

## Merlin – from Wildman to Wizard.

### The myth of Merlin and the Apple Trees

Hello to everyone and welcome to this, the first of our myths to begin this new Anam Cara track. I ( [Phil](#)) am taking the lead on this one but of course, I am sending this to you on behalf of [Margaret](#) as well. Before I begin with the story of Merlin, we want to share some *preparatory work* for our first meeting which is coming up shortly. I hope that you have been able to access the required reading for our track and two books in particular would be important to access before the beginning of the course and for our work in September. These are:

- [Gayle Delaney's](#) book '*All about dreams: Everything you need to know about why we have them, what they mean and how to put them to work for you*' by Bravo Ltd.
- [Carol Pearson's](#) book '*Awakening the Heroes within: Twelve archetypes to help us find ourselves and transform our world*', published by HarperElixir.

Our obligatory reading list is not too long and you should have that now but these two books will be important for the first session.

For our preliminary work, we would ask the following:

**Please read Chapter 1 of Gayle's book on Dreamwork** to help set the context of work for the next year. We will discuss this further at our first meeting.

To begin to understand the importance of Archetypes, we suggest you read [Carol's book Part 1 up to page 68](#) and then in the month following our track seminar, you can begin to work on the Archetype associated with today's myth, the Magician.

We hope that does not seem too much to take on but we know you are eager to get started! However, if anyone has any problems just let us know and we will be happy to help you in whatever way we can. We are both so looking forward to working with you over the next year.

And so, to our story.

One of the phrases that you will hear repeated oft in this track is to *'listen with the ears of your soul'*. So, we think it is important that you just have opportunity to engage with the story each month as some pre-reading or where possible, pre-recording even though we will revisit it in more detail during our monthly meetings. However, before we begin, I think that you need a little bit of background information first. I have included a paragraph at the very end from a contemporary book on Merlin called *From The True History of Merlin the Magician* by Anne Lawrence-Mathers, published by Yale University Press in 2020. Here, we can start to think a little bit about Merlin as the Magician archetype. Don't miss it, in case you want to explore further.....

### [A little background](#)

Although the Merlin that we have heard of is a creation of the 12<sup>th</sup> century by a rather infamous writer called Geoffrey of Monmouth, it is clear that Merlin's origins are much older from within Welsh mythology and legend, a native folklore of the time when the ancient Britons fought against the invading Saxons. In the ancient texts of the time, Merlin was both a bard – a storyteller and a seer – one who could see and predict the future. His origins are told in a rather bloodthirsty story where the King of the Britons tries to build a Fortress to protect himself and his people but whatever he builds collapses overnight. His Druids tell him that he needs to find a boy child without a father, kill him and sprinkle the blood on the ground if the Fortress is to be built. The king sends his troops out and sure enough, they eventually find a boy that fits the bill. However, the boy, called Ambrosius is a greater magician than the King's Druids and tells the King's men to dig below the Fortress where they find a pool with two jars, one containing a white dragon and one a red dragon. Ambrosius tells the King that the Red dragon represents the Welsh dragon who will defeat the White dragon of the

Saxons. Of course, that wasn't actually the happy ending that the King was hoping for. The Saxons eventually ruled Britain and still today, our word for English people in Irish and with a slight derivation, Welsh (*Sasanach*) refers to the Saxons. But the Red Welsh dragon is still visible on the Welsh flag and from this ancient story, the medieval legends of Arthur, Guinevere, Lancelot and the Knights of the Round Table all derive. However, Geoffrey, who was a better storyteller than historian, decided that it was a better story to adapt the Welsh name of Ambrosius, *Myrddin*, to Merlin as we know him today. So, today's story of the myth of Merlin comes from the adapted medieval story underpinned by a more ancient heritage from Welsh history.

So, sit back now, relax and enjoy the story of Merlin from wild man to Magician.

*'Merlin was both a prophet and King who ruled a kingdom in South-West Wales. His Kingdom was part of an alliance between three kingdoms, and one day, his allies called him to join them in battle against the King of Scotland. The battle was won and the King of Scotland was defeated but the slaughter was terrible and Merlin was so destroyed by his grief at seeing these terrible things, he went mad and fled to the woods. Here, he lived naked, high up in the trees, living off grass and fruits, particularly from the apple trees.'*

*Anyway, poor Merlin lived in this way for 50 years, tormented by guilt and believing that his madness was divine punishment for his acts of war in battle. His allies, the two Kings from the other kingdoms tried to persuade him to come out of the woods, but he hid under an apple tree that had magical powers to prevent him from being seen. His isolated and wild life, his madness and terror honed his prophetic powers, something that was important to his fellow Kings who wanted him back and not always for good reasons. So, one day a messenger was sent to bring Merlin back. Merlin, cowering under his apple tree heard the messenger sing a beautiful song about Merlin's kingdom and especially his wife and sister, both of whom had been precious to him. Listening to the song, Merlin's sanity returned and he came back to the palace with the messenger. However, after a while and exposed to the world, his madness returned and afraid of what he might do or say, Merlin was chained up by the Kings in the palace to prevent him from leaving.*

*Merlin oscillated between sanity and insanity and in his insane state, his prophecies become true, albeit in strange and unusual ways. I will tell you about one of them. One day, Merlin saw a leaf in his sister, Gwenddydd's hair and let out a mad laugh [apologies for my Welsh pronunciation – MB]. He refused to say why unless they unchained him. This done, he told them that she had taken a lover which is why she had a leaf in her hair. Ashamed and furious, Gwenddydd tried to discredit her brother's gift of prophecy. She dressed a boy in different clothes on three occasions and presented the boy to Merlin asking him to predict how the child would die. For the first boy, Merlin said he would die from a fall. For the second, he said he would die in a tree. For the third, he would drown. She rejoices in telling him that he is wrong but, as you would expect, he was not. The boy fell from a rock, get caught upside down in the branches of a tree and drowned because his head is hanging in the river. And after many other examples of his prophecies coming true, Merlin eventually was released from his chains and went back to the woods and his wild man state.*

