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Whose English?: Language in the Modern Arthurian Novel

Abstract

Analyzes the use of language, mood/tone, vocabulary, syntax, idioms, metaphors, and ideas in a number of contemporary Arthurian novels.

Additional Keywords

Arthurian myth; Arthurian myth in literature; Language in literature; Style in literature

Whose English?

Language in the Modern Arthurian Novel

Lisa Padol



he style is the book. So says Ursula K. Le Guin in her essay "From Elfland to Poughkeepsie." She continues: If you remove the style, all you have left is the plot. This is partly true of history; largely true of fiction; and absolutely true of fantasy. (84) "Style," in this paragraph, refers to the way an author uses language. Vocabulary, syntax, metaphors, idioms, and ideas must be chosen with care. This is certainly true of modern Arthurian novels, in which the elements of modern, fiction, and fantasy are mixed in varying proportions, depending on the author's goals.

Not all authors care about the historical details of Arthur's reign, whatever they may have been, just as not all authors choose to write a novel of high fantasy. Arthurian novels come in all flavors, from Rosemary Sutcliff's historical and elegiac *Sword at Sunset*, of which she boasts: "Almost every part of the story... has some kind of basis outside the author's imagination," (viii) to T. H. White's magical, deliberately anachronistic *The Once and Future King*, which uses a medieval setting, and from Robertson Davies' *The Lyre of Orpheus*, which, although set in the twentieth century, draws parallels between the modern characters and their Arthurian counterparts, to the graphic novel *Camelot 3000*, a comic book in which Arthur and his knights return in the thirtieth century. For each story, language must be used differently. It would be as inappropriate to use sixth century syntax for Davies' book as it would be to use modern vocabulary for Sutcliff's novel. Neither White nor the authors of *Camelot 3000* care about historical accuracy; the former is most interested in exploring the moral implications of the use of force, while the latter are writing a fast-paced adventure for readers who expect the conventions of comic books to be followed.

This preliminary study is limited to selected passages in a few novels which make some attempt to set the story of Arthur in the sixth century. While any such study inevitably contains a subjective component, there are guidelines for recognizing when language is used successfully to aid in the creation of what Tolkien calls Secondary Belief in the world of the novel. (37 - 38) There are six factors which I will consider: language itself, mood or tone, vocabulary, syntax, idioms or metaphors, and ideas.

All of the Arthurian novels considered in this paper are written in English. We would not expect a modern author to write in Arthur's British, or in Latin or Anglo-Saxon, or in a combination of the three. Nor may a modern author reasonably demand that the reader be fluent in Latin and Anglo-Saxon, let alone Old Welsh or British! After all, most authors

are writing for the general public, not for linguistic scholars. Nevertheless, a sprinkling of Latin or Anglo-Saxon can be very effective. Sharan Newman uses the latter to good effect. In the third book of Newman's trilogy, Guinevere attempts to persuade some frightened Saxon children to come into her house, which they are convinced must be haunted by fearsome ghosts:

"Leaf child," she began. The little girl started, then cautiously touched a lock of Guinevere's hair.

She smiled. "*Sua sua Mama*," she said.

"Yes!" Guinevere was pleased. "Just like Mama's.

Now, Comst! In *hus na grimlicum gastum*."

The child looked doubtful. Guinevere repeated, "*Na grimlicum gastum!*"

"What are you saying?" Letitia asked.

"I think I'm telling them we have no ghosts, but I'm not sure," Guinevere admitted.

"Well, let's try to get them inside again and find out.

I hope they learn good British soon. I'll never get my throat around that guttural language!" (269)

This excerpt shows that it is not necessary to translate every word of the foreign passages. Readers unfamiliar with Anglo-Saxon will have no difficulty understanding what is going on. The excerpt also illustrates character. The Saxon children are frightened, sharing the superstitions of their parents. Guinevere, previously a self-centered woman, cares enough about the children to take the time to speak to them in their own language. However poor her command of it may be, at least she makes the attempt, which is more than can be said of her kinswoman Letitia, who will wait until the children learn British, which she considers vastly superior. Newman is able to indulge in subtle irony here, as the main language now spoken in Britain is closer to Anglo-Saxon than to the old British language.

