Merlin Enthralled Study Guide

Merlin Enthralled by Richard Wilbur

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Introduction

"Merlin Enthralled" is from Richard Wilbur's 1956 poetry collection *Things of This World*, a book that was awarded both a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Award. The poem offers a new look at the ancient legend of Merlin, the magician who served as counselor to the legendary King Arthur of England. The episode that Wilbur recounts is from the end of Merlin's life when he falls under a spell cast by Niniane, a sorceress who lulls him to sleep. In most versions, this story ends with Merlin trapped within a tree or cave or tomb where he slowly wastes away in an agonizing death, but, in Wilbur's poem, Merlin lies peacefully beside a lake, becoming one with nature as he dies.

Among this poem's noteworthy aspects is the way it modernizes a traditional story dating back almost a millennium. Arthur, Gawen, and the other knights, who have stood for centuries as figures of military force, are shown to be almost childlike when they cannot find Merlin, while the sorcerer himself seems to be released, rather than captured, by Niniane (the medieval sense of the word "enthrall" entailed holding one in slavery). Wilbur's use of formal elements of rhyme and meter links this work with centuries of poetic tradition, but he uses enough verbal flexibility to make this formal structure nearly inconspicuous. "Merlin Enthralled" is generally considered to be one of the best of Richard Wilbur's early poems, a standout in a career that has lasted for more than fifty years.

Author Biography

Richard Purdy Wilbur was born March 1, 1921, in New York, New York, into a family of writers and artists. His mother's father and grandfather were newspaper editors, and Wilbur's father was a commercial artist in New York. When Wilbur entered Amherst College in 1938, he studied to become a newspaper editor himself, spending summers travelling the country in boxcars. In college, his writing was mostly prose, with a focus on essays and editorials. After graduation, he served in Europe during World War II, and his intimate experience with the horrors of war caused him to change his career goal, leading Wilbur to appreciate the subtleties of poetry. The idea that poetry is a way of making order out of a chaotic situation can be seen in his early postwar poems. His first book of poetry, *The Beautiful Changes and Other Poems*, was published in 1947, the same year that he received his master of arts degree from Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

It took Wilbur just a short time to gain a reputation as a poet. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, he won major literary prizes, establishing a pattern of recognition from his peers that has continued throughout his career as a writer. A small sampling of these honors include Guggenheim fellowships in 1952 and 1963, the Harriet Monroe Memorial Prize from *Poetry* magazine in 1948 and 1978, the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1957 and 1989, and a Gold Medal for Poetry from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters in 1991.

In addition to his career as a poet and teacher, Wilbur has earned praise as a translator. His translations of the plays *Tartuffe* and *The Misanthrope*□ both written by seventeenth-century French playwright Molière□were produced in 1955 and 1964, respectively, and have become standard translations of these plays when they are studied in English today. He has published other translations of plays by Molière as well as plays by Voltaire and Jean Racine and poetry by Charles Baudelaire. He has also written several children's books, including some that he himself illustrated.

In 1987, the Congress of the United States recognized Wilbur's long, distinguished career by appointing him poet laureate. After serving in that position for a year, he resumed writing and lecturing. His book of poetry, *Mayflies: New Poems and Translations*, was published in 2000. He lives in Cummington, Massachusetts.

Poem Text

In a while they rose and went out aimlessly riding,
Leaving their drained cups on the table round.
Merlin, Merlin, their hearts cried, where are you hiding?
In all the world was no unnatural sound.

Mystery watched them riding glade by glade;
They saw it darkle from under leafy brows;
But leaves were all its voice, and squirrels made
An alien fracas in the ancient boughs.

Once by a lake-edge something made them stop.
Yet what they found was the thumping of a frog,
Bugs skating on the shut water-top,
Some hairlike algae bleaching on a log.

Gawen thought for a moment that he heard
A whitehorn breathe *Niniane*.
That Siren's daughter
Rose in a fort of dreams and spoke the word
Sleep, her voice like dark diving water;

And Merlin slept, who had imagined her
Of water-sounds and the deep unsoundable swell
A creature to bewitch a sorcerer,
And lay there now within her towering spell.

Slowly the shapes of searching men and horses
Escaped him as he dreamt on that high bed:
History died; he gathered in its forces;
The mists of time condensed in the still head

Until his mind, as clear as mountain water,
Went raveling toward the deep transparent dream
Who bade him sleep. And then the Siren's daughter
Received him as the sea receives a stream.

