The Dream of the Dragon and Bear

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He (Arthur) dreamed that a dragon dreadful to behold,
Came driving over the deep to destroy his people,
At once sailing out of the western lands,
Wandering unworthily over the waves of the sea.
Both his head and his neck wholly, all over,
Adorned in azure, enamelled full fair:
His shoulders were scaled all in clear silver,
Spread over the worm with shrinking points;
His womb and his wings of wonderful hues.
In marvellous mail he mounted full high;
Whomever he touched was destroyed forever!
His feet flourished all in fine sable,
And such a venomous flare flew from his lips
That the flood, for the flames, seemed all on fire!

Then came from the East, against him direct
A black boisterous bear above in the clouds,
With each paw like a post, and palms full huge,
With talons of terror, all twisted they seemed
Loathsome and loathly, with locks and the rest
With shanks all misshapen, shaggy and haired
Ugly and furred, with foaming lips
The foulest of figure that ever was formed!
He reared and he roared, and rallied thereafter
To battle he bounds, with brutal claws:
He so roamed and roared, that all earth resounded.
So rudely he hits out, to riot himself.

Then the dragon drew near and dived in attack
And with dire blows drove him far off in the clouds
He fares like a falcon, freely he strikes
Both with feet and with fire he fights all at once!
The bear in the battle the mightier seemed
And bites him boldly with baleful fangs;
Such buffets he gives him with his broad claws,
That his breast and his belly were bloody all over!

He rampaged so rudely that rent is the earth,
Running with red blood like rain from the skies
He would have wearied the worm through the weight of his strength,
If the worm had not wielded wild fire in defence.

Then wanders the worm away to the heights
Comes gliding from the clouds and claws him at once
Touches him with his talons and tears open his back
Between the tail and the top, ten feet in length!
Thus he breaks up the bear; it is brought to its death.
Let him fall in the flood, to float where he likes:
They so burdened the bold king, on board the ship,
That for bale he near bursts, in bed where he lies. (760–805)

The meaning of the prophetic dreams for the understanding of the message of the *AMA* has not yet been fully recognised, although there are many critical assessments of the Dream of Fortune, particularly in connection with attempts to determine the genre of the poem. In the only book-length publication on the poem, William Matthews concentrates on the Dream of Fortune alone, while summarily dismissing the Dream of the Dragon and Bear in a single sentence.[1] It is, however, evident that both dreams play an essential role in structuring the poem as an architectonic whole. The Dream of the Dragon and Bear stands at the beginning of the Roman campaign, which will bring Arthur to the height of his power, but at the same time reduce him to moral degeneration. The Dream of the Wheel of Fortune on the other hand, symbolises his turn of fortune and the downward descent of his life and fate. Thus both dreams give shape to the pyramidal form of the *casus*.

This is a feature peculiar to the *AMA*. K.-J. Steinmeyer has the following to say about the allegorical meaning of dreams in classical and medieval literature in general:

> . . . We can . . . investigate the dreams in Greek, Latin, Old Norse, Old English and Old High German literature; the result is always the same: the events follow immediately after the dream report.[2]

This results in the fact that the fulfilment of every event prophesied in a dream must be sought in the passage following it. The relationship between prophecy and realisation in the *AMA*, however, is entirely different. Just as in the Parthenon on the Acropolis each stone is designed for a particular position, thus reflecting in form and function the whole edifice, so, too, Arthur's dreams represent in an encoded form his entire life, rise and fall, victory and defeat, political power and moral decay.

Even a superficial reading of the two prophetic dreams — especially

that of the Dragon and Bear — reveals that their symbols carry the weight of traditional significance — harking back to archetypal concepts, but well-known at the time. The greatest problem for the modern reader is evaluating the degree to which the poet was bound by contemporary lore and learning.[3] In the case of individual symbols it is difficult to decide whether the author deviates consciously from established traditions, or whether he is merely ignorant of them.

But before we can even begin to speak in terms of the poet's individual use of such symbols, we have to examine their associations and connotations in the fourteenth century. This is all the more necessary in the case of the dragon and bear. Both animals are deeply rooted in mythological traditions which may have conditioned the author, and it is only against this background that we can determine how and why the author deviated from the traditional symbolical pattern in order to provide new meaning. It is neither possible nor necessary to pass muster on the entire complex of the medieval symbolism of dragon, bear [and boar]. The Dream of the Dragon and Bear as we find it in the *AMA* provides us with a guideline and a goal as to the scope of the symbols to be taken into consideration.