Newman is very sparing in her use of Anglo-Saxon. Much more would either leave the audience in the dark, or require an extended translation, which would clutter the narrative. A work intended for scholarly audiences might be able to pull this off, but Newman is writing for a broader market.

Gillian Bradshaw also makes use of another language, in this case, Latin. Bradshaw quotes five lines of the Aeneid, which her narrator Gwalchmai (Gawain) then translates, with the help of his mother, Morgawse, who supplies an Irish word. Gwalchmai begins:

"Thus the...prophet?"

"Or poet," Morgawse murmured. "Like an ollamh."

"Thus the prophet began to speak: 'You who are

sprung from the blood of gods, Trojan, son of Anchises, easy is the descent of Avernus: night and day the gate of black Dis is open; but to recall your step and to come out to the upper air, this is the toil, this is the labor..." I stopped, swallowing suddenly. "Avernus. That is Iffern, isn't it? The Dark Otherworld?"

She nodded, her eyes cold and amused. "Does that frighten you, my hawk?"

I put my hand over the page, shaking my head, but the catch was still in my throat. Easy is the descent, but to recall your steps... (*Hawk of May*, 72)

It is unnecessary for the reader to be familiar with the Aeneid. Bradshaw provides the translation, and it is not essential to know the context of the quote. What is important is what the passage means to Gwalchmai. For him, it is a warning that he has begun to descend into the darkness of his mother's evil sorcery, and it is only with great difficulty that he will free himself. Morgawse's dark sorcery, like the passage from the Aeneid, will continue to haunt him even after he vows to serve Arthur, who fights for the Light.

Why does Bradshaw bother to provide the original Latin? She is attempting to make Gwalchmai's world real to the reader. The Latin quote is one of many details which make his world more solid. Providing the actual words which Gwalchmai reads is no more frivolous than explaining that Morgawse's copy of the Aeneid includes only the first half of the poem, and cost her "the value of ten cows in gold." (71) Both kinds of details create a special mood. The solidity of these mundane details anchors Morgawse's magic, making it easier for the reader to accept in an otherwise more or less historical novel. At the same time, because the everyday details of life in the sixth century are strange to most readers, these details paradoxically reinforce the magicalness of the world. (See Attebury, Tolkien, and Watson.)

When authors build up a mood like Bradshaw's, they must not break it unnecessarily. For example, in the third book of her Guinevere trilogy, Newman has the following passage:

The room had suddenly become more crowded as Sir Lancelot, silver armor shining and white plumes waving, pulled his panting horse up in front of the dais. Hanging onto his ankle, nearly in a state of collapse, was a young man. He was wrapped in a rough woolen tunic and his shoes were coming apart. As he stood gasping for air, he raised his shaggy head and looked around. He breathed more deeply and a slow grin of delight appeared. Lancelot dismounted. He climbed up to the table, bowed to the King and Queen, looked back at his companion and shrugged.

"Arthur, this is Percival. He followed me home. May I keep him?" (5)

For two books, Newman has carefully created the illusion of a sixth century world that is at once reasonably historically accurate and magical. In one line, she shatters it for the sake of a cheap laugh, if indeed the reader laughs, rather than winces. Tolkien sums up the results of Newman's technique, saying:

The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from outside. (38)

Newman has deliberately created the moment of disbelief which shatters her spell.

It must be emphasized that the trouble with Newman's passage is that it is out of place in her novels. If it had appeared in Berger's *Arthur Rex*, it would not have been inappropriate. Authors of ironic novels, such as Berger and Twain, will regularly establish and then destroy a mood, for humorous or satirical purposes.

Similarly, vocabulary which would be inappropriate in the novels of Newman and Bradshaw is perfectly acceptable in David Drake's novel, *The Dragon Lord*. One of Drake's characters says of Arthur: "Umm. Yeah, he is mad, isn't he?" (58) Neither "umm" nor "yeah" is historically accurate, but this language accurately reflects what the character would say if he were speaking English. This is not Le Guin's language of Elfland; however, Drake is not writing a novel of high fantasy. His characters do not live in the magical world of Bradshaw's novels, but in a much grittier and more unpleasant world. Both authors take pains to make the reader believe that their version of the sixth century might have existed, and both use the language appropriate to describe their respective worlds.

