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Guinevere's Role in the Arthurian Poetry of Charles Williams

Abstract

A study of Guinevere's meaning and function in Williams' Arthurian poems

Additional Keywords

Williams, Charles—Characters—Guinevere; Williams, Charles. *Arthuriad*—Moral and religious aspects

GUINEVERE'S ROLE IN THE ARTHURIAN POETRY OF CHARLES WILLIAMS

by Veronica L. Skinner

In his two volumes of Arthurian poetry, *The Region of the Summer Stars* and *Taliessin Through Logres*, Charles Williams lays emphasis on the eternal truth, the Christian truth, that he sees exemplified in the Arthurian legend. He sees the legend as displaying man's pride and greed, imperfections which are evidence of Original Sin. But it also points towards salvation, and towards the joyful harmony which, for Williams, is inseparable from salvation.

Appropriate to his profoundly Christian view of the world, Williams places the Grail -- a symbol of Christ's sacrifice for mankind, a symbol of redemption -- at the center of his Arthurian cycle. Arthur's very kingdom is created in order to house the Grail. Merlin emerges from the magic wood of Broceliande -- the home of energy, potentiality, feeling, and poetic impulse -- and summons Arthur to subdue the chaos that prevails in Britain (and, for Williams, chaos is always symptomatic of evil). Arthur is to be the bringer of order, an order suffused with Merlin's inspiration, so that the new kingdom will be a union of imagination with intellect, of energy with discipline. This kingdom, which Williams names Logres, "is to be the kingdom of a complete and balanced humanity."¹ As such, it will be a fitting home for the Grail.

In Williams' poetry, Arthur's kingdom gains its significance through its relation to the Grail, and the inhabitants of the kingdom are similarly assessed. Williams concerns himself not with the particular personalities and idiosyncracies of his characters, but with the role they have to play within this Grail-centered order. In their various spheres of action, do they, or do they not, contribute to the purpose of the kingdom?

Thus the universal implications which Williams finds in the legend affect his characterization of Guinevere. In the entire cycle, she speaks only once, and there is virtually no mention of her personal characteristics. Guinevere's importance does not lie in her as an individual, but in her relation to her role as queen and as a symbol of womanhood. She is to be "the feminine headship of Logres,"² and, in this role, she possesses a metaphysical importance second only to Arthur's.

The queen should provide the perfect example or image of femininity, of the sensuous aspect of creation as distinct from the intellectual. If all were as it should be, she would display the perfection of the physical universe in two ways: both in her beauty and in her relation to the intellect, the masculine aspect of creation, which would mirror the relationship between the physical universe and the principle of order that comes from God. This is not to say that Arthur is to be as God to her, for her role is not simply that of Arthur's wife. Rather, her role is that of queen, and her true queenhood consists in her being "the consort of Logres."³ In other words, she is to be in perfect harmony with and subordination to *the ideal and*

order which Arthur embodies and which has transformed Britain into Logres.

Guinevere fails to fulfil her role, but her failure is rooted in Arthur's transgression. Arthur, as early as his coronation, makes the decision that will eventually destroy his kingdom. In asking himself whether the king is "made for the kingdom, or the kingdom made for the king,"⁴ he decides for the latter. A line sung by Taliessin, "*More than the voice is the vision, the kingdom than the king,*"⁵ makes clear Arthur's error, as does the quotation from Dante's *De Monarchia* which Williams uses as a preface to *Taliessin Through Logres*:

Unde est, quod non operatio propria propter
essentiam, sed haec propter illam habet ut sit.

[And so it is, that the proper function does not
exist on account of the being, but the latter
exists for the sake of its proper function.]⁶

Williams' choice of this quotation as a preface to this volume indicates its importance for his Arthurian cycle, for it concerns the hierarchy of values that is to underlie the entire kingdom. Dante indicates the centrality of this question for a government by making essentially the same point several times in *De Monarchia*, saying that the legislator exists for the sake of those who are governed by law, and that a prince's authority is not his own property.⁷ When Merlin calls Arthur to be king, he does so in order to create the kingdom of Logres. And Williams uses the very word "calling" in the poem, "The Calling of Arthur" -- a word which has overtones of the phrase, "to have a calling," and which thereby suggests that Arthur's kingship is his vocation. Arthur, as king, owes the kingdom his devout service.

Thus Arthur's decision -- that the kingdom exists for *his* sake -- reverses what Merlin had intended and is a blow against the values that should prevail in Logres; it is, in fact, the Dolorous Blow:

Thwart drove his current against the current of Merlin:
In beleaguered Sophia they sang of the dolorous blow.⁸

The Dolorous Blow is here "a symbol of the egocentricism which is of the very nature of evil."⁹ In Malory, it was struck by Balin, and it laid waste a kingdom; here it is struck by Arthur, and it destroys a kingdom and endangers an empire.¹⁰

⁴ Charles Williams, "The Crowning of Arthur," in *Taliessin Through Logres* (London, 1938), p. 21.

