

Essays in Medieval Studies 1

[Page numbers of the printed text appear at the right in bold.]

page 62*Prophecy, Dragons and Meaning in Malory***Lesley Kordecki**

Of all the perplexing aspects of medieval literature, the popularity of the courtly romance continues most puzzling to modern scholars. The question is, perhaps, not how people could enjoy such oftentimes rambling, almost chaotic not to say bad narratives, but rather, how a people who also appreciated sermons, saints' lives, allegories, and biblical exegesis could possibly see any merit in these seemingly meaningless stories.

As with any aesthetic question, the answer is far too complex to attempt in a brief study, but I would like to contribute a slight redefinition of the problem which was the accidental result of my own peculiar research in Malory. In tracing the occurrence and function of dragons in Malory's romances, I noticed that the creatures are often found in an episode which proves significant or even determinative to the major themes of Arthurian romance, i.e., Arthur's life, Round Fable chivalry, and the quest for the Holy Grail. This in itself is not so remarkable since dragons or otherwise monstrous creatures frequently appear in prophetic sequences, such as dreams, and prophecy would be used to foreshadow the prominent events of the narratives. What struck me was the evidence of premeditation in tales that seem to flaunt sloppy plots the rather surprising attention to overall meaning.

One of the strangest anomalies of the medieval romance is that it does not appear to "mean" in the same way that other contemporary genres do. Biblical commentaries clearly illustrate the tendency to supply a stated meaning for a narrative. Scientific

page 63

encyclopedias adapted from classical writers were modified in such a fashion that all animals, plants, and even stones would have meanings provided for them. One would expect Ovid to be moralized, not only to make a Christian out of him, but to give his tales meaning meaning which is stated along with the narrative. This was an aesthetic principle, not merely a theological one, a propensity toward explicit and accompanying interpretation which was in no way limited by our modern demand for subtlety. The meaning of saints' lives was to supply models for the reader. Sermons are pure meaning, employing *exempla* or narratives to round out, make more powerful and artistically complete, the statements which they proffer. Allegorical writings, of course, structurally intertwine meaning and plot.

Most genres display stated meaning, except the romance, which at least in this respect can be seen as a forerunner of our modern literature. In an age of literary hierarchy and order, the romance might easily have been considered the poor cousin of the more serious works, much as it has since been considered the poor cousin of the epic.

If we accept, then, that the reader of that time demanded some kind of meaning in a romance, just as in a saint's life, we must look for it in what we call plot, for characterization in romance is as sparse and unrewarding as stated meaning. Further, we might simply consider meaning to be the application of a particular narrative to that body of information, ideals, and dreams which we each have in our own perception of reality. The application need not be direct. Meaning does not presuppose the "how-to" aspect of, say, the saint's life, but, on the other hand, it can hardly emanate from purely escapist literature, whose definition and, therefore, existence is highly questionable anyway.

page 64

Meaning is a putting of things together, seeing things as a whole. Malory's tales, like all romances, seem to reek of fragmentation because the plots are exuberant, rambling, and over-indulgent. Yet, curiously enough, when we think of romance material in all its jumble and inconsistencies, we perceive a world, a literary cosmos, within which principles legitimately and interestingly operate. The profuse plotting itself seems to carry the meaning, and not in any really subtle way, but by using the only method available for plots, that is, by the sequencing of events. And sequence, of course, demands an understanding of past, present, and future.

In romances, we seem to be in a perpetual present, following a knight around, often losing that sense of pattern which we call meaning, as we wonder why we have to hear about this event or that one, and how it connects to what has gone before or will come after. Morton Bloomfield aptly described the phenomenon as the "unmotivated episode" which gives romance its essential "sense of mystery."¹ We must be meant to feel a little lost; we forgive this flaw as we reach the end of the good romances.

If the romance carries its meaning in its plot, we must look to the rarer mention of past and future in this world of present for sequence, pattern, writer's intention, and the more nebulous thing we call meaning. Continuity with the past is accomplished in the usual ways in Malory, through mention of historical battles and lineage of characters. More unconventionally, the Arthurian romance achieves a sense of patterning with the past through one character's longevity. When Merlin appears in the narrative, we glimpse an overall pattern. If Merlin cares enough to affect the outcome of an episode, we know that particular action somehow fits significantly into the meaning of the story.

page 65

A feeling of the past, then, is embodied in the family heritage of characters, mention of historical events, and the singularly effective character of Merlin. Romances, however, also keep an ace in the hole by being able to draw from the reader's or listener's memories of previous stories about the same characters. The romance at hand couches itself in this body of information in much the same way as any serialized story. Familiarity breeds interest and the points emphasized or repeated lead to the meaning.