In the Christian tradition the dragon is a symbol of evil, heresy, and the Anti-Christ. Particularly relevant for iconographic representations of the dragon was Ps. 90.13, where Christ is pictured as vanquishing the dragon. The representation of St Michael as dragon slayer derives from Rev. 12. Numerous apostles of the faith followed in his wake, St George of England being the most memorable one. In processions, a banner of the dragon preceded the Crucifix during the Rogation Days and followed it on Ascension Day. The popular concept of the dragon can be traced to the *Physiologus*. Following Aristotle and other authorities, people were firmly convinced of the existence of dragons until the seventeenth century.

In medieval astronomy the constellation of the dragon was regarded as *monstrum mirabile*; Chaucer speaks of the 'tail of the dragoun' as a 'wykkid planete' (*Astrol.* II, § 4). The dragon and bear are often mentioned together by astrologists. Edmund says of himself in *King Lear*: 'My father compounded with my mother under the dragon's tail, and my nativity was under *Ursa Major*: so that it follows I am rough and leacherous.'[4]

Especially remarkable is the broad range of symbolical meanings of the dragon, which reaches from the satanic fiend to the merciful guardian: '. . . they range in character from the destructive and terrible to the benign and helpful.'[5] Even in pre-Christian times, the dragon was regarded as the incarnation of the destructive powers in the world and in the universe. In nearly all mythologies he is a manifestation of anarchic wilfulness and of unbridled animal power: '. . . with expanded wings, . . . head and tail erect, violently and ruthlessly outraging decency and

propriety, spouting fire and fury both from mouth and tail, and wasting and devastating the whole land.'[6] St George's slaying of the dragon is an archetypal legend, one not connected with the saint until the High Middle Ages. A very similar feat had already been attributed to Perseus, who saved Andromeda from being made a sacrificial offering to a sea-dragon in obedience to an oracle. Even the old Babylonians had their tales of Bel, Enlil and Marduk, who fought against dragons in order to protect the world and the universe from destruction.[7] Almost always, such tales centre on the victory of Good over Evil, of Light over Darkness, and Order over Chaos.

The word *sea-dragon* as a name for the Vikings has, by way of contrast, a more positive meaning. The Norsemen were thus called because the prow of their ships ended in a blue and red painted dragon's head. The Golden Dragon was the symbol of the House of Wessex; it was also the ensign of Alfred the Great. According to Geoffrey of Monmouth, Uther saw a fiery ball in the form of a dragon in the sky, a premonition of his victory over his enemies: 'Merlin had prophesied he should be King by means of the dragon'[8]; hence his surname Pendragon, chief dragon.

In this literary tradition, which is particularly relevant for England, the dragon has mostly positive associations: it stands for kingship and supremacy. This interpretation can be traced back to Artemidoros' *Oneirokritika* (second century AD) where we read: 'The Dragon signifies the Emperor.'[9] It is likely that Geoffrey was acquainted with this work. Artemidoros has seven dragonbirth dreams, foretelling the birth of seven sons. In Geoffrey's version, the ray emitted by the dragon divides into 'seven lesser rays . . . [signifying seven] sons and grandsons [that] shall hold the kingdom of Britain . . .'[10] The battle ensign of the dragon used by the Roman cohorts belongs to this tradition. As late as the Hundred Years War, the English armies fought in France under the sign of the dragon, which signified the claim to supreme power. This symbolical meaning was not restricted to the English alone, as is evident from the dream of Herzeloyde where the dragon symbolises Parzival.[11]

Like the dragon, the bear is a highly ambivalent symbolic animal. Negative associations are evident: the breath of the bear was regarded as poisonous and his appearance in dreams was considered a bad omen, foretelling illness or a long journey.[12] According to a very popular and widespread tradition, the bear is an emblem of the sins of *sloth* and *gluttony*: the Middle English word *bere* signifies a man subject to those particular sins.[13] The devil himself was envisaged in the guise of a bear: 'þe deouel is beore cunnes' (Ancr. 546), or: 'þe fende is *bere kynde bihynde & asse bifore*' (Ancr. Recl. 139/29).[14]

The ancient Teutons are said to have avoided the use of the old word for *bear* which they regarded as tabu. The word can be reconstructed from Avest. *arsa*, Greek , Gall. *artos*. The constellation of Ursa Major, the Greater Bear, is one of the best-known star groups. Homer

has a passage on *arctus*, the only star which never dips into the waves of the ocean.[15] In nearly all languages the constellation is called The Bear, usually in the feminine gender. In Anglo-Saxon countries, the constellation in the northern sky is often called Charles' Wagon. The original name, however, was Arthur's Wagon, presumably because of the star called *arctus*. The explanation for the transfer of the name to Charles lies in his close association with Arthur.