Fate would be fated; dreams desire to sleep.
This the forsaken will not understand.
Arthur upon the road began to weep
And said to Gawen *Remember when this hand*

Once haled a sword from stone; now no less strong

It cannot dream of such a thing to do.
Their mail grew quainter as they clopped along.
The sky became a still and woven blue.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-4

At the start of "Merlin Enthralled," the knights of the Round Table are already aware of Merlin's disappearance. The first few words, "after a while," indicate that they have waited for some word of him or for someone to lead them into action. The fact that they have no clue about where to begin looking is made clear in the first line, which specifies that they are "aimlessly riding." The reference to their "drained cups" shows that the knights have held off their search until their drinks were finished. In line four, the lack of any "unnatural sound" presents readers with a paradox. If "unnatural" is taken to be a bad or threatening thing, the sort of mischief an evil sorcerer might perpetrate, then its lack is a good thing, but if Merlin himself is considered something different than nature, then the lack of unnatural sound might indicate that he is dead.

Lines 5-8

In line five "mystery" is personified. The word is usually used to describe a mood, but Wilbur gives it human characteristics. It watches the way a person would watch, and it "darkle[s]," which is the action of making things dark or mysterious. In line seven "mystery" is said to have a voice, which is the sound of the wind through the leaves. Line eight describes the squirrels as making an "alien" sound as they chase each other. They are contrasted with the "ancient" trees that are solid, still, and steady.

Lines 9-12

The third stanza refers back to the distorted reality frequently implied throughout the poem. Wilbur does not describe for readers what it is that might have made the knights stop, or what they felt that made them suspect that Merlin might be near the edge of the lake. Instead, the poem describes this feeling in line nine with the vague word "something." Stopping and being still for once, the knights pay attention to the small things of nature that they might ordinarily be too busy to notice, such as frogs and insects. Line eleven describes the bugs skating on top of the water and states that the top of the water is "shut," as though nothing could penetrate it. In line twelve, the sun is described as hot enough to dry out algae on a log.

Lines 13-16

Niniane is revealed in the fourth stanza. As with other aspects of the poem, her presence is implied rather than directly explained. The knights do not directly encounter Niniane, nor are they told that she is behind Merlin's disappearance. Instead, one knight, Gawen, *thinks* that he hears a whitehorn deer say her name, but he is not sure. Wilbur goes on to directly explain Niniane's actions, leaving a question about whether

the details in stanzas four and five represent what really happened or if they are just what Gawen imagines.

Lines 17-20

This stanza expresses Niniane's complete control over Merlin. In line nineteen, Wilbur states that Merlin has been "bewitched" by Niniane. There is some indication he is under the power of a more potent magician than himself, particularly in line twenty. Line eighteen plays off two definitions of the word "sound": the first is the common use of the term to refer to things that can be heard audibly, while the second hints at the old English word "sund," meaning "to swim," which is interpreted in modern language as a "sound" referring to an inlet of water.

Lines 21-24

The sixth stanza shows Merlin slowly losing consciousness of the world around him. In the first two lines of this stanza, death is presented physically. Shapes "escape" from him as if they are moving away from him, when actually his mind is moving away from reality. In the second two lines, death is presented in terms of time. As Merlin dies, history dies, taking him with it. Line twenty-four explains death as a gathering of "the mists of time," joining the physical metaphor□time as a mist that becomes increasingly solid□to the temporal metaphor of time's end as death.

Lines 25-28

This stanza joins together Merlin's thoughts with the thoughts Niniane wants him to think, and it also introduces the symbolism of water. Line twenty-five uses "mountain water" to express how clear his thoughts are when he gives in to the sorceress's spell. The verb "raveling" in line twenty-six is a unique one in that its meanings include opposite definitions: it can mean "to become entangled or confused," but it can also mean "to untangle." Here Wilbur uses it in a deliberately unclear context so that either definition may apply. Calling the dream "deep" and "transparent" in line twenty-six draws a relationship between dreaming and water. This relationship is punctuated in line twenty-eight, in which the relationship between Merlin and Niniane is metaphorically compared to that of a river to the sea. The break between lines twenty-six and twenty-seven draws attention to the unusual time sequence. A dream usually does not exist until one is asleep, and so it could not have called out to Merlin ("bade" him) to sleep, except in the strange mix between reality and magic that Wilbur has created in this poem.

Lines 29-32

Line twenty-nine presents two ideas that challenge the reader's sense of reality: fate (an abstract concept itself) is said to wish fate, and dreams (a product of sleep) are said to

wish sleep for themselves. The poem uses complex language. In line thirty, the word "forsaken" implies that these impossible situations make sense to those, like Merlin, who have not been abandoned. In doing so, it turns readers' sympathies around. Merlin, who may have once seemed victimized by Niniane, seems fortunate to be joined with her, while Arthur, the powerful king, seems helpless and confused. This stanza ends with Arthur mentioning his hand, drawing attention to his physical power as well as his power as the reigning king.

Lines 33-36

The word "hale," used in line thirty-three, means both physical might and also, in old English, to pull or drag. The reference here is to the legend of Arthur pulling the sword Excalibur out of a stone when no one else could, proving himself the person fit to rule England as its king. Arthur points out that although he has lost none of the physical strength he had when he performed that feat in his youth, he still could not do it now. Mentioning Arthur's sadness and his realization that his power is gone in such close proximity to the death of Merlin shows readers that Arthur senses Merlin has gone from the world, even though he has not seen him die. The "woven" blue of the sky at the end of the poem refers to the ancient tapestries that would be woven with scenes from the Arthurian legends.