Romances deal similarly with references to the future. Distant battles, the deeds of as yet unborn children, and Merlin's (as well as hermits' and strange ladies') straightforward prophecies all contribute to story focal points which we use to formulate meaning. Prophecy employs monstrous imagery, and attention to only one such motif the dragon-will demonstrate Malory's handling of unstated meaning, but meaning, nevertheless, in the seemingly meaningless medieval romance.

Arthur himself is not remembered for any grand dragon combat,² but dragons do figure in his legend, interwoven in the narrative in a manner characteristic of the genre. The earlier renditions of his story, as told by Nennius, Geoffrey of Monmouth, Wace, and Layamon all relate the episode of Arthur's ancestor Vortigern (or Guorthigirnus), who could not build a tower until Merlin reveals that two *vermes* (in later writers, clearly dragons) are battling underground. Merlin foretells that the red *vermis*, signifying the red dragon of the people of Britain, will be overrun by the white *vermis*, which represents the Saxons.³

From this simple episode Geoffrey constructs his highly portentous scenario, resulting in an astounding number of omens, some enigmatic, some promptly clarified, which we know as the *Prophetia*

page 66

Merlini. Using the ominous white dragon as a springboard, Merlin launches into his mystical animal allegory which is often punctuated by dragons:

The German Worm will trample religion again. The red dragon will gain strength ... The German Worm will take the crown. The seeds of the white dragon are decimated. Two more dragons (one killed by envy, the other under cover of authority) ... Boar, Ram, Ass, Girl, Hedgehog, Heron, Fox ... Dragon of Worcester against the Giant of Wickedness ... dragons with wings fight those without.⁴

Wace in his *Roman de Brut* and Layamon in his Middle English *Brut* both retain the story, although in Wace, Merlin prophesies only that the dragons (no longer worms) are future kings.⁵ Layamon embellishes the story and describes the dragons as fire-breathing. Merlin's prophecy is of Uther and Aurelius and Arthur only.⁶

This history of Arthur's family is omitted in the later English versions. The *Alliterative Morte Arthure* begins with the messenger from the Roman Emperor Lucius addressing Arthur, well after the accounts of Wace and Layamon, who were more concerned with Britain's story, not just its famous king's. Malory's narratives likewise begin after Vortigern's time with the fabulous events surrounding the conception of Arthur. As it turns out, this earlier episode would have interfered with Malory's larger intentions.

Geoffrey's second dragon appears in the vision of Uther, Arthur's father. At the time of the poisoning of his brother, Aurelius, Uther sees in the sky a star of great magnitude projecting a beam of light.

page 67

At the end of the beam is a ball of fire spread out in the form of a dragon. Two rays of light emerge from the dragon's mouth: one directed toward Gaul and the other toward the Irish Sea. This latter ray shatters into seven small lights. Merlin, again interpreting, informs Uther that Aurelius is dead and the dragon signifies Uther, the beam toward Gaul indicates Arthur, the beam shining toward the Irish Sea, Anna, whose sons and grandsons will one day rule Britain. In memory of this vision, Uther has two golden dragons made one as a gift to Winchester and one to carry to war, hence he was known as Uther Pendragon, or dragon-head.⁷ Wace and Layamon repeat the story, little altered.⁸

Both of these highly portentous episodes, filled with stated meaning, are omitted by Malory, who ultimately relies on subtler means, the immediate plot itself, to convey his point. Malory, however, does borrow Geoffrey's next dragon reference because it serves his premeditated design. This time Arthur himself dreams. He sees a bear flying through the air; the ground trembles when it growls. From the west a dragon appears, flying with the light of its eyes illuminating the earth. The dragon burns the bear and hurls its scorched body to the ground. Others read the dream as portending Arthur's (the dragon's) conquest over a giant (the bear), but Arthur interprets it as his ultimate victory over the Roman emperor Lucius.⁹ Shortly after the episode, Arthur does indeed slay a giant. Apparently a popular event in Arthur's legend, the dream is related in shimmering detail in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*.¹⁰

We know that Malory's stories draw on more than the early pseudohistorical writings. Vinaver wrote that he gave "new life to dying traditions,"¹¹ and his use of the dragon motif demonstrates this. Malory's dragons were placed in portentous positions in the narrative, and, although not all are used

page 68

strictly as signs or omens, his dragons never quite lose this function. Malory wrote in the second half of the fifteenth century, with hundreds of years of literary and artistic interest in dragons and other monsters preceding his tales. The evolution of the dragon motif develops from the symbol seen in the Old English *Beowulf* to the sign of the devil himself continued steadily in saints' lives, and romances were not impervious to this shift in meaning. Although never quite as single-minded, nor as limited, in their use of the motif as biblical exegesis or saints' lives, romances did rely on certain negative connotations of the dragon.