Even the early Chaldeans established a close connection between *Draco* and the Bear(s): 'With that people, it (*Draco*) was a much longer constellation than with us, winding downwards and in front of Ursa Major, and, even into later times, clasped both of the Bears in its folds; this is shown in manuscripts and books, as late as the seventeenth century, with the combined title, *Arctoe et Draco*.'[16]

In mythology the bear plays a far more positive role than might be expected from the premises of folklore.[17] In classical antiquity the reign of the she-bear was connected with peaceful communication of the nations. Augustus was associated with Ursa Major: 'For it is Augustus who brings peace to the world, who calls her to new and joyful hopes and to the happiness of re-established unity' (Ovid, F. 697–704).[18] As the light-bearing Arctos-Mother, the bear is associated with the light of day and the colour white. Nearly always the image of the she-bear is connected with the benevolent aspects of motherhood; darker connotations are lacking. The association of the bear with motherhood is deeply rooted in almost all classical authors;[19] the word *ursa* is used *genus pro genere*.[20]

In nearly all Celtic areas, the cultic image derived from the Romance countries was preserved intact.[21] Even the orphic meaning of the bear was retained, as can be ascertained from bear-names on Christian tombstones.[22] In general we can say that the cult of the bear survived longest in Celtic regions, as can be seen from the numerous Celtic coins bearing the ursine image.[23] A gem in the *Museum Florentinum* is unique in that it shows, on the one side, the she-bear as an emblem of peace, happiness, and prosperity, and on the reverse side, the Goddess of Fortune (Tyche?) with the attributes of abundance.[24]

The dream of the Dragon and Bear appears for the first time in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (1135). In this work there is a particularly close connection between Arthur and the symbol of the bear; Arthur is the son of Utherpendragon (the chief dragon), and he wears a helmet 'graven with the semblance of a dragon . . . and a golden dragon he had for standard'.[25]

Thus we can presuppose a close association between Arthur and the dragon on the part of Geoffrey. It is no less certain that Geoffrey Arthur, as the author of the *HRB* was known to his contemporaries,[26] knew the Celtic word Arthur = 'bear'; after all, he claimed to have translated a book originally written in British into Latin. More problematical is the

connection which E. Southward established between Mordred and Celt. *mordraig* = 'sea dragon'.[27] According to this hypothesis, Arthur is to be identified with the bear, and the dragon with Mordred.[28] This theory seems rather far-fetched, but it is supported by an episode in the French *Mort Artu* which must be regarded as one of the major sources of the *AMA*. In the French work there is a reference to a dream of Arthur's in which a serpent emerged from his body, with the brutal intent of burning and destroying his country. Later Arthur identifies the serpent explicitly with Mordred, so that there are strong parallels to the dragon of the *AMA*.[29]

In the *HRB* Arthur dreams of a bear flying through the air, whose roaring makes the coasts tremble. From the west he sees a flying dragon approach, whose glittering eyes light up the entire country (*patriam*). A terrible battle ensues from which the dragon emerges the victor, having scorched the bear with his fiery breath and cast him to earth.

The author uses not more than two sentences for the description of the battle, mentioning only the roaring of the bear and the glittering eyes of the dragon. The superiority of the dragon over the bear is evident from the very beginning. There is no mention of Arthur's emotional reaction. He reports the dream to them that stood by ('Expergefactus ergo Arturus astantibus quod somniaverat indicavit'; X.2.U.24–5), and these interpret the dragon as Arthur himself and the bear as a giant whom Arthur will defeat. But Arthur is not willing to accept the proffered interpretation, 'existimans ob se et imperatorem talem visionem contigisse' (X.2.U.29–30).

Seen superficially, the dragon stands for Arthur as the embodiment of organic order and of the idea of an Empire. The bear, on the other hand, stands for the giant, and at the same time for Lucius as an opponent of the concept of *ordo*. But the name Arthur = 'bear', which was evidently common knowledge at the time, acts as a signal that the dream refers to Arthur's victories over both the giant and Lucius only on a surface level. Its true meaning lies in its function as a portent of Arthur's downfall. Whether Geoffrey's Arthur sees either the dragon or the bear as a herald of his fate cannot be determined from the text. It would appear that Geoffrey intentionally left the question open.

