor, but of the grounds for marrying at all. Over the course of the drama the playwright inverts the audience's expectations by converting not Modesta to the virtues of marriage, but instead by showing how Modesta persuades her sister to choose a life of pious virginity. Such a choice is not typically portrayed as unusual or unworthy *per se*, but in all other cases it is the choice of last resort, selected only to avoid an evil suitor, assuage the grief of disappointed love, or relieve the stage of a superfluous single woman.⁵ In no other drama does a woman, let alone a pair of women, refuse a worthy, devoted, parentally approved suitor out of simple spiritual devotion, especially when one of the women initially desires marriage rather than convent life. *The Birth of Merlin* does not overtly criticize the young women's choice, but it does alert the audience to a sense of social hypocrisy. Traditionally, society may valorize spiritual devotion and virginal chastity, but like Donobert, father to the two young women, and the two suitors, Cador and Edwin, the audience experiences such a choice as disappointment. Donobert's desire for heirs and the young men's desires for wives are neither selfish nor immoral; they have fulfilled all the normal obligations and prerequisites necessary to attain their desires, and the successful continuation of the social order depends upon people pursuing such desire. *The Birth of Merlin* represents pious virginity not as the glorious goal of all, or any, good maids, but as a baffling and disillusioning decision.

Artesia, sister to the Saxon General Ostorius, is *The Birth of Merlin's* representative of the married woman. Like Constantia and Modesta, Artesia is an unusual character. Her relationship with Aurelius has no historical or mythical authenticity, but does parallel the relationship between Vortigern and Hengist's daughter Rowena recounted both in several chronicle histories and in Middleton's *Hengist, King of Kent*.⁶ Finally, Artesia's adulterous

relationship with Uter, while having no apparent literary antecedents, is a convincing and thematically appropriate prequel to the more famous story of Uter's adulterous passion for Igraine, the wife of his subject-king Gorlois, which leads in many different sources to the conception of Arthur.

Artesia represents the failures or danger of married chastity in two different ways. Artesia enters the play during the second scene as the Saxon ambassador. Aurelius all but loses the power of speech when he sees her, and he completely forgets the military concerns and political conditions of the truce he is supposed to be negotiating:

Fair damsel — Oh my tongue
 Turns Traitor, and will betray my heart — sister to
 Our enemy: — 'sdeath, her beauty mazes me,
 I cannot speak if I but look on her. —
 What's that we did conclude? (1.2.89–93)⁷

Aurelius' use of 'traitor' and 'betray' resonate particularly ironically because these terms will later be applied in earnest to Artesia, and the confusion and debilitation he experiences in her presence are not the passing symptoms of infatuation but portents of all that is to come in their relationship. Aurelius responds to his desire in the only morally sanctioned fashion; he asks Artesia to marry him. But once again *The Birth of Merlin* inverts the traditional ethical expectations of the audience. Aurelius is not rewarded for his chivalrous behavior, and his attempts to preserve the kingdom through marital rather than martial alliance are exploited. Instead of providing him with aid and comfort as a good wife ought, Artesia steals Aurelius' attentions from the business of the kingdom by distracting him with her personal attractions, and her political affiliation as a Saxon only serves to create dissatisfaction and contention among his subjects. Artesia's relationship with Aurelius illustrates, as did Constantia and Modesta, that morally appropriate choices are not necessarily happy or desirable in their consequences.

Artesia's relationship with Uter is the only predictable romantic alliance in the play. Prince Uter's romance with Artesia is initially shrouded in mystery; the audience is introduced to Uter in act 2 as he wanders alone and infatuated seeking a nameless love. Eventually he returns to Aurelius's court and meets his brother's new bride, who, of course, turns out to be his own lost love. Uter finds himself torn between his loyalty to his brother and his affection for Artesia. His pledge to forget her is, however, forgotten as soon as Artesia sends a secret message revealing her own continuing interest in him. Eventually, Artesia discloses her real loyalties when she exposes Uter's illicit

passion to Aurelius and sets the brothers against each other. In *The Birth of Merlin*, adulterous love is perhaps more disastrous in its consequences than virtuous love, but no version of romantic love is portrayed as genuinely rewarding.

