



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 23 | Number 1 | Issue 87, Summer/Fall

Article 3

10-15-2000

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Eric Rauscher
Independent Scholar

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Recommended Citation

Rauscher, Eric (2000) "From Dubric to Taliessin: Charles Williams's Early Work on the Arthurian Cycle," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 23 : No. 1 , Article 3.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol23/iss1/3>

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From Dubric to Taliessin: Charles Williams's Early Work on the Arthurian Cycle

Abstract

Explores the transformation of Dubric into Taliessen, focusing on how Dubric gradually recedes in importance in Williams's thinking about the Arthur story and is finally transformed into Taliessen.

From Dubric to Taliessin: Charles Williams's Early Work on the Arthurian Cycle

Eric Rauscher

“CLOTTED glory from Charles.” Such was Hugo Dyson’s opinion of Charles Williams’s writings (Carp 115). Many people upon first encountering his poetry have a similar view. It is rather thick stuff. But long before Charles Williams even met Dyson (or any of the Inklings for that matter) he was already working on poetry as his “calling.” In a letter to a correspondent C. S. Lewis wrote of Williams, “I can’t tell you when he first became interested in the Arthurian story, but the overwhelming probability is that, like so many English boys, he got via Tennyson into Malory in his ‘teens” (*Letters* 244). His father Walter read poetry to him as a child, and he published his first book of poetry (*The Silver Stair*) in 1912. A few years later in an unpublished manuscript often referred to as “The Commonplace Book” we see not “clotted glory” but the quick-flowing record of the thoughts he sketched down for a cycle of poetry he was planning on the Arthurian stories. The manuscript does contain a small amount of poetry, but the majority consists of notes on everything from the *Mahabharata* to Arthur. An especially interesting aspect of the manuscript is how one character in the early pages (Dubric) metamorphoses into another (Taliessin) by the end.

Before examining the change from Dubric to Taliessin, I will provide a glimpse of the whole manuscript by discussing a few short selections. I will also give a brief description of the manuscript and suggest a date for it.

Page 48 of the manuscript is a typical example. It contains notes on incest, specifically that which leads to Galahad and Mordred. This page is fully struck through with a large X; one sentence is struck through again with 5 slashes and a comment is penciled in at the bottom at a time after the page was first written. This one page displays Williams’s thought processes in action. He originally contrasts Galahad’s birth (from incest) with that of Mordred. He mentions that “in some essay” Swinburne “points out that Arthur’s unconscious sin of incest with his sister is the cause of the birth of Mordred, and hence eventually of all the disasters and the tragedy of the table.” Williams goes on to

write that Galahad's incestuous birth differs from Mordred's "through his own free-will: he desiring good." A bit further comes the sentence that was individually struck through. "?Could Arthur + Lancelot be together and sin on the same night, so that Mordred and Galahad are born together?" At the bottom of the page is the penciled-in sentence "Yes, but ?Galahad was not born from incest."

This one page pretty clearly displays his quick-flowing thought patterns, starting with an idea pulled from someone else's essay, through a sort of geometrical framework, and ending up with an afterthought realizing that Galahad was not born of incest.

Another page of tantalizing interest in seeing Williams's thought processes is page 128. In another person's handwriting is the sentence "Certain stories are quite absent from your notes—eg *Balin & Balan* (furthermore are not these lacking from yr list o knights) ."

First, it is interesting that he would be sharing his notebook with others, looking for ideas and criticism (as he would later do with the Inklings.) It would be an interesting but exhausting effort to track down the handwriting and discover who this person is.

Second, it is true that the Balin and Balan stories are absent in the manuscript so far but Balan appears on page 145. Williams also adds a note on the page referring to Tennyson and Swinburne discussing "the dolorous stroke". The final remark is "? insert the Dolorous Stroke + omit the rest of the B+B story?". Once again we can see Williams's thought processes in action.