In the *Brut Tysylio*, as translated by San Marte,[30] there is also a report on Arthur's dream in nearly the same wording as in Geoffrey. This is also true of the battle of Mont St Michel[31] — the first and simplest fulfilment of the prophetic dream — which follows immediately afterwards in almost the same manner as in the *HRB*. San Marte, however, did not translate the Cymric original, but used the English translation by Peter Roberts. This version can hardly be called a translation, but should rather be regarded as a compilation of several different chronicles. Roberts himself admits to having used the *Brut Gruffud ab Arthur*, that is Geoffrey of Monmouth's *HRB*, as well as other 'private

sources' in addition to the *Brut Tysylio*.[32] Therefore it cannot come as a surprise that Roberts' and San Marte's versions contain materials which do not derive from the *Brut Tysylio*, for instance Arthur's battle with the giant of Mont St Michel, which is not to be found in the *Tysylio* version.[33] There the campaign against the Romans follows immediately after the dream.

The Welsh report of the dream is clearer and more precise in so far as the bear flying up from the South is called *monstrum* and thus identified as the villain from the beginning. He descends on the coast of France ('From the south . . . alighting on the shore of ffraink'); this can only be applied to the Roman emperor. When the author mentions the beast for the second time he terms him *Arthyr* = 'bear', thereby establishing a connection with King Arthur, whose close association with the dragon was of course popular knowledge of the time. From this it follows that the Welsh author saw in King Arthur the terrible bear, and at the same time the invincible dragon. The reading of the dream suggested by the by-standers proves to be wrong; only Arthur's interpretation of the dream is borne out by later events.

The Anglo-Norman Wace[34] made major changes in the character of the Dream of the Dragon and Bear. The characteristics attributed to the animals do not create pressing associations either with Arthur as the leader and protector of the British, or with Lucius as an aggressor and tyrant. The bear is nearly as powerful as the dragon himself, whose main weapon is his brute strength rather than his wild fire. Both animals are geographically determined: the bear comes 'de vers oriant'; the dragon flies 'de vers occidant' (2699, 2703).

Arthur reports his dream to the clerks and barons. Some of them read it as a premonition of Arthur's victory over a giant, while others propose divergent explanations. But they all agree in regarding the dream as a favourable omen. Arthur himself believes that the dream refers to his battle against the Emperor, but he is somewhat dubious about the matter. He concludes: 'Mes del tot soit el Criator'.[35]

In Layamon's *Brut*[36] the author himself terms Arthur's nightmare as fearful (*feorlic*, 12753). The King is so terrified at the dream that he groans loudly when he awakes. None of those about him dares to ask Arthur what the matter is, until he reports the dream of his own accord.

According to Layamon the hideous bear comes in a thunderstorm from the East, while the burning dragon approaches from the West. The sea seems aflame with the reflection of the dragon's fire. The poet emphasises explicitly that the dragon burns the cities of the country — a notable parallel to the *AMA* [(bur) [ʒes he] suel[de], Cal. 12773, borwes he swelde, Otho MS.].[37] This is the first hint of the fact that the dragon will destroy his own country. Layamon emphasises the fierceness of the battle, which at first appears as a match of equal strength, as well as the uncertainty of the outcome. Finally the

dragon slays the bear, casts him to earth, and tears him to pieces.

The author of the *AMA* in his representation of the dragon and the bear takes up quite a number of motifs which can be found in his predecessors, but he also adds a number of essential traits. The dragon is clearly different from those found in the sources. The author describes him as a magnificent animal shining in silver and brilliant colours. Nearly all his features are positive ones. The bear, however, is a wild monster; all the epithets applied to him are negative. In summation, the poet calls him the ugliest beast ever created. In the battle, the bear is at first not only an even match, but seems the superior of the two; he would have defeated his opponent if the dragon had not defended himself with his wild fire.

In contrast to all earlier versions the description of the dragon precedes that of the bear. The dragon comes over the ocean from the West in order to destroy Arthur's people: 'to drenschen hys pople' (761). This statement is repeated by the philosophers when they explain Arthur's dream. They stress specifically that the dragon symbolises Arthur: 'The dragon approaching over the sea, in order to destroy thy people (to drynchen thy pople, 816), means yourself.'