Themes

Mortality

This poem deals with the death of Merlin, the legendary sorcerer from the court of King Arthur. Because Merlin was known for his magical powers, it is a bit of a surprise that he could die at all. More surprising than that is the fact that he dies willingly, accepting death as a release from his responsibilities.

Merlin's death is represented here as a form of sleep, as mentioned in stanzas five and seven. The poem does not explicitly say that he dies, but it is implied in the way that the magician's consciousness slips away from him. The shapes of the searching men "escape" him as he loses awareness of the world. At the same time, "the mists of time condensed in the still head," implying with his motionlessness and with the stopping of time that this is not a sleep from which he will ever emerge. The most definitive clue that Merlin is dead comes from the reaction of his comrades□especially King Arthur, who apparently senses the loss of the magic that once enabled him to pull Excalibur from the stone in which it was embedded.

The fact that Merlin goes willingly to his death can be inferred from the poem's references to Niniane as the siren's daughter who has bewitched him. Readers might interpret this to mean that Merlin has been tricked into accepting death, but, whether his infatuation with Niniane is natural or unnatural, he still dies peacefully. When line thirty says "this the forsaken will not understand," it implies that Merlin, who has been accepted by Niniane (and is therefore not one of the forsaken), has knowledge that makes his death acceptable to him, even though readers and his peers in the poem might find it something against which to fight.

Mourning

Because of the magical nature of the events related in this poem, Merlin's friends do not react to his death the way that they might in real life. This is established from the start when the knights rise up from the Round Table and go looking for Merlin. No explanation is given for why they did not move earlier or why they suddenly know it is the right time to act. Readers are presented with a magical, intuitive relationship between Merlin and the knights. The knights' concern is evident in the third line when they "cried" his name, as if these knights who are masters of their world are panicked when they think of losing him. Riding out through the forest to find him, they are hypersensitive to the sounds and motions around them, which gives another clue to just how frightened they are at the thought of losing him.

Of all of Merlin's associates, though, it is King Arthur who mourns Merlin most intensely and most directly. Merlin was Arthur's guardian all his life, taking him away into hiding soon after his birth and then returning him to rule Britain when the time was right. When

Merlin dies, Arthur does not see any evidence of his death, yet still he stops riding to weep. Like the others, he senses the loss of his friend and mentor. Telling Gawen that his hand is still as strong as it was long ago but that he would not now be able to pull the sword from the stone is his admission that the loss of Merlin's magic has left him vulnerable. The fact that their armor became "quainter," or more old-fashioned, as they rode along, gives an added dimension to the knights' mourning, indicating that Merlin's death has made them somewhat self-conscious of their own eventual deaths.

Motion

Wilbur connects the concepts of time and motion, saying time and history come to an end as Merlin stops moving. It begins with meaningless action□aimless wandering□which follows after the passage of an indefinite "while." As the knights ride through the forest, they are aware of the slightest motions, such as the actions of frog or bugs, to such an extent that when squirrels chase each other, it is described as an "alien fracas." The exact moment of Merlin's death is presented as a condensation of the "mists of time" as they change from a drifting vapor to a motionless solid. In the poem's final line, as the scene of King Arthur and his knights freezes like an old picture on a tapestry, the sky itself becomes "still" and "woven," indicating that this moment is stopped forever, while at the same time it has become part of the rich and complex weave of history.

Delusion

Much of the action in this poem depends upon the power of sorcery to delude people, just as much of the poetic effect depends upon keeping readers uncertain of the difference between delusion and reality. The knights set out on their quest with the impression that Merlin is hiding from them. In their search, "something" makes them stop. Although they cannot see him, they have a feeling they have found Merlin, and since he is able to see them, it is clear that Niniane's sorcery has hidden him from their view. At that point, Gawen has a feeling of Niniane's involvement in the disappearance of Merlin, a feeling that seems to come from a whitehorn deer. The poem does not specify whether Gawen's suspicion is real or delusional.

The poem is just as vague about how much of Merlin's experience is a delusion. He feels that he is sleeping, that Niniane is just a figment of his imagination, and that he is dreaming that she is "receiving" him as the vision of his friends in the real world slip away. These impressions are of course what she would want to bewitch him into believing. A good case can be made for interpreting this as her way of making Merlin cooperate as she lures him to his death.