Just how fussy should an author be when it comes to vocabulary? Persia Woolley considers this question in the introduction to the first book of her trilogy about Guinevere. She says:

It is easy to become very picky about language in a work such as this. For instance, would these people use slang? Can one use the term "lunch" or "book" when the word itself wasn't invented for a number of centuries to come? If this principle is carried to its logical extreme, one couldn't even use the Anglo-Saxon and French words which make up such a large body of our vocabulary, since technically they weren't part of the Celtic tongue. In the end I decided that the purist should view this book as a translation; the characters themselves would have been speaking Brythonic or Latin or Goidelic anyway, and whether they called it lunch or the midday meal, book or tablet, the concept remains the same. (ix)

Woolley is correct: The reader is not jarred when the midday meal is called lunch. At the same time, individual words can make a big difference. Consider the following passage, from the first book of Woolley's trilogy: "With a gulp I reached over and put my hand on my parent's arm, stricken by the realization that this was as difficult for him as it was for me." (7) The word "parent" is not slang. Perhaps it is more historically accurate than "father" in this context. Nevertheless, to the modern ear, it sounds wrong. Similarly, when Parke Godwin's Arthur uses the word "boyo" in *Firelord* (315), I wince, even though Godwin's Arthur would have used a word that was equally informal in his own language.

However, vocabulary is only one factor in the use of language. Another is syntax. In Rosemary Sutcliff's *Sword at Sunset*, when Guenhumara (Guinevere) realizes that something has made her husband Artos (Arthur) almost impotent, she says: "Let you tell me the once, and be done with the telling." (238) Guenhumara's words are perfectly clear. Every single one is English. Yet, a modern speaker would say "Tell me once and get it over with." Guenhumara's vocabulary and syntax signal to the reader that he is not in the world of the twentieth century.

In the prequel to *Sword at Sunset*, *The Lantern Bearers*, Sutcliff's protagonist Aquila uses a similar phrase:

He flung the willow basket aside, and caught the other man by the shoulders, shaking him, thrusting his own distorted face into the one that looked back at him as quietly as ever. "Tell me! By Our Lord, you shall tell me!"

"Let me go," Brother Ninnias said. "I am as strong as you, possibly stronger. Do not make me put out my strength against one who has eaten my salt."

For a few moments Aquila continued to drag him to and fro; then he dropped his hands, panting. "Let you tell me where he is!" (104)

Again, the strange syntax is present. Aquila says "Let you tell me", not "Tell me where he is". Something else is happening in this passage, as well.

It would be unusual, albeit not impossible, for a character in a novel set in the twentieth century to say "By Our Lord, you shall tell me!" By putting these words in Aquila's mouth, Sutcliff again reminds the reader that Aquila comes from a time when such oaths were more common, particularly in moments of stress. It would be extremely surprising if a character in a novel set in the present day were to say, as Nennius does, "Do not make me put out my strength against one who has eaten my salt." The first half of the sentence is unusual. The modern man would be more likely to say, "Don't make me fight you." Even more unusual, however, is the reference to eating salt. This harkens back to the rules of hospitality which simply don't exist in twentieth century America or Britain. A man living in Britain today would never say or even think Nennius' words, any more than a sixth century man would say, "I don't wanna punch out the lights of a guy who just treated me to a beer."

Sutcliff is going beyond vocabulary and syntax. She is dealing with idioms. If vocabulary concerns itself with the individual word, and syntax with the way a word is used in a sentence, metaphors and idioms concern themselves with the content of a clause or a sentence.

It is a relatively simple matter to avoid contractions and to edit out individual words which are inappropriate in historical novels. Using idioms and metaphors correctly is more difficult; yet, using them incorrectly is just as jarring as a slip in vocabulary. It might even be easier to overlook a single misplaced word than it would be to overlook Arthur saying, "It ain't over till the fat lady sings."

Like Sutcliff, Bradshaw takes the care to use idioms and metaphors which are appropriate for a sixth century setting. For example, when Rhys ap Iwan, the narrator of *Kingdom of Summer*, describes how he asked Gwalchmai (Gawain) to take him to Arthur's city, he says: "I came over a bit closer to him, looked at him, and felt my heart settle like a wineskin with a puncture." (49) This makes the world of the sixth century realer. There would be nothing wrong with Rhys using a more familiar idiom, such as: "I felt butterflies in my stomach", but the unfamiliar comparison of the heart to a punctured wineskin drives home to the reader the fact that he is not in the Poughkeepsie of the twentieth century, but in the Elfland of Arthur's kingdom of summer.