⁵ "The Star of Percivale," *Taliessin*, p. 46.

⁶ *De Monarchia*, I, iii.

⁷ *De Monarchia*, I, xii, and III, vii. The same point is also to be found in the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas: in his Commentary on Aristotle's *Ethics*, V, Lesson 2 and in his Commentary on the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans, Chapter 12, Lesson 1.

⁸ "The Crowning of Arthur," *Taliessin*, p. 21.

⁹ C.P. Crowley, "The Grail Poetry of Charles Williams," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, XXV (1956), 490.

¹⁰ Williams, in his essay, "Notes on the Arthurian Myth," indicates that he had plans for a poem showing Bali wounding the Grail King. If Williams had lived to write this poem, it might very well

¹ C.S. Lewis, "Williams and the Arthuriad," in *Arthurian Torso*, ed. C.S. Lewis (London, 1948), p. 102.

² Charles Williams, "Taliessin in the Rose Garden," in *The Region of the Summer Stars* (London, 1944), p. 23.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

Logres is part of an empire which Williams portrays as a body in order to emphasize its organic unity. Byzantium, where Sophia is, is the center of the Empire and the home of order and hierarchy; Logres, possessing imagination as well as intellect, is the Empire's head. For that reason, Arthur's decision endangers Sophia: when the head loses control, the order and control of the entire body are in peril.

In depriving the kingdom of its proper guidance, Arthur's decision affects both Lancelot and Guinevere. Her love and beauty, now lacking direction, are appropriated by Lancelot's passion and energy, which also lack a guide. There would be nothing wrong with Lancelot's love of the queen if all were well in Logres. He would then love her as Dante loved Beatrice; his would be a Beatrician experience, one in which the lover sees the beloved not only as the individual that she or he is, but also as an image of God, clothed with the glory that comes from God.¹¹ Lancelot would love Guinevere virtuously (as Malory would have said) and would be led by love of her to the love of God. But the denial of hierarchy that is implicit in Arthur's decision plunges Arthur's kingdom, including Lancelot, into confusion. Williams describes Lancelot's emotional state in terms of the lion that is his heraldic symbol:

Lancelot's lion, bewildered by the smell of adoration,
roars around Guinevere's lordly body.¹²

Lancelot is ready to love, but lacks the guidelines which will define for him a proper love. He does not, however, remain confused for long. His Beatrician vision goes wrong: he commits the error of thinking that the glory which he sees in the queen is actually her personal possession, and he therefore does not proceed to adoration of God, who is its true source and authority. Instead of adoring God, Lancelot adores Guinevere; at Mass, "Lancelot's gaze at the Host found only a ghost of the Queen."¹³ In short, Lancelot commits idolatry.

Arthur's sin does not relieve Lancelot and Guinevere from responsibility for their actions. Although in one sense Arthur's sin precedes theirs -- for it is the lack of proper guidance that permits their emotions to go astray -- in another sense, as C.P. Crowley indicates, the sins of all three of them are one and the same sin.

The evil actions of Arthur, Guinevere, Lancelot and the others are all manifestations of the Dolorous Blow, so that the Blow becomes the exaltation of self that lies behind all sin. The whole complex of evil in the myth is thus seen as one continuous flow from the original sin of Adam. Every sin is seen to be part of the blow that killed Christ; every sin is seen as a link with the original sin in the sense that all are disordered movements of self.¹⁴

have had Balin striking the physical blow at the same time that Arthur was making his egocentric decision. This essay appears in *Image of the City and Other Essays*, ed. Anne Ridler (London, 1970).

¹¹ C.S. Lewis describes the Beatrician experience as follows: "The Beatrician experience may be defined as the recovery (in respect to one human being) of that vision of reality which would have been common to all men in respect of all things if man had never fallen. The lover sees the Lady as the Adam saw all things before they foolishly chose to experience good as evil...Williams believes that this experience is what it professes to be. The "Light" in which the beloved appears to be clothed is true light; the intense significance which she appears to have is not an illusion; in her (at that moment) Paradise is actually revealed, and in the lover Nature is renovated." ("Williams and the Arthuriad," p. 116.)

¹² "The Vision of the Empire," *Taliessin*, p. 8.

¹³ "The Star of Percivale," *Taliessin*, p. 47.

¹⁴ Crowley, p. 490.