Style

Quatrain

A quatrain is a stanza of a poem that is written with four lines. Usually these lines will have a similar number of syllables, giving the poem an even look and a well-rounded feel when it is recited. It is the most common and most recognizable form of English poetry, allowing poets to use symmetrical rhyme schemes of AABB or ABAB. For a poem like "Merlin Enthralled," the quatrain allows for short stanzas that lend themselves to quick and frequent changes of scene and point of view. Even though the focus of the poem changes frequently, these transitions are smoothed over by the fact that the traditional quatrain structure is familiar to most readers. In addition, its geometric density gives readers a sense of stability that might have been lost by the poem's uneven, mysterious sense of what is real and what is illusion.

Rhyme

Rhyming poems use words that sound either identical or at least very similar in parallel positions, usually at the ends of lines. "Merlin Enthralled" has a strict rhyme scheme from which it never diverts: the last words of every first and third line in each stanza rhyme, as do the last words of every second and fourth line. In the majority of cases, rhymes are simple, with single-syllable words that sound alike matched together, such as "frog" and "log" or "swell" and "spell," although there are also cases, like "riding" and "hiding" and "horses" and "forces," in which both syllables of two-syllable words sound alike. The furthest deviations from this strict rhyme scheme occur when the poem uses multisyllabic words that only rhyme on the last syllable. He does this in the fifth stanza, rhyming "imagined her" with "sorcerer," and in the eighth stanza, where "understand" is rhymed with "when this hand."

The use of a strict rhyme scheme is unusual in twentieth-century poetry, a time when most acclaimed poets produced work in free verse (poetry that does not use rhymes) or used rhyme more freely, allowing similarities in a few sounds in the two rhyming words to stand for a loose but acceptable rhyme. One criticism of strict rhyme is that it limits the words, and by extension the meanings, a poet can choose from in specific places in their poems. In the case of "Merlin Enthralled," though, the strict rhyme scheme resembles the structures of traditional verses. Since Wilbur's theme is traditional, this similarity seems appropriate.

In Medias Res

In Medias Res is a Latin term meaning "in the middle of things." It refers to artistic works that, like "Merlin Enthralled," begin mid-action, when the story being told has already begun for the characters. Such works often use flashbacks to bring readers up-to-date with what has happened in the story so far. Wilbur, however, focuses on the action at

hand, leaving unanswered the questions of how the knights of the Round Table knew that Merlin had disappeared and why they waited to begin searching for him. These questions are never fully answered, although the style that the rest of the poem takes hints at part of the explanation. Much that these knights do is intuitive, such as stopping at the side of the lake, Gawen believing he hears Niniane's name, and Arthur understanding as he rides along the road that he has lost the magical power of his friend and ally. Readers can reasonably believe the knights might subconsciously understand what they have to do, even if they do not have a particular reason for jumping up from the table at that particular time. If this explanation is satisfactory enough to keep readers from dwelling on the missing pieces, then the poem works. What the poem gains from beginning *in medias res* is that it makes its readers feel as though they are joining a longer work already in progress, reminding them that it is just a small moment in the overall legend of Camelot.

Point of View

Point of view refers to the consciousness from which a story is being told. Often the point of view of a literary work will be that of one of the characters involved in the action, although authors sometimes use an "omniscient" point of view, which can give information known to none of the characters. The point of view for "Merlin Enthralled" shifts freely and in some cases is unidentifiable.

Often a poem's point of view is assumed to be that of the person or persons being discussed at the time. For instance, it is probably the knights of the Round Table who believe that "in all the world was no unnatural sound" and that the squirrels in the trees made "an alien fracas," although the knights themselves might not have phrased their experiences with those words. The fifth stanza describes Merlin but uses the phrase "a creature to bewitch a sorcerer" to describe Niniane: although the focus of this stanza is on Merlin, this particular phrase is probably not from Merlin's point of view but is instead the poem's narrator commenting directly on Niniane. The seventh and eighth stanzas clearly present the situation from Merlin's point of view, raising the possibility that he sees the situation unclearly because Niniane has a spell on him, that his death is not as calm and liberating as he might think it is.

The first two lines of stanza eight and the last two of stanza nine give an omniscient view of the characters from philosophical and historical perspectives. These lines are interrupted by a brief but powerful direct quote from King Arthur, who understands that Merlin has died as well as the significance of his death.

Historical Context

Arthurian Legend

There is no accurate historical record clearly pointing to the "King Arthur" described in the legends of Camelot. Legends about a ruler named "Arthwyr" circulated around the British Isles beginning in the sixth century, but at that time there were dozens of kingdoms in what is now known as England, and, with no written records, it is difficult to verify any relationship between historical figures and the Arthur of legend. The matter is further complicated by the supernatural elements concerning sorcery that the legend has accumulated over the centuries, raising doubts about any claim of authenticity.