A final page to illustrate process, but this time in a distinctly non-linear form, is page 109b/108a (more on pagination later). This page deals with Galahad, who is arguably the most important character to Williams. It contains snippets of poems, notes relating to the poems in "clouds" (circles drawn around words or clusters of words) obviously added at a later date, and several indications of his trying to tie Galahad with "our Lady." Most of the manuscript pages start at the top and work to the bottom line by line, but this page contains seven distinct 'areas' all interacting with each other towards an as yet unsolidified idea.

These three pages are examples of how one can follow Williams thinking through things in a linear fashion from the start of the manuscript to the end, but they also reveal how he can go back and rethink or jump around from idea to idea changing things as he goes. But before addressing how Williams

transforms Dubric to Taliessin, a little background information on the manuscript itself is in order.

“A book of notes and cuttings called his Commonplace book shows all sorts of facts or sidelights which, for him, formed links with the stories of Arthur,” writes Alice Mary Hadfield (14-15). This is the first place I recall hearing about this manuscript. The footnote for the quotation above simply states: “Kindly made available to me by Mrs. Anne Ridler.” In 1989 Mrs. Ridler donated this manuscript to the Bodleian Library at Oxford University. Titled *The Holy Grail*, the manuscript is cataloged as MS. Eng. e. 2012. In October of 1997 I had the great pleasure of being able to view the manuscript. The first thing I discovered when I asked for Charles Williams’s *Commonplace Book* was that none existed, but the Bodleian did have a Charles Williams manuscript entitled *The Holy Grail*. The two are one and the same.

The manuscript itself consists of two parts, one a volume (book) and the other an envelope containing loose leaves of paper. The volume is a bound volume titled on the spine *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*. Written in hand below this is “The Holy Grail.” The book seems to have been a “dummy” (left blank) for a book later published as *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the English Language* (1914).

The pages are numbered on the recto (175-183 being the loose leaves in the envelope) totaling 533. Williams apparently did the original numbering of pages (several times he makes reference to another page), but the sequence was corrected at a later date for skipped pages and individual numbering of inset clippings from articles. Only the first 183 pages have writing on them and almost always on the recto with a rare note or comment on the verso. Also, most of the pages to page 50 are struck through top to bottom, with occasional strike-throughs thereafter. Most of the manuscript is in Williams’s handwriting, both in ink (of various colors) and pencil, which is very legible. At least three other people also wrote in the manuscript. Once by a person on page 128, another, Anne Ridler, and the third the cataloger at the Bodleian (along with the stamp of the library at various places in the manuscript).

As for the date of the manuscript, it obviously had to come after the printing of the original (i.e. 1913 or 1914), and some of the clippings have dates on them, all before 1920. I would hazard a guess that the bulk of the manuscript was written circa 1915-20. Much of this will no doubt be expanded upon in a forthcoming critical edition by David Llewellyn Dodds.

While reading for the first time through *The Holy Grail*, I kept coming across an unfamiliar character named Dubric. In Tennyson he is the person who both crowns Arthur king and officiates at his marriage. Geoffrey of Monmouth also refers to Dubric as being the archbishop of Caerleon who crowns Arthur king. Dubric is not named at all in Malory.

As an example of the importance of Dubric in Williams's *The Holy Grail*, Taliessin appears on 6% of the pages, Dubric on 15%, and Galahad on 30%. Galahad's prominence is not surprising. But the virtual absence of Taliessin compared to Dubric (who appears only as a passing reference in the published volumes of Williams's Arthurian poetry) is a puzzle.