Joy Chant's *The High Kings* is an anthology of stories set in an Elfland of a different kind. Bradshaw uses a simple, beautiful English, embroidered with metaphors strange to the reader, yet familiar to her characters. This is the language which Le Guin calls "the noblest of all." (83) Joy Chant, on the other hand, uses gaudy, ornate, wonderful language to signal that the reader has entered the realm of Fairie. A beautiful woman is described as follows:

The daughter of Corineus came into the feast; she was beautiful and proud, and her name was Vennolandua. The red berry of the rowan was not more glorious than her hair, nor its blossom whiter than her skin. Her brows were black and fine, and the glance of her eyes bright as the glance of a falcon on a cliff. (33)

The reader is unlikely to have to refer to a dictionary, but this is not the simple language of Sutcliff and Bradshaw. This is the language of a Celtic wonder tale. It is not merely the individual words that make this passage work. The first sentence is carefully structured; the reader does not learn Vennolandua's name until after she has been described as "beautiful and proud." Chant says, "and her name was Vennolandua", where the reader might expect the words "and she was called Vennolandua." Furthermore, a modern description of a beautiful woman is unlikely to linger on her brows. Red hair is more likely to be compared to fire than to red berries. Even if the less likely comparison were to be made, how many people would describe hair as "the red berry of the rowan" rather than simply "red berries"? Even if the longer description were used, one might expect the sentence to read "Her hair was more glorious than the red berry of the rowan", but Chant says, "The red berry of the rowan was not more glorious than her hair," inverting the expected order and using a negative comparison, instead of a positive one. Finally, few people would compare a woman's eyes to those of a falcon. Indeed, not many city dwellers have ever seen a falcon.

Chant isn't working in a vacuum. She is using language familiar to any reader of wonder tales. The amazing thing is that Chant makes it seem so simple. It would be easy to be fooled into thinking that anyone can imitate this style. After all, Chant imitated it, borrowing from her sources.

Do not believe it! As Le Guin points out, "The archaic manner is indeed a perfect distancer, but you have to do it perfectly. It's a high wire: one slip spoils all." (80) A less skilled author than Chant would create a passage that felt fake and was painful to read.

Chant successfully uses the archaic manner in *The High Kings*. Bradshaw and Sutcliff use a simpler language which they embellish with vocabulary, syntax, metaphors, idioms, and ideas appropriate to the sixth century. While their novels may not be to everyone's taste, these three authors keep perfect control of their language from start to finish.

Not all authors are so skilled. For example, Drake breaks the mood of gritty realism in *The Dragon Lord* when Merlin summons a dragon for Arthur. The wizard explains:

"what you think is a dragon, what looks like a dragon, is really thousands and thousands and uncounted thousands of dragons....A whole row of them moving each for an instant into this universe from one in which wyverns can exist."

"One exists right there," Arthur said...

"But only because of my magic," Merlin replied, "and only for the briefest moments. Then it's back in the cosmos I drew it from and another - from a wholly separate existence - is there in its place for another hair's-breadth of time...instead of having the same wyvern repeat itself from myriads of identical universes - I added a time gradient as well. This way each of the creatures is a little older, a little larger than the one before....There isn't any end of worlds, worlds with wyverns leaping and squalling and spitting flame. It's my control that chooses which world is plucked of which wyvern [...] that and a sort of...inertia that the process itself gives it. I can't be ordering the creature to breath or telling it which muscles to tense so that it can take a step. That sort of thing just...goes on...the simulacrum[...]made from thousands of wyverns[...]will act by itself as though it were one real wyvern, here and now....They're not at all like things of this world....They couldn't breath if they were here, if they had to stay. Things weigh much more in their worlds and the air is much thicker, besides being different. That's how they can fly, even though they're huge when they grow." (143-145, *The Dragon Lord*)

No sixth century man would ever have words like "inertia" or "gradient" in his vocabulary. However, the problem with the language of this passage is not limited to the vocabulary. No sixth century man would understand the concept of tensing muscles in order to take a step, or that conditions in our world prevent grown dragons from flying. The ideas do not belong in the mouth of a sixth century character any more than a word like "inertia" does. Nor is the language of this passage the language of fantasy. This is the language of science fiction, where the mad scientist explains his experiment to a cooperatively stupid assistant so that the audience will understand it. Such language would be acceptable from T. H. White's Merlin, who lives backwards in time, but it does not suit Drake's Merlin. (See Grumer.)