Positioned against the disappointing chastity of Modesta and Constantia, the marital manipulations of Artesia, and the treacherous adultery of Artesia, Joan's illegitimate pregnancy seems, if not actually moral, at least surprisingly appealing. And it is against these foils that the audience is introduced to the enigmatic mother of Merlin. Aside from producing a child without first acquiring a husband, she nearly epitomizes the chaste, silent, and obedient women of the Elizabethan conduct books, but these virtues have not always been recognized in her.

Udall is typical of the play's critics when she describes Joan as showing 'every sign of being a fairly thick-witted country wench'⁸ based upon her language and the company she keeps. Certainly, the role of Joan could be performed in the manner Udall suggests, but there is nothing in the play that demands Joan be debased or degraded in this fashion. In fact, the text goes out of its way to illustrate that love makes equals, if foolish ones, of us all. Joan's admission that 'Alas, I know not the Gentlemans name Brother./ I met him in these woods' (2.1.13–14) might sound simple-minded were not Prince Uter to enter the forest glade immediately afterwards declaring, 'Here did I see her first, here view her beauty:/ Oh had I known her name, I had been happy' (2.1.78–9). No critic suggests that Uter be interpreted as a thick-witted country bumpkin because he has neglected to ask his beloved's name. Similarly, the identification of her brother as a 'Clown' does little to indicate the siblings' social stature. The title Clown is at least as much a reference to his parodic, satirical function in the drama as it is to his class standing. Clowns and fools are just as often the company of kings as of commoners in many sixteenth- and seventeenth-century dramas. Joan might just as well be represented as a proper yeoman's daughter as she might a simple country wench. Not only would a dignified interpretation better accord with her 'elegant' repentance in the later scenes of the play,⁹ but it would also keep better faith with the chronicle accounts of her origin as daughter to the King of Demetia. The author of *The Birth of Merlin* does not always employ his literary sources in predictable ways; he seems much more interested in reworking rather than refuting the literary precedents of the Merlin legend.

In Act 3 Joan ceases her search for her lover in order to give birth to Merlin, and while no moral epiphany is portrayed on stage, once her child is born she stops speaking of her former lover with anything other than regret and

repentance and begins to locate her pride in the power and accomplishment of her precocious son instead of in her beauty. Her moral regeneration is completed in Act 5 when she absolutely and unremorsefully refuses the renewed advances of her lover and finally acknowledges him as the devil. Merlin not only recognizes his mother's moral recuperation, but insists that the rest of the nation do so as well. Merlin promises Joan:

And Ile conduct you to a place retir'd,
 Which I by art have rais'd, call'd *Merlin's Bower*,
 There shall you dwell with solitary sighs,
 With groans and passions your companions,
 To weep away this flesh you have offended with,
 And leave all bare unto your aerial soul:
 And when you die, I will erect a Monument
 Upon the verdant plains of *Salisbury*,
 No King shall have so high a sepulchre,
 With pendulous stones that I will hang by art,
 Where neither Lime nor Morter shalbe us'd,
 A dark *Enigma* to the memory,
 For none shall have the power to number them,—
 A place that I will hollow for your rest,
 Where no Night-hag shall walk, nor Ware-wolf tread,
 Where *Merlins* Mother shall be sepulcher'd. (5.1.92–107)

Many sources of Arthurian lore attribute the construction of Stonehenge to Merlin. He builds it in some versions as a tribute to Aurelius, Uther, the Britons who died defending the Kingdom from the Saxons, and even to himself, but only in *The Birth of Merlin* is the great structure designated as a tribute and tomb for his mother.¹⁰ Although it is possible the author of the play draws on some unknown source for this detail, it is also possible and appropriate in a drama about Merlin's parentage that the redesignation of the famous landmark is the author's own addition, a specific modification selected to emphasize the moral rehabilitation of Merlin's unwed mother, and by extension Merlin himself.

