

Merlin. Steve Barron, dir. A Hallmark Entertainment/NBC Presentation, 26–27 April 1998. 4 hours (with commercials).

Merlin. Steve Barron, dir. Hallmark Entertainment. 2 videotapes (tape 2 includes a short, ‘The Making of *Merlin*’). 87 minutes each. \$29.95 (set).

ed khmara and david stevens, *Merlin: The Shooting Script*. New York: Newmarket Press, 1998. 243 pp. (with 27 stills). isbn: 1–55704–366–3. \$16.95 (paper).

The most understated explanation for the continued appeal of the medieval comes from an unlikely source, Umberto Eco, who with perhaps uncharacteristic brevity and clarity has remarked: ‘It seems people like the Middle Ages’ (*Travels in Hypereality* [1986]:61).

And it seems (some) people like *Merlin*. With an international all-star cast and a price tag of close to \$30 million—roughly four times what such programs normally cost to make—the Hallmark Entertainment/NBC mini-series *Merlin* won the May television sweeps even before the sweeps had begun. Originally aired in two two-hour segments on April 26 and 27, 1998, *Merlin* attracted a larger audience than any television mini-series in more than a decade, and on-air solicitations for a two-cassette edition of the program along with a free copy of the script resulted in over 100,000 sales orders.

The mini-series opens in a less distant time outside Avalon Abbey with the clearly wizened Merlin (Sam Neill) reduced from his former status as king maker and court wizard to a teller of tales. As he unfolds his tale, we are transported back in time as parallel, interconnected stories of Merlin himself and of England develop. The half-human Merlin is the creation of Queen Mab (Miranda Richardson) who, despite an illustrious literary pedigree from Shakespeare to Byron and beyond, makes her first appearance here in the Arthuriad. Mab is the last of her kind, a pagan priestess/goddess who laments the passing of the old ways. England itself is torn by civil war as the Christian King Constant (John Gielgud in a walk on—and off) turns tyrant and loses his throne—and his head—to Vortigern (Rutger Hauer).

Mab intends to use Merlin to restore the old ways, and thereby to ensure her own survival. She is aided in this attempt by the gnome Frik (Martin Short) and eventually by Morgan Le Fey (Helena Bonham Carter)—who, for reasons never explained, shares with Mab an increasingly annoying speech impediment. Years pass, and Merlin grows into manhood. In a chance encounter, he meets and rescues Nimue (Isabella Rossellini) who becomes the love of his life. For the balance of the mini-series, Mab tries to have Merlin do her bidding, Merlin and Nimue seek to reunite, and England borders on the brink of chaos first under Vortigern and then under Arthur (Paul Curran) as Morgan attempts to undermine the rule of her half brother and secure the throne for their son Mordred (Jason Done).

The focus of the mini-series is on the title character, and more familiar plot lines such as the conception of Arthur by ruse, the assembling of the knight of the Round Table, the love triangle and adultery, and the quest for the Grail are all subordinated



Sam Neill as the title character in Hallmark Entertainment/NBC's Merlin. (Still courtesy of NBC. Photo by Oliver Upton.)

to the story of Merlin and his pursuit of Nimue. Throughout, there are nods toward and borrowings from earlier films including Boorman's *Excalibur*, *Jurassic Park* (in which Neill had a starring role), and *Dragonslayer*.

If—to quote Eco again—it seems people like the Middle Ages, it seems (some) Arthurian scholars do not like anything that smacks of irreverence when it comes to retelling the legend of Camelot. A quick review of the responses on [arthurnet](#) to *Merlin* shows subscribers are nothing if not passionate about the cinematic matter of Arthur. And the more scholarly subscribers have been reduced to the depths of despair by the mini-series' less-than-orthodox approach to the matter of Arthur.

Certainly, focusing on Merlin—or just on any other Arthurian character—is not in and of itself problematic—Paul Bryer's 1996 novel *In a Pig's Ear* takes a similar approach in its modern retelling of the legend of Arthur. But the makers of this mini-series are unable or unwilling to trust the basics of the story they seek to tell. The Arthurian story survives retelling after retelling because it is first and foremost a good story. The essential narremes are already there; they simply need to be teased out and adapted to whatever purpose a storyteller wants. Since the writers here do not trust their basic materials, the mini-series too often gets bogged down, and the plot meanders or simply drags—at least 30 minutes could be cut from the mini-series without harming the story.

The special effects—touted by Hallmark and NBC in the series' promotional materials—are more distraction than anything else. Frik's ubiquity is at best distracting. Anachronisms and historical inaccuracies abound—see the archives of [arthurnet](#)

for a laundry-list of complaints—but still television audiences returned to the mini-series to watch its conclusion on the second night it aired. Reconciling such popular wild enthusiasm and scholarly disdain is not easy, but perhaps such disparate views attest the continuing vitality of the legend of the once and future king. Pop culture and literature have always at least been step-siblings, and as Professor Eco has also reminded us ‘the Middle Ages have always been messed up in order to meet the vital requirements’ of the day (68)—or, in this case, of the mini-series.

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