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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

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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 Taliesin 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 Brocéliande -- 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." 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 idiosyncrasies 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," 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 intellect. 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." 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 fulfill 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," he decides for the latter. A line sung by Taliesin, "More than the voice is the vision, the kingdom than the king," makes clear Arthur's error, as does the quotation from Dante's De Monarchia which Williams uses as a preface to Taliesin Through Logres:

Unde est, quod non operatio propria prophetiam essentiam, sed haec prophet 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.]

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. 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.

The Dolorous Blow is here "a symbol of the ego-centricism which is the very nature of evil." 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.

5 "The Star of Perceval," Taliesin, 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 Taliesin, p. 46.
9 C.P. Crowley, "The Grail Poetry of Charles Williams, University of Toronto Quarterly, XXV (1956), 450.
10 Williams, in his essay, "Notes on the Arthurian Myth," indicates that he had plans for a poem showing Balin wounding the Grail King. If Williams had lived to write this poem, it might very well

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 be the beloved 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. Lancelot would love Guinevere virtually (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.

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 eyes at the Host found only a ghost of the Queen.” 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. Corvoley 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 as 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.

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.

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.

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” 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 the flow of the blood of the king Pelles, belted by the course of the Dolorous Blow." 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’s 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

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).

C.S. Lewis describes the Beatrician experience as follows: “The Beatrician experience may be defined as the recovery (with respect to one’s 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 illusion; in her (at that moment) Paradise is actualized, the mind in the lover Nature is renovated.” (“Williams and the Arthuriad,” p. 116.)

The Vision of the Empire,” Taliesin, p. 8.

The Star of Percival,” Taliesin, p. 47.

Crowley, p. 490.


16 Ibid., p. 21.

17 "The Son of Percival,” Taliesin, p. 47.

18 "The Son of Lancelot,” Taliesin, p. 55.

19 Lewis, p. 162.


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 out-
ward 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.

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 talk-
ing with Dindrané, 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," he distinguishes be-
tween them. The moment when the three appear as
one suggests the essential unity that should be
present. The saintly Dindrané, who dies to save
the life of another, and the maid, who works dil-
gently 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 Dindrané and to the
maid are not excluded from this image of the re-
flecting ring. The red of flowing blood suggests
sacrifice and redemption as well as wounds and
death. It is the blood of Dindrané, shed to save
one, and it is the blood of Christ, shed to 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
Svant," they appear magically to clothe a freed
slave; and, in "The Prayers of the Pope," the
mysterious hailing of the forces of evil is marked
by the blooming of the "roses of the world...from
Burma to Logres." Thus the shedding of blood
caused by Guinevere does not preclude her redemp-
tion.

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. Al-
though Malory's Guinevere is troubled by her tem-
pestuous 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 her 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 sobbs 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 hell that she has
helped create. In Williams' poetry, however, Guin-
evere'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 Dindrané'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
better serving of God. And, in her growing re-
ssemblance to Dindrané, 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, heightened, 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 Dindrané 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 Dindrané.
Williams liked her true name "too well to let it go,
and adopted it with Blanchefleur (given in The
Calling) that Dindrané 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 Pro-
duction 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 15, 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 ex-
tra time it took to send material back and forth, and be-
cause 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
typsetting. 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 ab-
солutely necessary work goes into each issue. Thanks to
all who have worked to make Mythlore what it now is.

23 Ibid., p. 24.
24 Ibid., p. 27.
26 Ibid., p. 54.
27 Ibid., p. 43.