Malory first uses monstrous imagery in the dream Arthur has after inadvertently sleeping with his sister. This union produces Mordred, Arthur's illegitimate son and his eventual bane. Arthur dreams of "gryffens and serpentes" which come into his land burning and killing. They did Arthur great harm and wounded him, but at last he conquered them.¹² No interpretation immediately follows, but clearly the griffins and serpents together represent Mordred. Merlin confirms this conclusion the next day after prohibiting Arthur from following the questing beast which is introduced at this point. The ubiquitous sorcerer tells Arthur of his parentage and the son who will destroy him and all his knights. Later Malory relates the elaborate description of the dragon in Arthur's dream mentioned above. The philosopher tells him that:

the dragon thou dremyste of betokyns thyne owne persone that thus here sayles with thy syker knyghtes; and the coloure of his wyngys is thy kingdomes that thou haste with thy knyghtes wonne. And his tayle that was all to-tatered sygnyfyed your noble knyghtes of the Round Table.... (V, 4)

page 69

Both dreams address one of Malory's principal purposes in writing his narratives. They emphasize Arthur's life and many of the significant characters in it Mordred in the form of monsters, and the knights of the Table Round in the form of a tattered tail of the dragon Arthur. It seems that whenever the wandering plot focuses directly upon one of Malory's main themes, it will slow down long enough to reflect back or project forward so that, by the attention given the action, and by the comparison to the past or future, the reader will note it and properly value it as a key to the author's overall meaning.

Nothing really disingenuous is going on here, of course. Repetition and comparison are staples of classical and medieval rhetoric. What might be important, however, is how these devices begin to replace stated meaning in the later Middle Ages, especially in the genre of romance. Malory has sometimes been hailed as one of the first modern writers. His indirect approach to expressing meaning might be indicative of this modernity.

Malory continues to use this technique in episodes in which three different knights are involved with dragons. Lancelot's encounter with the creature is short. A hermit comes to the Round Table and tells Arthur that the knight who will win the "Sankgreall" will be conceived that year. We are then concerned with Lancelot's rescue of Elaine from the scalding water. Almost incidentally, Lancelot is asked to perform the additional service of delivering the same people from "an orryble and a fyendely dragon spyttyng wyldre fyre oute of hys mowthe" (XI, 1). He sees written on the dragon's tomb "Here shall com a lybarde of kynge's blood and he shall sle this serpente. And this lybarde shall engendir a lyon in this forayne contrey whyche lyon shall passe all other knyghtes."

page 70

Lancelot slays the dragon, sees the Grail for the first time, and unwittingly sleeps with Elaine (thinking she is Guenevere). She later gives birth to Galahad, "whyche lyon shall passes all other knyghtes" and win the Holy Grail, fulfilling the hermit's prophecy. If we grant that Malory's narratives have at least two dominant themes—the life and death of Arthur and the quest for the Grail—we see an interesting parallel in the prophecies portending the culmination of both themes. Arthur's dream of griffins and serpents is a result of his unwitting conception of the man ultimately responsible for his death Mordred. Lancelot's seemingly needless encounter with a dragon heralds his (also unwitting) conception of Galahad, the man who is ultimately responsible for the culmination of the Grail theme.

Sir Bors, soon after this Lancelot episode, submits himself to many adventures, in one of which he defeats Sir Bedyvere, strikes a head off a lion, and then sees a dragon in a courtyard:

he sawe a dragon in the courte, passynge parelous and orryble, and there semyd to him that there were lettyrs off golde wrytyn in hys forhede, and sir Bors thought that the lettyrs made a sygnfyfycacion of 'kynge Arthure'. And right so there came an orryble lybarde and an olde, and there they faught longe and ded grete batayle togydys. And at the laste the dragon spytte oute of hys mowthe as hit had bene an hondred dragons; and lyghtly all the smale dragons slew the olde dragon and tore hym all to pecys. (XI, 5)

Sir Bors' adventures reveal his spiritual strength, and the animal imagery powerfully reinforces this. It seems that Arthur's own knights are to be his des

page 71

truction. The "lybarde" could be Lancelot again or Mordred. The episode addresses all major themes: Arthur's death, the spiritual quest, and the disintegration of Round Table chivalry.