Dubric makes his first appearance on page 6 in a passing reference to Dubric's hearing of the appearance of the Grail. On page 12 Dubric's name is at the top followed by the years "444-45[4?] A.D." Williams notes this as a reference in *Apologia* November 14 and writes "this fixes the date of King Arthur." This passage is immediately followed by (in pencil) "unless it does not fit the requirements of the poem." This page has the added interesting feature of not only having been struck through top to bottom, but the section referring to Dubric is also struck through by two slanting lines. Page 14 once again refers to Dubric, and once again with a historical tie, specifically to a Roman Consul named Aetuis. One gets the feeling early on that Williams intends Dubric to play a role not only as an ecclesiastic but also as a tie to both the Roman Church and the Roman Empire's culture. Page 16 has no reference to either Dubric or Taliessin, but begins with the line "? a vagabond poet who is fascinated by symbols." The word "vagabond" is written in above the line. So early on, we see Williams's interest in a poet as a character, but one distinct from Dubric. Another interesting item on this page is the line at the bottom (not struck through): "He that loveth his symbolism shall lose it."

The next mention of Dubric occurs on page 41, where the reference is to "?Bring Merlin + Dubric together in agreement on this method" of testing each report of signs and wonders separately. This pairing of Merlin and Dubric, with their different world-views, will be a recurring theme.

Page 47 contains some of the most interesting pointers towards Williams's shift in interest from Dubric to Taliessin. The majority of this page contains a poem with the words "A Song (two verses from the middle)" at the top. The whole page has been crossed out with an X. The poem's subject is Mary, the mother of Jesus. There is a cloud with "see p. 50" off to one side which leads to

a continuation of the poem on that page. At the bottom of the page is another short poem; and in between the two, and referring to the first poem, is “? sung by a monk (at/on Dubric’s permission [written above]) after another song, sad + uncertain, by ?the symbolist poet—.” This is followed by a short poem with Michael the Archangel as its subject. Both the notation in the cloud and the added sentence and poem were apparently written later; the ink is different, and the script smaller. Added to this and in pencil, at yet a later date, is a cloud around the words “a monk” with a line leading down to the word Taliessin.

On this one page, a monk “on Dubric’s permission” sings a poem about the mother of God treading throughout history with “chanting priest and singing bard.” This is followed by a “sad + uncertain” poem about Michael the Archangel sung by “the symbolist poet.” The fascinating thing is that Williams circles the monk, rather than the symbolist poet, to be replaced by Taliessin, and that although Dubric did not sing the first song, it was on his permission. (Later on, Taliessin himself becomes the symbolist poet.) It is also interesting that the phrase “on Dubric’s permission” was originally “at Dubric’s permission” with the ‘at’ crossed out and the word ‘on’ written above. The symbolist poet mentioned on this page must surely be the “vagabond poet” “fascinated by symbols” on page 16. It should be noted at this point that Dubric appears on five pages before this one and eight more times before Taliessin is mentioned. Keep in mind that Taliessin appears on this page only as a later addition.

The next seven pages that Dubric appears on stress his role as an ecclesiastic and reinforce his ties to Rome. Specifically, page 54 refers to Dubric as a “non-knightly character” (the other two being Merlin, with whom Dubric consults, and Fabio, a very minor and discarded character that exemplified the Roman culture in Britain, also a friend of Dubric’s). On page 59 (dealing mainly with the papal monarchy) Williams jots down “?Dubric knows Leo, +?met Augustine”.

Page 63 is again one of the pivotal pages that deals with both Dubric and Taliessin. Although Taliessin has already been discussed, it is important to keep in mind that this is the first time he is mentioned in the original sequence of the notes. On this page is a comparison of Dubric to Merlin; Dubric is described as “a heavy, thick-built, man” and Merlin as “a slighter, leaner, more ‘intellectual’, face.” Immediately following this is a list as follows:

The three great men of Arthur’s household;
Dubric, the ecclesiastic+priest

Merlin, the wizard+ 'scientist'
 Taliessin, the artist, poet, singer.