Confronted with the task of legitimizing Merlin's position as a moral and Christian magician, the author of *The Birth of Merlin* chooses to approach his task indirectly. Rather than arguing that Merlin's mother made moral or virtuous choices, he surrounds her with a cast of women who make choices even more immoral or unappealing than her own. The playwright never tries to argue that Joan is guiltless; instead he simply implies that her sins are not

particularly heavy ones. And unlike the other women in the play who each exit the stage without explaining or expiating their sins, Joan's repentance and exonerations are dramatically represented.

The playwright had one other advantage on his side in his struggle to reconstruct Merlin's mother; he was living in an age when insisting on too close an examination of parentage or too narrow a definition of chastity could be dangerous. Queen Elizabeth was herself an illegitimate child by some interpretations, and aspersions were also frequently cast on the legitimacy of James VI and I. Given such circumstances and the sensitivity of both monarchs to criticism, lingering too long on the question of anyone's illegitimacy, especially a king's, might well lead to misunderstandings both unfortunate and disagreeable to the dramatist. In such a climate, the author of *The Birth of Merlin* did not have to prove so much the spotless reputation of Merlin's mother so much as he needed to emphasize her ultimate virtue.

The juxtaposed portraits of the four kings in *The Birth of Merlin* work in a similar but simpler manner. The playwright presents each of the first three kings — Aurelius, Vortigern, and Uter — as a troubled man rather than a regal leader. Aurelius' infatuation with Artesia diverts him from the important business of his kingdom, and the contentious attitudes and competing strategies of his followers hinder his attempts to maintain the autonomy of England. Vortigern not only inherits all of Aurelius' problems, but has made the even more damaging mistake of surrounding himself with subversive foreign advisors and self-serving magicians. Uter, deceived and trapped by Artesia, is twice troubled. He not only has to fend off the Saxons, but he has to reestablish his reputation with Aurelius, who believes him traitorous. These confusions and troubles make the prophecy of Arthur's united reign look all the more attractive. Rather than bringing about the downfall of the kingdom, Arthur's association with a particularly powerful magician (an association which predates his birth) is represented as a symbol or portent of his imminent greatness.

The association each of the first three kings has with a magician of some sort also prepares the way for Merlin as magical advisor to Arthur. Aurelius is served by Anselme the Hermit who partakes of the qualities of both a magician and a prophet, Vortigern takes advice from first the Saxon magician Proximus and later from Merlin, and Uter is ushered onto his throne through the foresight of Merlin. Not all of these magicians find their power in the same source, and they are not all equally trustworthy or reliable, but the text never suggests that magic counsel is itself dangerous to the king. In the play,

it is the practitioner of magic who, like any other advisor or subject, must be scrutinized and tested, not the practice of magic that requires questioning.

The playwright pursues the question of magic and the trustworthiness of its origin by comparing four different magicians during the course of the drama. He effects this comparison by dramatizing four escalating magical contests that eventually demonstrate not only Merlin's moral legitimacy but his superior magical strength as well. The first two contests, which feature Anselme, a character constructed as both holy and magical, serve two functions. First, these contests set up the parameters or laws of magic. In the contest between Anselme and Proximus the questions of whether man can conjure demonic spirits and whether these spirits ever work in opposition to each other are posed and answered. Second, these contests reveal Anselme as God's champion and mark out a space or sphere of action in which good magicians and beneficial magic can operate. In the last two contests, Merlin's efforts to prove both the physical and moral strength of his power are made much easier because he takes up the battle not at the beginning, but after Anselme's example has already conquered much of the field. As with the question of Joan's chastity, the author of *The Birth of Merlin* makes his point indirectly. He sets up a spectrum of characters whose behaviours serve to mark out the range of a question or the scope of a debate and only then introduces the real issue. As Joan's seduction appears merely immodest and not actually evil or even anti-social when juxtaposed with the behaviour of Artesia and the two virginal sisters, Merlin's magic only appears irregular and not actually demonic when compared to the powers of Anselme, Proximus, and the Devil.