Of the various claims to a historically accurate King Arthur, the one that has had the most influence is that of Geoffrey of Monmouth (c. 1100-1154). At a time when little was known about English history, Geoffrey published a text in 1136 called *History of the Kings of England*, which traces the country's ruling government from 1100 B.C. to 689 A.D., giving England a legitimate background to match those of the Roman and Greek empires. It is difficult to tell where reality and Geoffrey's version of reality part company. The Arthurian legends, as they are discussed today□with Arthur, Merlin, Niniane, the Round Table, and the Quest for the Holy Grail□are mostly based on Geoffrey's version of stories that had existed for at least five hundred years.

History of the Kings of England identifies the legendary Arthur as the son of Uther Pendragon, saying he was born to Ygerna, the wife of Gorlois, the Duke of Cornwall. In Geoffrey's version, there was tension between Uther and Gorlois after Uther showed interest in Ygerna. Gorlois sealed his castle against an attack, but Merlin cast a magic spell that made Uther look like Gorlois, gaining him entry into the castle and into Ygerna's bed. When Arthur was born, Merlin took the infant into hiding.

Merlin was a more recent addition to the oral legends of King Arthur, with records of him tracing only to the tenth century. He was called "Myrddin" in earlier accounts, but Geoffrey of Monmouth is said to have changed the spelling of his name because he thought the traditional form sounded too much like the French word *merde*, meaning excrement. In Geoffrey's history, Merlin not only arranged for the young king's birth but also for the competition which gained him the throne. After Uther's death, it was decided that the one who could pull an enchanted sword out of a stone was the one destined to rule England, a challenge which Merlin made sure Arthur would win.

As with all aspects of the legend, there are different accounts of how Merlin met his end. The woman referred to as Niniane in "Merlin Enthralled" has also been known as Nineve, Nimue, Nyneve, or simply as "the Lady of the Lake," although in most stories she is just one of several to hold this position. In Geoffrey's history, Merlin accompanies a wounded Arthur at the end of his life to Avalon, the mystic isle. Other versions of the story, closer to Wilbur's, say that Merlin fell in love with Niniane and taught her the secrets of magic, whereupon she enslaved him, alternately, in a glass tower, a cave, a

tree, or the tomb of two lovers. Different sources view her morality differently. In *Estoire de Merlin*, a medieval French vulgate text, she loves Merlin so much she seals him in a tower to keep him to herself. Sir Thomas Malory's 1485 text *Le Morte d'Arthur* has her aiding Arthur several times after she imprisons Merlin. At the other extreme, the nineteenth-century poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson, who wrote extensively about the legends of King Arthur, presented Naniane as an evil and malicious witch.

The 1950s

In 1956, when Wilbur first published this poem, the American political scene was characterized by a notable lack of dynamic or inspiring leaders. That year, Dwight Eisenhower, a sixty-six-year-old former general who made his reputation by commanding the Allied forces during World War II, was reelected to the presidency for a second term, despite failing health. Although Eisenhower was personally popular, the officials serving under him were generally bland, anonymous bureaucrats. In particular, Eisenhower's vice president, Richard Nixon, seemed to represent the mood of the time: a capable functionary with a brilliance for international diplomacy, Nixon was widely disliked and distrusted by many of the American people (he was later elected to the presidency and forced to resign under a cloud of scandal). At the time, the central political issue was the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. Each of these superpowers monitored the other's support among countries around the world, carefully watching the balance of power in a conflict that came to be called "the Cold War" ("cold" because, despite the tensions and the stakes involved, there was no direct fighting between the two sides).

The government was an active force in everyday life, investigating citizens who were thought to be sympathetic to communists. Television, in the mean time, had reached its second phase of development. After the end of the war in 1945, television quickly became a widespread consumer product, and broadcasters, unprepared for its immense popularity, scheduled shows that were little more than filmed stage acts. By the late 1950s, though, networks were developing original programming, and they found that original fantasy and adventure shows were perfect for the medium. Shows about legendary characters like the Lone Ranger and Tarzan and Robin Hood suited television's half-hour, segmented format, and these shows in turn affected public tastes. When "Merlin Enthralled" was published, the country was ready for a heroic figure.

A few years later, in 1960, Robert F. Kennedy was elected to the presidency, defeating Nixon. Young, handsome, and married to a smart and fashionable wife, Kennedy provided the country with a new identity. That year the musical *Camelot* opened on Broadway and political commentators quickly compared King Arthur's Round Table to Kennedy's administration. To this day, "Camelot" is used in American journalism to refer to the Kennedy administration as often as it is to refer to the rule of Arthur.

Critical Overview

Critics have had opposing views about Richard Wilbur's poetry since the start of his career, mostly disagreeing about the success of his style. Other poets who appeared in the 1940s and 1950s flaunted tradition and tried to impress readers with originality. Wilbur, on the other hand, always worked within conventional forms. Even the critics who found his work sterile and thought that he sacrificed meaning for the sake of style commended his work for its craftsmanship. As John B. Hougen explains it in his book *Ecstasy Within Discipline: The Poetry of Richard Wilbur*: "It is no doubt Wilbur's reliance on traditional poetic forms in an era when they were out of fashion that muted the praise of his work in some quarters and in others gave rise to blatantly negative criticism." The critics who found Wilbur's work too stiff and formal did not see that his experiments within formality were just as daring as those by poets who flaunted formal rules.