Under this list is a phrase “?add a mystic.” But a penciled cloud at the bottom of the page states, “no more mystics besides Galahad.” Williams has defined three modes of viewing the world. It appears that he wanted to add a mystic to the group “+ use them as a sort of four choruses commenting variously on the world.” Immediately following this line, but perhaps written after the added cloud referring to Galahad, he writes “?keep the more mystical meanings for the interlocutions of Dubric and Taliessin.” From that phrase, I immediately imagined “a heavy thick-built” man having mystical conversations with a “slighter, leaner, more ‘intellectual’ face” whom I thought of as Taliessin but then realized was Merlin. If Williams was to turn one of the three listed into the mystic, it was to be the poet Taliessin as Dubric receded into the background.

Page 67 has an interesting comment on Dubric: “? give him the old desire of the saints to turn to a life of contemplation.” Here Williams seems to be moving Dubric towards a more sedentary role. This is in contrast to the Dubric we find earlier (pg. 57) “riding fast with his knights to relieve it” (the sacking of Winchester by the Saxons). The phrase “riding fast with his knights” suggests Taliessin’s role as “the king’s . . . captain of horse” and his charge with his knights in the poem “Mount Badon” as published in *Taliessin Through Logres*. It is also interesting that Williams comments, regarding Dubric as contemplative, “isn’t this what he does in Malory?” He must have been thinking of Tennyson, because Dubric does not appear in Malory.

On page 124 Williams notes that “Merlin, intellect [crossed out] natural man (‘heathen’) conscious of the quest . . . but ignorant of its full meanings. Cf with Dubric-conscious of the meaning (+? suggest that Dubric has in himself achieved the Graal).” That would be a high honor for any man to achieve, and Dubric would be in lofty company. Dubric may not be the main concern of Williams as Galahad is, but he certainly was not thought of as a minor character.

Page 125 starts a two page section of notes about Ireland. Taliessin, Dubric, and Galahad each make an appearance here. Williams notes “Gaelic idea of the State opposed to the mediaeval one: self-governing communities bound together in a willing federation. ‘Forces of union not material but spiritual’.” (This last phrase is very close to Williams’s own idea of co-inherence.) There is a line going to a cloud in the margin from this statement. In the cloud is written

“?make Taliessin the traveler and spokesman of this idea as against ?Dubric+authority.” We just discovered on page 124 that Dubric has achieved the grail, but here we have in a political setting Taliessin chosen as the spokesman for one of Williams’s major theological themes. Keeping in mind this theological kernel in a political note, we find Galahad on page 126 “born in Ireland - ‘the land of saints and mystics’ - ‘There was scarcely a boundary felt between the divine country + the earthly.’” Ireland is a land of “political theology” and Taliessin, not Galahad, who is the main mystic in Williams’s thinking (as we saw on page 63), is to be its spokesperson. Taliessin is not to fill Dubric’s role as the main figure of the church who, along with Galahad, achieves the grail. He is to be the “vagabond poet” of page 16, the monk who became Taliessin, the “symbolist poet” of page 47.

Page 130 contains a poem about Taliessin who, along with Merlin, is “Arthur’s best-loved.” Williams calls him “The singer Taliessin, poet, knight, And maker of the everlasting things.” Taliessin’s star seems to be rising, while Dubric, on page 135, is still playing his role as an ecclesiastic who ties the story to history. (On page 135 Williams mentions “Deusdedit (d.663), sixth archbishop of Canterbury . . . ?introduce him as an acolyte or page to Dubric.”) The poem ends, “Shadowed with mightier seeming, not of man, / Than any there for labor’s praise or love’s / Save the archbishop and the sorcerer.” The sorcerer Merlin stays on in the latter poems, but the archbishop Dubric is dropped.

Page 145 nears the end of the manuscript as it does the end of Dubric. Taliessin is mentioned on three more pages, Dubric only one. This page also contains one of the few spots in the manuscript with writing other than Williams’s.