Woolley has a similar, albeit less obvious, lapse. In

Child of the Northern Spring, Guinevere ponders the wisdom of telling Arthur about the improper advances made to her by Maelgwn. She decides that doing so would jeopardize an alliance between Arthur and Maelgwn, then muses:

Then too, Arthur and I were still so new to each other, this might add an unpleasant tension to our relationship. I didn't want him thinking I was some silly young girl who couldn't keep a randy courtier in his place. And in fact my words to Maelgwn had implied that I would not tell Arthur if he backed down. (287)

This sounds like a modern woman worrying about harassment at the office, not like a sixth century Queen worrying about the political implications of the incident. All one has to do is replace the words "randy courtier" with the words "lecherous boardmember" to make this passage something a modern woman might say. (See Le Guin 74 - 75.)

The ideas in this passage belong to the twentieth century, not to the sixth. Worrying about tensions in a relationship is a modern idea. In fact, the word "relationship" in this passage is used in the twentieth century sense. (See Rosenzweig.) This is not to say that Guinevere could not possibly have worried about her relationship with Arthur, but she would not voice her worries in the same way a modern woman would.

One might charge that the objection to the passage centers on one phrase, "this might add an unpleasant tension to our relationship." Even if this is so, that one phrase destroys the illusion Woolley is trying to maintain.

Why should this be? How is this any different than Drake's character saying "Umm" and "yeah"? Isn't the author merely taking the liberty of putting a sixth century person's thoughts into twentieth century words?

In Drake's case, yes. The character who says "umm" and "yeah" is a mercenary who has seen too much of his decidedly un-ideal world. He would certainly have used similar words to the ones Drake gives him. He does not live in Elfand, even though he does not live in Poughkeepsie either.

Woolley, however, puts the passage about Maelgwn in Guinevere's mouth. Guinevere is not a common woman, but a princess who will soon be High Queen of a country she is coming to love. Guinevere, of all people, ought not to sound like a woman of our time.

But surely there are parallels between her situation and the situation of the woman who deals with harassment at the office? Certainly. A large part of the appeal of Arthurian novels is that such parallels can be drawn. Nevertheless, an equally important part of the appeal of these novels is that the characters are also different from the people whom the reader meets every day. One expects this difference to be reflected in the language of the novel, unless, of course, the author is not concerned with historical accuracy. However, Woolley, as her introduction makes clear, is concerned with sounding authentic.

A different problem occurs earlier in the novel. Nearly two hundred pages into the book, Guinevere describes Carlisle to the reader. She says:

Carlisle has been a center of trade and travel since the time of the Empire, for not only does it command the western end of the Wall, it also straddles the Main Road which leads both north and south. In the days of the Legions it must have been a lively place, playing host to a steady stream of soldiers and supply shipments, military commanders and visiting bureaucrats.

Nowadays the King is the government, and the center of the state is wherever he happens to be. With no more need for office space and administrators, the buildings of the Empire stand empty and decaying except where the local people have appropriated the space for purposes of their own. (Woolley 181)

The description continues for two more paragraphs. While one might question the use of the word "bureaucrats" or Guinevere's claim that office space and administrators became obsolete, a more serious problem is that the passage is out of place in the novel. Guinevere is narrating the story of her life to an unknown audience; she is not writing to a friend to explain the history of the city. Woolley has stopped the story to describe Carlisle, using language that might be found in a Michelin travel guide or a history textbook. (See Rosenzweig.) In this context, it is as if an author of a science fiction novel were to stop the plot for the hero to say, "The hyperspace drive, as everyone knows, was invented..."

Nor is the description of Carlisle essential to the novel. By stopping the story to describe something, an author implies that what is being described is so important that the reader must pay special attention to it. If this is not the case, if the description is intended primarily to add to the details which make the world of the novel more real to the reader, then the description must be worked in unobtrusively.