*Here, Merlin built a tower where he continued his prophecies into the future, often using astrology as a way to interpretation. He was visited by many scholars and wise men, among them another hero of the Welsh myth, Taliesin – but that is another story. This story ends when a miraculous spring bubbles up and Merlin, drinking from the spring becomes cured of his insanity and the pool become a source of healing, particularly for those afflicted by the diseases of the mind. Creating a healing centre, Merlin, Taliesin and Merlin's sister, Gwenddydd, chose to remain in the wood forever, never returning to the world again'.*

So, having heard the story of Merlin the magician, you might like to take some time to consider what are the important messages of this story for you? Let me give you some pointers to consider.

**What is the important of apples and apple trees?** Apples are often considered a sign of abundance, a sign of the harvest and of plenty. On the other hand, they can also be associated with the struggle between good and evil. Think of the symbolism of the apple in the Garden of Eden, or a more contemporary view, the apple given to Snow White by the Wicked Witch. For any of you who know anything about

gardening, you will know that apple trees do not grow in woods. So what apples are we talking about? Actually, there is one apple tree that is associated with woods and that is the crab apple.

Trees were sacred to the Celtic peoples, often considered to have spiritual powers or deities within and so were worshipped. For the Druids, the Oak tree, the Yew tree and the Elder were specifically sacred. To deliberately damage a tree without necessity (for wood to heat the home for example) was a terrible sacrilege. Of course, the sacred symbolism of trees was not only lauded in Celtic lands. The Norse story of Yggdrasil or the Tree of the World with three deep roots connecting the nine worlds of Heaven and Earth surrounded by nature symbols of the God Odin is another example of nature as a source of myth and story. Trees are symbolic of strength, connection with earth and sky, feeling rooted and stable and continuity in terms of longevity. Today, we know the immense importance of trees as a conduit of healthy ecosystem. The crab apple tree has nothing to do with crabs but rather refers to the twisty and gnarled appearance of its bark and perhaps also the bitter taste of the fruit. Notably, the leaves spread into a wide canopy and so it was easy for Merlin to hide in and not be seen. However, it also develops sharp spines so it would not have been that easy for Merlin to hide comfortably!! Further, the apples themselves are sometimes called, 'The Golden Bough' as they tend to grow and hang down in clumps of three and four with a golden hue which makes for the jewel-like colour of the crab apple jelly which can be made as an accompaniment to meat dishes. Some of you may be familiar with this phrase as it is the title of a famous 19<sup>th</sup> century book on magic and religion written by the Scottish anthropologist, James George Frazer. You can still find this book. Additionally, in folklore, the crab apple was also associated with love and marriage. Crab apple trees are also associated with kinship and family bonds since the closer the crab apple tree is to its parent tree, the sweeter and larger the fruit! Hence, we have the phrase '*the apple doesn't fall far from the tree*' when we talk about traits in younger people that resemble their elders.

Take a moment....

What does this reflection on trees and crab apples evoke for you in terms of, for example, shelter, kinship and rootedness.

And finally, the healing spring. Merlin's story touches on many natural elements such as earth air and water. The healing properties of water and their miraculous nature forms the basis of many myths and even in our modern times, the idea of water as a cure for illness is reminiscent in the story of Bernadette Soubirous and the apparition of the Virgin Mary in Lourdes, France. What is interesting in Merlin's story is that the focus of healing is on the mind and moreover that mental illness can be healed, in this story, through the water and also in music – remember the messenger's song.

Take a moment...

How, I wonder, can we heal the mind using nature as our source and resource for life?

So, as we approach our first session, we invite you to begin your reading and reflecting on the story of Merlin. Maybe at this time, you are harvesting some apples, making apple pies or apple jellies. Until we meet soon, Margaret and I wish you a fruitful first exploration into the work of our track (sorry for the pun!).

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A footnote from Margaret on Merlin the Magician

*From [The True History of Merlin the Magician](#) by Anne Lawrence-Mathers. Published by Yale University Press in 2020.*

[It is Geoffrey of Monmouth's] Merlin who became the archetype of the great magician, in control of superhuman knowledge as well as power. Unlike shaman figures, he does not merge into the natural world – instead he interprets and dominates it. His enormous appeal derives from bringing together the magical traditions of the ancient world, the Christian Church, and the Celtic past as re-imagined in the medieval court. Even in the nineteenth century, this Merlin remained a potent and remarkably unchanging figure, although he had moved from history to the realm he still occupies: that of literature. This power as a symbolic figure is inseparable from his historical complexity – from the fact that he was discovered,

during the twelfth-century renaissance, as a real person who had lived just as classical civilization was dying. Merlin was not an alien figure from a wild, Dark Age past. Rather, he was a prophet-magician who had helped to shape a world of great empires, and was master of both natural forces and advanced technology. Merlin had an immediate impact in medieval Europe. He was accepted as a genuine historical figure, and he brought together key themes in both magic and politics. His powers of prophecy were perhaps of greatest importance in the Middle Ages. But he was also an embodiment of forms of magic that remained serious and real throughout the renaissance as well as the medieval period. This enduring power could not have been achieved without two necessary conditions. The first was the fact that he was accepted as real for over four hundred years. The second was his capacity to offer examples of all the major forms of magic practised down to the seventeenth century. His impact is demonstrated by his extraordinary longevity as an archetype of a great magician. It is this unique status which makes Merlin so important as a subject for historical study.