The poem, "The Crowning of Arthur," suggests the simultaneity of the sins, for it suggests that the love between Lancelot and Guinevere is beginning just as Arthur makes his fateful decision. When, after the coronation, Guinevere starts to make her way to Arthur, Lancelot goes to her:

the king's friend kneeled,
the king's organic motion, the king's mind's blood,
the lion in the blood roaring through the mouth of
creation
as the lions roar that stand in the Byzantine glory.¹⁵

Like the lions in Byzantium, Lancelot's passion is responding to the glory before him; he is experiencing the adoration which will soon turn to idolatry. And it is as the two advance to Arthur, hand in hand, that the king's decision comes.

Sin manifests itself in different forms in Arthur and Guinevere, and these differences help bring about the latter's love for Lancelot. Arthur's egoism takes the form of love of self and of power. In addition to believing the kingdom to be his possession, he thinks of Camelot as "his city,"¹⁶ and, at Mass, "the king in the elevation beheld and loved himself crowned."¹⁷ Arthur, in his self-love, is rejecting the sharing, the exchange, the "give and take," involved in loving others. Withdrawing both from other people and from the discipline of rationality, he retreats into dreams of self-glorification,

dreaming of a red Grail in an ivory Logres
set for wonder, and himself Byzantium's rival
for men's thuribled and throated worship...¹⁸

As C.S. Lewis points out, "Arthur is an aesthete: imagination is the medium through which his egoism corrupts him."¹⁹ In Guinevere, however, sin takes a different form of self-indulgence. It manifests itself in her intensified and misguided passion. Whereas Arthur's sin makes him almost incapable of love, hers heightens her need of love. On the day that Arthur was crowned, she was able to enter only "into the king's mind,"²⁰ not into his heart; what more understandable, then, than her turning to Lancelot, whose passions match her own and who holds her hand as he leads her to the king?

In his poem, "Taliessin in the Rose Garden," Williams uses the image of redness to express both Guinevere's role as queen and her failure to fulfill it. Guinevere, in the garden, wears a ruby ring whose "deep-rose-royal"²¹ symbolizes the majesty of her position. In the sunlight, the ring reflects the color of the flowers surrounding it, so that their trembling seems to send a rush of redness into the stone, a flow which the poet Taliessin envisions as that of "the blood of the King Pelles, belted by the curse of the Dolorous Blow."²² The yielding of the flowers to the wind in this scene presents an image of Guinevere's yielding to her passions, with the consequent flow of color into the gem representing the consequences of her yielding.

Guinevere's heraldic device is a red chalice on a silver field, which suggests that if Logres had not gone wrong, Guinevere would have been worthy of being a Grail princess. She would have given birth to the achiever of the Grail, and there would have been no need for Pelles' daughter to take on the role of Galahad's mother. But her yielding to her disordered passions brings about the wounding of the ideal that she should embody, so that she

¹⁵ "The Crowning of Arthur," *Taliessin*, p. 21.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹⁷ "The Star of Percivale," *Taliessin*, p. 47.

¹⁸ "The Son of Lancelot," *Taliessin*, p. 55.

¹⁹ Lewis, p. 162.

²⁰ "The Crowning of Arthur," *Taliessin*, p. 21.

²¹ "Taliessin in the Rose Garden," *Region*, p. 23.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 24.

cannot be what she would have been. In terms of the dominant image of this poem, the royal red of the queen's gem is affected by the passionate flow of color from the trembling flowers.

But to Taliessin the color appears to go outward as well as in. The reflected movement of the roses seems to shoot out from the facets of the gem:

the flush of the roses
let seem that the unrestrained rush of the ruby
loosed a secular war to expand through the land,
and again the shore of Logres — and that soon —
felt the pirate beaks in a moon of blood-letting...²³

In the red of the roses he sees the blood that will be shed because of the queen's indulgence of her passions -- her offense against her queenship.

Guinevere is not alone with Taliessin in the garden. When the poet first sees her, she is talking with Dindrane, Perceval's sister, while a maid works nearby on the roses. For a moment Taliessin sees them as a single "rush of the crimson," but then, "his eyes cleared,"²⁴ he distinguishes between them. The moment when the three appear as one suggests the essential unity that should be present. The saintly Dindrane, who dies to save the life of another, and the maid, who works diligently on the roses, are doing as they ought within their respective spheres. If Guinevere possessed their disciplined devotion, she would truly embody the feminine headship of Logres.