One review from 1956, written by Horace Gregory, praises Wilbur's talent while at the same time represents him as a writer of his time. In "The Poetry of Suburbia" published in *Partisan Review*, Gregory identifies Wilbur's place among other contemporary poets but says that, like many of them, he has nothing very new to offer the world. He compares Wilbur's poetry to the kind of "magazine verse" that was published in the *New Yorker* forty years earlier: light, witty verse that was popular in the growing suburbs precisely because it was so insubstantial. He compares particular poems from *Things of the World* to forgotten works by T. S. Eliot and Phelps Putnam, noting that, "In contrast to Putnam's, Wilbur's poem is overdressed and a shade pretentious□and his phrase, 'God keep me a damned fool,' rings false, false because Wilbur seems so expert at contriving certain of his lines."

Even though some critics find Wilbur to be a poet with limited imagination, he has always had ardent supporters among critics and fellow poets. The book in which "Merlin Enthralled" was published, *Things of the World*, won both a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Award for the year it was published, just a few of the dozens of awards presented to Wilbur throughout his long career. He is such an influential writer that a book-length study of his poetry was published in 1967, just twenty years after the publication of Wilbur's first collection. In his book *Richard Wilbur*, Donald L. Hill analyzes "Merlin Enthralled," finding it to be "beyond a doubt one of his finest poems." Lauding it for being able to say things often left unsaid, Hill concludes his analysis by noting that "there is a spaciousness about the poem, a fullness of expression and a harmony among the parts, that are the marks of a masterpiece." While Hill is generally favorable to Wilbur's work, such ardent praise for an individual piece is rare.

Over the years, Wilbur became established as one of America's most accomplished poets and one of the most reliable. The old controversy about his formal style masking a lack of spirit faded as critics accepted him on his own terms. By the time his *New and Collected Poems* was published in 1989, several of Wilbur's translations of French dramas had been performed on Broadway and had become standard English-language versions; he had published over twenty books of poetry, children's verse, and literary criticism; and he had served as the poet laureate of the United States.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Kelly is an instructor of creative writing and literature at Oakton Community College. In this essay, Kelly examines "Merlin Enthralled" as an independent work which can be understood and appreciated with little knowledge of Arthurian legend.

Arthurian legend is so old that there is no way of verifying the truth of any of it. It would be silly for a literary critic to say that one author is lying or mistaken because his or her version of the story does not match a version that some other author previously made up. In his poem "Merlin Enthralled," Richard Wilbur tells a story that has often been told over the last thousand years or so. It may help readers somewhat to understand how Wilbur's version relates to other versions—to the original source recorded in the twelfth century by Geoffrey of Monmouth, or Alfred, Lord Tennyson's version, or Edgar Arlington Robinson's version—but such a literary exploration would probably do as much to confuse the issue as it does to clarify it. Naturally, the subsequent versions are different from one another, and the various authors knew what their predecessors had to say, and they built upon the past. What seems even more interesting is to see how Wilbur's poem can stand by itself, without reference to the past. This is, at heart, a story about love and sacrifice, regardless of what the ancient Saxons or the historians who study them might think. It can be used as a lesson in social history, but Wilbur's style is more focused on the psychology of mid-twentieth century America.

"Merlin Enthralled" has three main characters: Arthur, Gawen, and Merlin. A fourth, Niniane, is mentioned, but the closest she comes to actually appearing in the poem is when it is pointed out that she "receives" Merlin—a verb that has no specific action associated with it, making her presence indistinct. Of the three characters, it is Merlin, the one named in the poem's title, who has the least to do here. He just wants to lie down and go to sleep in his lady's arms, or at least her good graces. Arthur has the most touching observation of the poem when he finally speaks at the end. It could almost be said that this poem is told from the point of view of Gawen, a knight who shows no particular characteristics beyond the fact that he is an observer.

To some degree, Gawen's lack of personality can be seen as the very point the poem is making. He does not function as an individual here, but rather as a representative of the entire assembly of knights of the Round Table. Wilbur could easily have said "one of the knights" in place of Gawen's name, with little change in the overall effect. The only difference is that poetry is stronger when it is specific rather than vague, and so the use of a particular name helps establish the reality of the world in which these characters live.

It does not matter whether the character called Gawen here speaks for one or many; what does matter is that this poem is about observers, not participants. In this way it is solidly a twentieth century, postmodern work, as concerned with the fact that someone is there to witness the story as it is with the story itself. To add to this, the historical associations Gawen has might add some nuances, but it would also add complications that would obscure Wilbur's view of the world.