There is one final problem which deserves mention: the problem of being too successful at using the language of Elfland. Nikolai Tolstoy's novel, *The Coming of the King*, uses an amazing, lush, and barely readable English. Consider the following passage:

The chariot trundles the length of the heavenly highway, that glorious trail we call Caer Gwydion, the trail which each man treads from his going forth to his lying down. It is the jewel-studded belt which binds the heavens, the road which runs from north to south the length of the Island of the Mighty. May the day of its loosing be far off, O Bright Shining One! (419)

This is a magnificent paragraph. No words are too modern; no phrases or concepts appear which would be out of place in the magical world which Tolstoy describes. His control of language is flawless. People do not speak like that today.

Nor can they read much of this. The entire 671-page novel is written in this vein. It is narrated by Merlin, who

has no compunction about describing underworld and underwater journeys for twenty pages or more. The above passage is representative in everything except length; it is somewhat shorter than the average paragraph. Tolstoy's novel, marketed for the general public, is an incredible linguistic tour-de-force, and I would be very impressed by any non-academic reader who managed to get past the second chapter. One would have to forgive even the serious scholar of Arthuriana who found this novel to impossible to finish.

How does Tolstoy's novel differ from Chant's? The most obvious difference is the length. Chant's book is less than a third the size of Tolstoy's. Also, her book is an anthology, and no single story is longer than thirty pages.

Moreover, while ornate, Chant's language is not as difficult as Tolstoy's. The reader always knows what is happening in her book, and something is always happening. Tolstoy suspends the simple plot of his novel for magical journeys and confrontations. It is often difficult to understand what is happening in these scenes, and I must confess that I still do not understand many of them. Tolstoy's novel has many Latin, Celtic, Anglo-Saxon, and Finnish words, not all of which are translated, even where translation seems essential. Finally, Chant's characters are better developed than Tolstoy's. The most interesting character in Tolstoy's novel is the Roman soldier Rufinus, who narrates his own story to Merlin. It is surely no coincidence that this part of the novel is told in simpler language than Tolstoy uses elsewhere.

This is not to say that authors must "write down" to readers, but the probable limits of their readers must be respected. Within these limits, it is possible to make the sixth century world of Arthur real to the reader through careful use of vocabulary, mood, syntax, metaphors and idioms, ideas, and language itself. Whether the world created is gritty and unpleasant, like Drake's; splendidly ornate, like Chant's and Tolstoy's; or grounded in everyday life, yet still magical, like Sutcliffe's, Bradshaw's, Woolley's, and Newman's; a firm control of language is essential to its creation.

(See page 29 for Works Cited.)



evoke. We may call it the myth of Arcadia, the belief that nature heals and that people who live close to the soil are somehow purer, fresher. It may or may not be true, but it is a very old idea. Let us look again at Susan Sowerby.

Though Susan speaks simply, in very braid Yorkshire indeed, and has a modest opinion of herself (again like the Christian view of the humility of Mary, the blessed Mother), we can see a special light about her. Particularly do we see this at the moment when she enters the Secret Garden for the first time, just as the children have been singing the Doxology:

The door in the ivied wall had been pushed gently open and a woman had entered. She had come in with the last line of their song and she had stood still listening and looking at them. With the ivy behind her, the sunlight drifting through the trees and dappling her long blue cloak, and her nice fresh face smiling across the greenery, she was rather like a softly coloured illustration in one of Colin's books. She had wonderful affectionate eyes which seemed to take everything in — all of them, even Ben Weatherstaff and the "creatures" and every flower that was in bloom. Unexpectedly as she had appeared, not one of them felt that she was an intruder at all. Dickon's eyes lighted like lamps.

"It's Mother — that's who it is!" he cried, and he went across the grass at a run.

Colin began to move towards her, too, and Mary went with him. (p. 233)

And there, I think, we shall leave them. Once more the mystical Garden has flowered, once more the Universal Mother gathers her children to herself. Colin will be healed of his lameness, Mary of her loneliness, and Archibald Craven of his despair. Yes, "the garden is found... we have come home at last." Praise God, we may well say, from whom all blessings flow!

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