The virtues belonging to Dindrane and to the maid are not excluded from this image of the reflecting ring. The red of flowing blood suggests sacrifice and redemption as well as wounds and death. It is the blood of Dindrane, shed to save one, and it is the blood of Christ, shed so save mankind. The Grail appears as red in Arthur's aesthetic dream, and red roses twice appear in the cycle as symbols of redemption: in "The Queen's Servant," they appear magically to clothe a freed slave; and, in "The Prayers of the Pope," the mysterious halting of the forces of evil is marked by the blooming of the "roses of the world...from Burma to Logres."²⁵ Thus the shedding of blood caused by Guinevere does not preclude her redemption.

Pointing towards the queen's future redemption is the fact that she feels the burden of her sin long before she rejects her love for Lancelot. Although Malory's Guinevere is troubled by her tempestuous emotions, she does not feel remorse for her sin until near the very end -- a lack in her which Williams sees as a serious fault. Williams rectifies this fault by showing his queen, midway in the cycle, having agonizing premonitions of what might come. Thus while Arthur sleeps, pleased with his dreams of "the Grail cooped for gustation and God for his glory,"²⁶ Guinevere lies awake, feeling the tentacles of chaos weighing heavily on her, and she sobs passionately at her vision of Lancelot degenerating into something evil.

Malory's Guinevere clearly feels remorse when she goes to Amesbury; she enters the convent in order to do penance for the evil that she has helped create. In Williams' poetry, however, Guinevere's feelings of unease are not shown as having fully matured into remorse by the time that she enters the convent. The poem, "The Meditation of Mordred," even contains the suggestion that she flees there merely so as to hide from Mordred.²⁷ But her occupying the cell that had been Dindrane's suggests that she will in time come to resemble Perceval's sister. Like Malory's queen, she will eventually choose to remain at the convent; it will be for her a deliberately chosen retreat for the

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

²⁵ *Region*, p. 54.

²⁶ "The Son of Lancelot," *Taliessin*, p. 58.

²⁷ *Region*, p. 43.

better serving of God. And, in her growing resemblance to Dindrane, whose name in religion is Blanchefleur,²⁸ she will attain the virtue of chastity as it is described by Williams:

chastity...[as]...more than a negation of lust; [as]...a growing, heightening, and expanding thing...[as] a state of spiritual being, and its spiritual expression...not at all inconsistent with marriage.²⁹

And the description of Guinevere during Lancelot's celebration of the Mass indicates that such growth does indeed take place:

In Blanchefleur's cell at Almesbury the queen
Guinevere
felt the past exposed; and the detail, sharp and dear,
draw at the pang in the breast till, rich and reconciled,
the mystical milk rose in the mother of Logres' child.³⁰

The forgiveness of sin and the reconciliation that are taking place are also in Guinevere. She is able to look at all the actions that have caused her passionate agony of the past and to be nourished by the suffering that she has experienced. She is enriched by it and reconciled to it; she now can see her actions in the light of eternity and can both ask for and receive forgiveness. In so doing, she restores her proper relation to the Grail and becomes what she had been meant to be -- the spiritual mother of Galahad and a true queen of Logres.

²⁸ Charles Williams refers to Perceval's sister both as Dindrane and as Blanchefleur. C.S. Lewis believes that Williams had already given her the name of Blanchefleur in his poetry when he realized that in the *Perlesvaus* she is called Dindrane. Williams liked her true name "too well to let it go, and adopted it with the explanation (given in *The Calling*) that Dindrane was her baptismal name and Blanchefleur her name 'in religion.'" (Lewis, p. 138.)

²⁹ Charles Williams, "The Figure of Arthur," in *Arthurian Torso*, p. 42.

³⁰ "Taliessin at Lancelot's Mass," *Taliessin*, p. 89.

Editorial Note

In this issue we see changes and additions to the staff. I personally wish to extend to the Canadian Art and Production Staff deep thanks for their dedication and hard work. They have been primarily responsible for the layout and art solicitation for numbers 12, 13, and 14 of *Mythlore*. They are responsible for the typing of pages 13, 14, 15, the second column of page 30, and pages 31 and 32 of this issue. The artwork on pages 18, 19, 26, and 27 was solicited or received through the Canadian Office. Because of the extra time it took to send material back and forth, and because of the additional cost due to postage and necessary phone calls from time to time, a decision to concentrate the production in one area was made. This decision was assisted by the coming forth of Karen Mathews to do the typing. She is a professional typesetter and has been able to enhance various portions of the text in this issue with some typesetting. Christine Smith agreed to be Art Editor, and has been a true asset in her assistance. Profound thanks goes to my wife Bonnie for her invaluable Johnny-on-the-spot help in a host of layout details that seemingly demand to be attended to at once. A great deal of unseen and absolutely necessary work goes into each issue. Thanks to all who have worked to make *Mythlore* what it now is.