The first contest does not involve Merlin directly, but establishes the superiority of good magic over demonic magic. In this contest the hermit Anselme opposes the Saxon army. Although no immediate comparison is made between Anselme and Merlin, Anselme is introduced with characteristics that anticipate those of Merlin. Early in the second scene in an incident without a clear historical analog Aurelius compliments Anselme by describing his role in the recent military victory over the Saxons:

Our Army being in rout, nay, quite o'rethrown,
As *Chester* writes; even then this holy man,
Arm'd with his cross and staff, went smiling on,
And boldly fronts the foe; at sight of whom
The *Saxons* stood amaz'd; for, to their seeming,
Above the Hermit's head appear'd such brightness,
Such clear and glorious beams as if our men

March't all in fire; wherewith the *Pagans* fled,
 And by our troops were all to death pursu'd. (1.2.17–25)

Toclio's account of Anselme in the early moments of the play also reinforces the similarity between him and Merlin. First Toclio describes Anselme as a servant of God, as a 'man of rare esteem for holyness' and as a 'reverent Hermit.' Four lines later Toclio's description implies an additional sort of vocation or profession:

Faith, you will finde no great pleasure in him, for ought that I can see, Lady.
 They say he is half a Prophet too: would he could tell me any news of the lost
 Prince; there's twenty talents offer'd to him that finds him. (1.1.81–6)

The title 'prophet' can certainly suggest religious power as well as occult power, but Toclio's modification of his description with the word 'too' suggests that he has moved on to discuss the skills that Anselme wields in addition to (as opposed to simply as an aspect of) his sacred abilities. His status as a half-prophet also foreshadows the halved parentage of Merlin. Finally, Toclio's request that Anselme might help him find a lost man puts Anselme firmly in the category of the witch. Finding lost property or people, especially when such recoveries would prove financially rewarding, was one of the most common functions of English witches.¹¹ The author of *The Birth of Merlin* prepares his audience to accept a half-demonic wizard by first introducing a half-holy one.

Anselme is thus already established as the British champion and magical holy-man by the time he meets the Saxon wizard Proximus in act 2 for the second contest. A dispute between Aurelius and the two Saxon war leaders Octa and Ostorius leads to the competition between the two sorcerers. Discussing the recent battle, they claim the Saxon forces lost only because the British treacherously employed magic. Aurelius maintains that it was not magic, but divine intervention which aided his men on the battlefield. Derisively, he asks the Saxons,

Is there a power in man that can strike fear
 Through a general camp, or create spirits,
 In recreant bosoms above present sense? (2.3.43–5)

Ostorius commands Proximus to show the skeptical English king just what wonders magic can compel. Aurelius asks to see the spirits of Hector and Achilles, Proximus quickly conjures them, but Anselme, who orders the spirits back to Hell, interrupts the spectacle. Amazed at the obedient departure of his demons, Proximus declares that Anselme must be served by the prince of devils

himself.¹² Contemptuously, Anselme explains that the Devil never fears the Devil, implying that Proximus' understanding of the occult arts must be very weak indeed if he does not even understand the relationship between good and evil spirits. Anselme's repudiation and Proximus' misunderstanding of the laws governing the Devil's allegiances is important not only for this contest, but also for the foundation Anselme's victory lays for Merlin's impending contest with his father the Devil. Aurelius sides with Anselme and claims that the 'heavenly Power' has triumphed. The victory is, however, more ambiguous than Aurelius admits for both the English and the Saxons have won a point. Aurelius has learned that men can indeed compel spirits and work magic, while the Saxons are forced to concede that Anselme's orders in the name of heaven are more powerful than Proximus' commands in the name of hell.