The knights—and Gawen, of course—stand in for the readers of the poem. It starts with them leaving the comforts of their chambers but not so abruptly that they would leave their drinks halffinished. They are plunged into a new situation, aimlessly searching, not seeing what is in front of them but only what is not: Merlin. Like the readers, the knights settle into this new situation after a short time—a stanza or two—and start to understand the world in which they find themselves. It is a world of mystery, a world where the things of nature live their lives generally unnoticed. In short, this poem is doing what most nature poetry does— drawing readers' attention to the world that they regularly take for granted.

After a short while as a nature poem, "Merlin Enthralled" shifts its focus, becoming a love poem. Again it is not important to know the precedents for the Merlin/Niniane affair so much as it is important to read the clues Wilbur gives and to understand what he has to say about love. Merlin may submit to a spell that has been cast upon him because Niniane is powerful enough to make him love her, or he may allow himself to fall under her power because of his natural love. With love, it is always difficult to distinguish just how voluntary enthrallment is. Wilbur *could* have been more clear on this point if he had wanted to be. For instance, if Niniane were called a "siren," it would be likely that she means to lure Merlin to his destruction, but the poem specifically refers to her twice as a "Siren's daughter." Readers are left to figure out for themselves whether the daughter of a siren would be more or less reckless and mischievous than a real siren. Merlin's apparent happiness about being "received" by Niniane smacks equally of sorcery and love.

Unclear about the cause of love, of whether it is freedom or manipulation, the poem is in fact fairly direct in showing love's results. This enchantment takes Merlin away from his friends. Unlike other versions of this story, "Merlin Enthralled" does not specify whether Merlin is murdered or just forever hidden away somewhere in a deep sleep. These each have their symbolic significance, but none applies here. What is important here is that enchantment, or love, might leave Merlin contented with his fate, but it leaves his comrades feeling abandoned.

This is a point made most directly at the end, when King Arthur, sensing that Merlin has left for good, knows he no longer has access to the magic that gave him the power to pull Excalibur from its stone, establishing his right to the throne of England. In a literal sense, Arthur is right: no Merlin equals no magic, leaving Arthur and his knights on their own to cope as humans. As in the rest of the poem, however, Wilbur is not concerned here with the natural limits of magic so much as with the emotional story behind what transpires. There is no hint that Arthur, having reigned for years at that point, would be left vulnerable by the loss of Merlin. It is sadness, not fear, that weighs upon Arthur in the end.

All of this can be explained in psychological, non-magical, terms: Merlin's submission to Niniane, the knights' panic about losing an important court figure, their discovery of the complexities of nature once they actually look at the world, and Arthur's sorrow over losing a close friend and advisor. The magical part of the poem is poetic, not supernatural, magic. Wilbur draws an association between love and time that goes

beyond any consideration of who has what power of enchantment over whom, and highlights the power that human affection has to make the world start and stop.

Time stops for Merlin, just as time starts for the knights at the moment that they lose him. Amid all of the motion and commotion of the search, the darkling leaves and the fracas of nature going about its business, he lies silent and still, and "the mists of time condensed in the still head." Though this figure of speech strongly implies death, it does not explicitly say it; it only says that motion ceased. Regardless of what Merlin's fate might be, it is outside of the bonds of time as far as the knights are concerned, and, by extension, as far as readers are concerned. While Wilbur uses the condensation of the mists of time to signify Merlin's disappearance, though, he also uses the passage of time to mark how his disappearance affects those who care for him. They become relics almost immediately: their armor becomes "quainter" and the sky above them turns into the sort of woven tapestry that modern readers associate with medieval stories. The implication here is that love takes one outside of time, as it does for Merlin when he joins Niniane, and also that the lack of love, which Arthur and Gawen and the rest of the knights feel upon the loss of their friend, can make one old and worn, on the way to quick obsolescence.

It can be quite tempting to take a poem like "Merlin Enthralled" and see how it compares to other versions of the Merlin story, but this is a thoroughly modern work that has much to say even without outside references. The story is as magical as it has ever been, but Wilbur's version relies mostly on the magic of human interaction. The story here is not about the enchantment of magical spells but about the enchantment of lovers and friends and the ways in which that basic human function affects people as time goes by.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on "Merlin Enthralled" in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Adaptations

"Merlin Enthralled" is included on the 1969 Caedmon record album *Richard Wilbur Reading His Poetry*. It was also published by Harper- Collins in audiocassette format.

Topics for Further Study

Just a few years after "Merlin Enthralled" was first published, the administration of President John Kennedy came to be called "Camelot" after the court of King Arthur. Research Kennedy's presidency and identify the similarities to Arthur's Round Table.

Modern tales of sorcery, most notably J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* novels and J. K. Rowling's books about the young wizard named Harry Potter, use ideas about magic that derive from Arthurian legend. Read one of these books and note which ideas about magic might have come from the centuries-old stories about Merlin.