Sir Percival, actively pursuing the Grail, has his own encounter with a dragon, and in this tale we find the dragon motif used in a very Christian sense. Percival comes upon a lion and serpent fighting:

the lyon had overtake the serpente and began batayle with hym. And than sir Percivale thought to helpe the lyon, for he was the more naturall beste of the two, and therewith he drew hys swerde and sette hys shyld afore hym, and there he gaff the serpente such a buffett that he had a dedely wounde. (XIV, 6)

Percival then dreams of two women, one astride a lion, one astride a serpent, who come to see him. The one on the lion tells him that tomorrow he will fight with the greatest lord of the world; the one on the serpent insists that in recompense for killing her serpent he must be her man. Later a mysterious priest interprets: The woman on the lion is the new law of the Holy Church; the other is the old law and the serpent is a "fynde" and "devyll." The serpent, of course, has specific connotations stemming from the Apocalyptic red dragon, which shows that Malory was not immune to this popular interpretation of the dragon.¹³

Percival's dream conveys the most spiritual reasons for the Grail quest in traditional symbolic language. Once again, a marvelous creature, a prophecy, and a consciousness of past and future momentarily interrupt the plot and reassert

the meaning.

page 72

Finally, Arthur dreams, before the last battle with Mordred, of serpents, worms, and beasts in a well:

And the kynge thought there was undir hym, farre from hym, an hydeous depe blak watir, and therein was all maner of serpentis and worm es and wylde bestes fowle and orryble. And suddeynly the kynge thought that the whyle turned up-so-downe, and he felle amonge the serpentis, and every beste toke hym by a lymme. (XXI, 3)

During the conference before the battle, a snake appears and one knight draws his sword and inadvertently starts the doleful conflict. This dream closely resembles Arthur's dream of griffins and serpents at Mordred's conception early in the story, and now precedes the destruction of the kingdom at Mordred's hand at the very end of the story.

Dragons, then, like most marvelous elements, are used in sequences which help stress Malory's main themes themes which have never been difficult to identify. The technique is so simple that one tends to overlook it and assume that romances are "pure" story because their meanings are not stated overtly as in other medieval genres. Malory's stories supply just as much meaning as sermons or saints' lives; he merely makes the plot do the work for him.

Barat College

Notes

1. Morton Bloomfield, *Essays and Explorations: Studies in Ideas, Language and Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970), pp. 106-7.
2. More so, iconographically. See R.S. Loomis and Laura Hibbard Loomis, *Arthurian Legends in Medieval Art* (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), p. 31. Arthur in a legend of St. Efflam (Legendary of Tréguier, c. 1400) is unable to dispose of a dragon which the saint dismisses through prayer. See also the reproductions in the back of the book (nos. 349 and 387) for two very different (Flemish and English) illustrations of the White and Red Dragon scene.
3. "*duo vermes duo dracones sunt; vermis rufus draco tuus est, et stagnum figura hujus mundi est. At ille albus draco, illius gentis quae occupavit gentes et regiones plurimas in Britannia ...*" (Nennius, *Historia Britonum*, ed. Joseph Stevenson (London: Sumptibus Societatis, 1838), chaps. 40-42, p. 33).
4. Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia regum Britanniae*, Latin ed., ed. Acton Griscom, trans. from Welsh Ms. Robert Ellis Jones (London: Longmans, Green, 1929), vi, 17-viii, 1.
5. *Arthurian Chronicles Represented by Wace and Layamon*, ed. and trans. Ernest Rhys (London: J. M. Dent, 1928), p. 16.
6. "þa comen ut þas tweie draken: / & muchel dunen makeden. / fuhten grimliche: / dun i þere dich. / ne ifaeh nauere na cniht:

- nan ladlucker fiht. / flu3en of heore muðe: / fures leome" (*Layamon's Brut or Chronicles of Britain*, ed. Frederick Madden [London: Society of Antiquaries, 1847], II, 244-45).
7. Geoffrey, viii, 14-17.
 8. Wace, pp. 31-32; "Com of þan steore, / a leome swiðe sturne / at þeos leome ende: / wes a drake hende / of þes draken muðe / leomen come inoh3e" (Layamon, II, 325).
 9. Geoffrey, x, 2; Wace, p. 80; in Layamon, III, 15, the interpretation is abbreviated. No giant or Roman emperor is mentioned. A line is missing from Ms. Cotton Calig. A ix.
 10. *King Arthur's Death: Stanzaic Morte Arthur and Alliterative Morte Arthure*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1974), 11. 760-74. Cf. Arthur's dream of dragons before battle with Mordred in the *Stanzaic Morte Arthure*, 11. 3181ff.
 11. Eugène Vinaver, "Sir Thomas Malory," in R. S. Loomis, ed., *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages: A Collaborative History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), p. 550.
 12. *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, ed. Eugène Vinaver, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1947; rpt. Oxford University Press, 1971, 1977), I, 19. All subsequent quotations of Malory will be from this edition.

13. This serpent iconographically is a winged dragon. See Loomis, *Arthurian Legends*, no. 283 for combat, no. 328 for vision of the New and Old Law.