The last two contests build upon Anselme's victories to illustrate first the quantity and then the quality of Merlin's powers. Merlin begins in the third competition by assuming Anselme's position both as a competitor and by propinquity as a representative of the beneficial powers of magic.¹³ Merlin first meets Proximus when he is summoned in act 4 to Vortiger's faltering fortress where the two wizards debate and cast aspersions upon each other's prophetic skills. Proximus claims:

My Art infalable instructed me,
 Upon thy blood must the foundation rise
 Of the King's building; it cannot stand else. (4.1.215–17)

And Merlin warns Proximus that he ought to cease prophesying the destruction of others until he has mastered the 'pendulous mischief which roofs' his own head. Proximus brushes off Merlin's predictions as the dawdling delays of the doomed, and his laughter seems to suggest that he accepts Merlin's challenge when the young wizard offers:

Make good thine Augury, as I shall mine.
 If thy fate fall not, thou hast spoke all truth,
 And let my blood satisfie the Kings desires:
 If thou thy self wilt write thine Epitaph,
 Dispatch it quickly, there's not a minutes time
 'Twixt thee and thy death. (4.1.226–31)

But Proximus' glee at the captive's seeming capitulation is cut drastically short when a stone, falling suddenly from the half-built fortress, kills him where he stands. Unlike Anselme's competition with Proximus, Merlin's victory is complete and undisputed. He has not only illustrated the fallacy of Proximus'

magic, but also demonstrated the prophetic knowledge enabled by his own art. In this contest the source of Merlin's magical powers is not investigated, but the strength of his wizardry is displayed as he predicts the elimination of a rival that even the holy hermit Anselme could only subdue.

In the final contest of occult powers, the source of Merlin's magical powers is at last confronted. Act 5 begins with Joan fleeing the Devil's continued, but no longer desired, advances. Merlin enters and intervenes just as the Devil's spirits are preparing to carry Joan off:

Stay, you black slaves of night, let loose your hold,
Set her down safe, or by th' infernal Stix,
Ile binde you up with exorcisms so strong,
That all the black pentagon of hell
Shall ne're release you. Save your selves and vanish! (5.1.46–50)

Just as Proximus's spirits vanished at Anselme's command, the Devil's spirits depart at Merlin's order. When the Devil expresses dismay at the extent of Merlin's power and anger that his son should behave so disobediently, Merlin explains with convoluted word play and logical inversions why his filial relationship to the Devil is nullified:

Obedience is no lesson in your school;
Nature and kind to her, commands my duty;
The part that you begot was against kinde,
So all I ow to you is to be unkind. (5.1.57–60)

Although his logic is a big slipper, if not actually circular, Merlin seems to argue that since the Devil is opposed to all things of God, he must also be in opposition to the fifth commandment, 'Honor thy father and thy mother'. Thus when the Devil demands obedience from his son, Merlin is actually behaving in both a demonic manner by denying his father his due (he is in some sense actually obeying the Devil since disobedience is what he demands) and in a Christian manner by obeying his Father through this repudiation of the Devil. Merlin goes on to justify his obedient disobedience by punning on the word 'kind,' explaining that his actions are simply the inverse of the Devil's own. Since the Devil has violated both the expectations of Christian behaviour (kindness) and of biology ('kind' or race) in his relations with Joan, Merlin will do the same to his father; ie, respond with 'unkindness'. Merlin's sophistic arguments work to unbalance or destabilize his relationship with the Devil. He cannot deny his father but that does not mean he has to accept him either. Instead, Merlin chooses to use the powers due him as a half-demon to repudiate

the Devil. Taking with one hand what he pushes away with the other creates a sort of neutrality, a moral equilibrium in which Merlin can use his demonic powers without being indebted to them, and so he imprisons the Devil in a rock and sets his mother free to pursue her repentance unmolested. With these actions Merlin's allegiance moves from his father to the Father, making Merlin a fit advisor for a Christian king and illustrating that the title of the play refers to Merlin's spiritual quest at least as much as biological search.