What kind of music might the siren's daughter have used to enchant Merlin? Research and write an essay on the instruments of the Middle Ages and the sort of songs that might have been played on them.

Find a source that gives a different account of Merlin's death than that in "Merlin Enthralled." Write a paper that briefly describes the other version and then explain which version you think is more likely and why.

If you have ever had an older mentor who disappeared from your life suddenly, the way that Merlin disappears from Arthur's, write an essay or poem about him or her, the cause of his or her disappearance from your life, and how his or her disappearance affected you.

Merlin is lulled to sleep beside a lake where he goes unnoticed by the people looking for him. Take a camera to a nearby body of water and bring back a picture of a place you think might have been the sort of spot where Merlin would have died. Explain the picture to your classmates.

Compare and Contrast

500s: Britain is fractured by competing kingdoms and beset by Saxon invaders. Britain's rulers briefly unite to drive back the Saxons, but the island is ultimately overrun and settled by the foreigners.

1950s: Britain is considered a venerable, established civilization. Americans consider it the "old world," with dated political practices such as colonies and a monarchy.

Today: The last of the British colonies in Africa received its independence in the 1960s, and the British Royal Family has only symbolic power.

500s: The identity of the actual King Arthur, if there was one at all, is unclear because written records are scarce and communication between different countries is almost nonexistent.

1950s: Television increases in popularity throughout the decade, allowing politicians to communicate directly with the general population.

Today: Politicians still speak directly to the public via television, but educated viewers are wary of image manipulation.

500s: International conflicts are fought with swords and maces; legend tells of magical powers wielded by magicians such as Merlin and Niniane.

1950s: After the decimation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan at the end of World War II, people across the world lived in fear of the destructive power of atomic bombs and hydrogen bombs.

Today: Nuclear bombs are many times more powerful than they were when they first were developed, but they are not used in conflict. Military reliance is on improvements in fighter jets, submarines, tanks, artillery, intelligence, and stratagem.

What Do I Read Next?

This poem, originally from the 1956 collection *Things of This World*, is included in Richard Wilbur's *New and Collected Poems*, published by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich in 1988.

The story of Merlin's life, from childhood to death, is the subject of a series by popular novelist Mary Stewart: *The Crystal Cave* (1970), *The Hollow Hills* (1973), *The Last Enchantment* (1979), and *The Wicked Day* (1983).

Alfred, Lord Tennyson wrote several books of poetry about the legends of King Arthur, including the book-length poem *Idylls of the King*. This 1885 book includes "Merlin and Vivien," a version of the story told in "Merlin Enthralled."

One of the most readable recent versions of the Arthurian legend was written by author John Steinbeck, who based his book *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights* (1976) on the writings of fifteenth-century English scholar Sir Thomas Malory.

Over the course of his long career, Wilbur has given dozens of interviews. Many can be found on the Internet. Some of the best were collected by William Butts in the 1990 book *Conversations with Richard Wilbur*, published by the University of Mississippi Press.

If Richard Wilbur were not a poet, he would still be known for his work as a translator, especially for his translations of the comedies of seventeenth- century French playwright Molière. His translations of Molière's plays *The Misanthrope* and *Tartuffe* were done in the 1960s and published in one volume in 1991 by Harvest Books.

Another fascinating achievement in translation is Wilbur's 1980 translation of the collection *A Part of Speech* by Pulitzer Prize-winning Russian poet Joseph Brodsky.

Geoffrey of Monmouth's 1136 history has been published in a 1981 Penguin edition titled *The History of the Kings of Britain*, which includes a comprehensive introduction and notes. Monmouth's book provides one of the first written histories of both King Arthur and Merlin, though scholarly opinion holds that Monmouth's work is largely fiction.

Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, first published in 1485, is one of the most popular sources for tales of the Arthur legend. It has been published in many different editions, including an illustrated hardback edition published in 2000.

Further Study

Goodrich, Norma Lorre, *King Arthur*, Franklin Watts, 1986.

King Arthur offers an in-depth scholarly look at the Arthurian legends with the intention of separating reality from myth.

Littleton, C. Scott, and Linda A. Malcor, *From Scythia to Camelot: A Radical Reassessment of the Legends of King Arthur, the Knights of the Round Table, and the Holy Grail*, Garland Publishers, 2000.

This book traces Arthurian legends beyond British history to Russian and Ukranian roots and serves as a fascinating example of folklore detection.

Scott, Nathan A., *Visions of Presence in Modern American Poetry*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.

Scott looks at the sense of "reality" in the poetry of several contemporary poets, including Wilbur, in order to refute the theory that poetry is a thing of words unconnected to an objective world experience.

Snyder, Christopher A., *An Age of Tyrants: Britain and the Britons, A.D. 400-600*, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998.

Snyder presents serious and direct historical exploration of the time when Arthur was supposed to have lived, as well as an appendix linking Arthurian legend to the known facts.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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