This page is similar to others in the manuscript where Williams is setting down in an organized fashion opposing lists of people and events or ideas that go along with them. Interestingly enough, this list deals with a subject brought up by another person to write in the book. On page 128 a note is commenting upon the absence of the Balen story, and the Dolorous Stroke and how it ties in with the Grail. Williams is obviously still trying to make sense of the story of the Dolorous Stroke (as many scholars are) as indicated by the gaps and question marks in the list. The most interesting item on the page, however, is Williams’s phrase, “?The story of Balen told by someone (?Launcelot).” In a little note added above Launcelot’s name are the words “rather Dubric, as telling the

story of the Fall.” Williams, always concerned with the theological aspects of things, is trying to set the story of the Dolorous Stroke in light of the Fall from Eden. Here we are dealing with symbols and mysteries, something that is just outside of Dubric’s role. We now can read the addition by yet another person to the manuscript. There is a peculiar asterisk (a cross with a dot in each quarter, used by Williams to cross-reference to other notes) written next to the Dubric addition. It leads to a note written across on the back of the facing page (144 verso) that reads, “later decided on Taliessin AR”. The initials AR identify the note’s author as Anne Ridler, the person who had possession of the manuscript and donated it to the Bodleian in 1989. I am in complete agreement with her. Dubric’s role as an ecclesiastic was not as well suited for telling a story laden with mystical, theological symbols. That role could only have been played by Taliessin.

On pages 154 and 155 Williams adds notes which give Taliessin the necessary background: “connected with Bran the Blessed and his invasion of Ireland . . . he was present with Noah in the Ark, at the Tower of Babel+ w. Alexander of Macedon.” After another page and a half of such notes, Williams finally jots that “Taliessin had walked in the Roman schools and learned the Greek legends + tales of the Gods, but most of all he loved the Irish singers and legends.”

Dubric’s last appearance occurs on page 166. On page 145, Williams had Dubric telling the story of the Dolorous Stroke and once again we find this on page 166, but in a little more detail. Here Dubric’s story seems to coincide with Galahad’s sitting in the perilous seat and “the whole action is assumed on to a higher” plane. Suddenly, the quest for the holy grail has become the fulfillment of the story of the Fall: “Till then inhibitions prevent Dubric and Merlin from teaching (? even from understanding) the meaning of their separate and peculiar doctrines.” Although Williams does not elaborate upon the doctrines, we can assume that they would follow along the lines of the roles of the characters as set out on page 63: “Dubric, the ecclesiastic + priest” and “Merlin, the wizard + ‘scientist.’”

One can extrapolate that this central story, the Dolorous Stroke and the quest of the Grail, can be seen in two ways, one religious (Dubric) and one secular (Merlin). The third person mentioned on page 63—“Taliessin, the artist, poet, singer”—eventually assumes the role of all three and tells the stories of Arthur in the two published cycles of poems.

At this point neither Dubric nor Taliessin are mentioned again in the manuscript. Although Dubric eventually disappears completely, he does show up in several poems published before *Taliessin Through Logres* and *The Region of the Summer Stars*. In the collection *Windows of Night* (1924), Dubric appears in a poem entitled "Honours." The poem deals with the highest chair of dignity that can be achieved in England. The three are "The Mayoralty of London; then, the See Of Dubric, Anselm, Temple; last, the chair . . . Of the English laureate." Williams still has Dubric as a character of high merit. A more telling mention of Dubric is in the poem *Taliessin's Song of Logres* (1931) (Dodds 169). Here Taliessin is the person telling the story of the chaos that ensues with the death of Uther Pendragon (similar to the Fall, the Dolorous Stroke). Williams mentions "Dubric the shepherd lieth hid / in the cellars of Cantuar and its towns." Rather than hiding in a cellar, Taliessin decides to "take ship for the Sacred Throne" (of the emperor in Byzantium) for "one cry for help ere the worse is done." At this point we can jump ahead to *Taliessin through Logres* and the poem *Taliessin's Return to Logres*.

At the falling of the first
 chaos behind me checked;
 at the falling of the second
 the mood showed the worst;
 at the falling of the third
 I had come to the king's camp;
 the harp on my back
 syllabled the signal word. (22-23)

Taliessin has returned to help Arthur establish Logres, and Dubric is not to be found.