By establishing Merlin's allegiance to his spiritual Father rather than the demon who sired him, the author of *The Birth of Merlin* redeems the magician from the shadowy reputation that had encumbered both Merlin himself and the kings he served. By representing Merlin as an enemy to the Devil, if not explicitly as an ally to God and Christianity, the prudent stewardship of magical powers, like Merlin's, becomes almost a duty of those kings with access to them; to do anything else would be tantamount to refusing God's gifts. In *The Birth of Merlin* the playwright redeems not only Merlin but also the idea that magical powers are an appropriate tool for rulers to call upon.

Notes

- 1 Joanna Udall, ed. *A Critical, Old-Spelling Edition of The Birth of Merlin* (Q 1662) (London, 1991), 25–9.
- 2 Bawcutt, N.W. *The Control and Censorship of Caroline Drama: The Records of Sir Henry Herbert, Master of the Revels 1623–73*. (Oxford, 1996), 136.
- 3 For the sake of expository convenience, I will treat the authorship of *The Birth of Merlin* as unitary throughout my argument.
- 4 Christopher Dean is not atypical when he concludes his analysis of the play by stating that the stylistic juxtaposition of the comic and the serious ultimately proves to be 'superfluous and vapid.' See his book, *A Study of Merlin in English Literature from the Middle Ages to the Present Day: The Devil's Son* (Lewiston, New York, 1992), 210. Other critics have looked to explain the diversity of the play viewing it as a collage of sorts. Middleton's *Hengist, King of Kent* in addition to *Vortigern* and *Uther Pendragon*, two plays which are referred to in Henslowe's diary for 1596 and 1597 respectively, but of which no extant copy seems to exist, are frequently cited as possible sources or prequels to *The Birth of Merlin* — in addition to the Arthurian chronicle and romance sources.
- 5 Udall, 56–9.
- 6 Udall, 79.

- 7 All citations to *The Birth of Merlin* come from C.F. Tucker Brooke, *The Shakespeare Apocrypha* (Oxford, 1929).
- 8 Udall, 70. Joan is also represented as a figure of fun in the illustrations to R.J. Stewart's edition of the text, which present her in the most degrading sort of caricature – dirty, ragged, and unkempt with a rather insane glint in her eye; see R.J. Stewart, Denise Coffey, and Roy Hudd (eds), *The Birth of Merlin* (Longmead, 1989).
- 9 Udall, citing K.M. Briggs for support, suggests that the difference between the coarse Joan of the early scenes and the “elegant Joan” of the later scenes is best explained by hypothesizing a change in authorship (pp. 71–2). This explanation seems both weak and unnecessary. Joan's character may be unexpectedly expansive: she embraces both infatuation and wisdom, transgression and redemption, but her portrait is not unusual. Uter is drawn with a similar breadth. The unwillingness of critics to accept Joan as a unified dramatic character in the same style as Uter suggests a narrowly classist (she is not a king) or sexist (women do not develop) interpretation.
- 10 Dean, *A Study of Merlin*, 72.
- 11 Keith Thomas. *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. (New York, 1971) 212–22.
- 12 The competition between Anselme and Proximus is reminiscent and probably indebted to similar contests and magical demonstrations in Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* (4.1.101–18) and Greene's *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (9.19–160). Robert Reed also notes and discusses these similarities; see *The Occult on the Tudor and Stuart Stage*, (Boston, 1965), 100–16.
- 13 Reed draws the parallels between Anselme and Merlin out even further. He argues that Merlin acquires an aura of saintliness through his association with Anselme. See 113–14.