In the manuscript *The Holy Grail* one can see Williams trying out new things, exploring different ideas, and expanding the Arthurian stories towards a cycle of poems. Dubric is perhaps the main example of this process. His first appearances are when Williams is exploring the Roman ties to Arthur's Britain, with Tennyson as his main inspiration for Dubric's role as a bishop. But even early on, Williams makes the comment "unless it does not fit the requirements of the poem." We also see Dubric being developed as Williams's voice to relate the more religious aspects of the poems, such as the Dolorous Stroke. But Williams also desires to explain the symbolic and mystical themes found in

Arthurian literature, such as the attainment of the Grail. At a certain point (page 125 in the manuscript, with notes on Ireland), Williams expands beyond the Roman-based setting for Arthur, incorporating a more Irish aspect, and Britain becomes Logres. It is then that Taliessin really comes into his own as the preferred vehicle for Williams to express the themes peculiar to his own cycle. Once again, it is on this page that Williams added the side note, "?make Taliessin the traveler and spokesman . . . as against ?Dubric + authority." From this point on, Dubric is relegated to Arthur's Britain while Taliessin is used by Williams to explore the realm of Logres and the Region of the Summer Stars.

Endnote

I would like to thank the staff at the Bodleian Library, without whose assistance this paper would not have been possible. Special thanks go to the estate of Charles Williams for allowing me to obtain a copy of the manuscript. And finally, thanks to my daughter, Emily, for practicing her typing to get the paper into the computer, and my wife, Bonnie (with her editing skills), for getting it out again.

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PAPER CALL

The 32nd Annual Mythopoeic Conference (Mythcon XXXII)

Theme: Many Dimensions: Modern Supernatural Fiction

Clark Kerr Conference Center, Berkeley, California, August 3-6, 2001

<http://www.mythsoc.org/mythcon32.html>

Scholar Guest of Honor: David Llewellyn Dodds

David Llewellyn Dodds is the editor of two books in Boydell and Brewer's "Arthurian Poets" series, one on Charles Williams and the other on John Masefield.

Author Guest of Honor: Peter S. Beagle

Peter S. Beagle, author of *The Last Unicorn*, *A Fine and Private Place* and many other books, is considered among the finest of modern fantasy writers. He is a two-time Mythopoeic Fantasy Award winner, for *The Folk of the Air* in 1987 and *Tamsin* in 2000. Beagle was a guest of honor at Mythcon IV in 1974 and we are honored to welcome him back in 2001.

The Mythopoeic Society is an international literary and educational organization devoted to the study, discussion, and enjoyment of the works of J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis and Charles Williams. It believes the study of these writers can lead to a greater understanding and appreciation of the literary, philosophical, and spiritual traditions which underlie their works, and can also engender an interest in the study of the genre of fantasy as a whole and the realm of myth and legend from which such authors derive their inspiration.

Papers dealing with the general conference theme are encouraged, as are those examining Charles Williams's role and influence in this genre. We also invite papers focusing on the work and interests of our Guest(s) of Honor, or on the other Inklings (especially Tolkien and Lewis). Papers on other fantasy authors and themes are also welcome. We are interested in papers from a variety of perspectives and disciplines.

Papers should be suitable for oral presentation within a time period of 20 to 45 minutes, leaving 10-15 minutes for questions. They should conform to the MLA Style Manual. Papers chosen for presentation at the conference will be considered for publication in *Mythlore: A Journal of J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*, the refereed journal of the Mythopoeic Society. Abstracts of papers should be sent to the Papers Coordinator at the following address (e-mail is acceptable) by April 30, 2001:

Edith L. Crowe, Clark Library
San Jose State University
San Jose, CA 95192-0028
ecrowe@email.sjsu.edu
Phone: 408.924.2738
Fax: 408.924.2701