This interpretation has a great deal more significance, since Arthur when he speaks of the dream only shows fear of the dragon, not of the bear. Immediately upon awakening the king tells the philosophers, who are well-versed in the seven liberal arts, that he has been tormented in his dream by a dragon: 'and syche a derfe beste, Has mad me full wery' (811–12). The dream readers accept Arthur's premises, and tell him in no uncertain terms that he is going to destroy his own people. They see the bear as the tyrants who torment his people: 'þat tourmentez thy pople' (824). The philosophers admit that the dream is a terrifying one, and therefore add a consolation and an encouragement: 'Ne kare noghte, Sir Conquerour, bot comforth thy seluen; And thise þat saillez ouer þe see, with thy sekyre knyghtes.' (830–1)

The interpretation of the philosophers, which is in itself contradictory, will in the end come true. Towards the end of the poem, the author blames Arthur for tormenting his own people: '(he) turmentez þe pople' (3153). Just as he had said of the bear, he says of King Arthur, '(he) riotes hym selfen' (3172). Arthur is, at one and the same time, the dragon *and* bear.

Arthur's battle against the giant on Mont St Michel immediately following the Dream of the Dragon and Bear is the first level of realisation of the dream. Arthur takes up the battle with the monster 'for rewthe of þe pople' (888). The description of the giant contains similar terms to that of the bear, and conveys a barbaric and hideous impression. The disgusting features of an entire menagerie of animals are catalogued, including the greyhound, frog, hawk, dogfish, flounder, bear (!), dolphin, wolf, bull, badger, boar and swine.

The giant is the grotesquely distorted caricature of a tyrant (*tyraunt*, 991) living outside of any kind of law and order ('he will lenge owt of lawe', 996, 'Withowten licence of lede, as lorde in his awen', 997). Very much like the bear he is an incarnation of the vice of gluttony and thus a *bere* in the Middle English sense of the word. His macabre feast described in minute detail is a malicious analogy to Arthur's overladen banquet in which twenty-three different dishes and eight types of wine were served.

Every Easter the giant receives the homage of fifteen realms and thus owns greater treasures than Arthur himself, whose name is twice mentioned by the nurse of the murdered duchess (1009, 1016). The monster thus represents in addition the absolute perversion of the medieval feudal system; single-handedly and with brute force he subjugated kings and princes and decimated the population of their countries. Parallels are also evident at the level of the half-line: the giant receives the tribute 'of fyftene rewmez' (1005), and Arthur's liege-men are also 'of fyftene rewmez' (837).

Similarities and parallels to the action of the dream are clearly recognisable. In the same manner in which the dragon attacks the bear, Arthur wades into battle. And just as the bear appears initially to be more powerful, so also the giant seems at first more than a match for Arthur and very nearly kills him. But in the end Arthur, like the dragon, strikes the decisive blow and emerges the victor.

On a second level the Dream of the Dragon and Bear also refers to Arthur's confrontation with the Roman Emperor Lucius. The imperial ensign is the golden dragon (1252, 2026), which had traditionally led the Roman cohorts into battle since ancient times. The Roman Viscount also has a dragon in his coat of arms (2053). This is further evidence of the ambivalence of this symbolic animal, which, in the *AMA*, embodies the claim to absolute power, and therewith war, death, and destruction: 'For thare is noghte bot dede thare the dragone es raissede' (2057). But such commentaries can be referred to both sides of the battle — Arthur's ensign is also the Golden Dragon which he inherited from his father Uther.

The symbol corresponds to the deed. Of Lucius it also said that he 'turmenttez þi pople' (1954). He massacres 'Comouns of þe countré, clergye and oþer/ / þat are noghte coupable þerin, ne knawes noght in armez' (1316–17). Arthur does exactly the same thing after the capture of Metz, as well as during the campaign in Italy. Again we find that formulaic half-lines intimate associations which are quite evidently the result of author intention. Lucius' and his men's anticipation is expressed in the same words as used for the giant and the bear: to 'ryotte oure selfen' (1969).

But the focus of the work is, of course, the death of King Arthur — in two places in the manuscript of the poem, at the beginning and the end,

it is entitled *Morte Arthur.* It is only from the *morte* perspective that the third level of realisation of the Dream of the Dragon and Bear can be understood.

King Arthur is so tortured by the dream that he falls ill and believes he must die. It is therefore evident that more important things are involved than a battle against a giant or even against the Roman Emperor. Arthur's fate and that of his realm are at stake here.

In proportion to his ever growing success, Arthur becomes by degrees more cruel, greedy, and unbridled. This is particularly evident in his campaign in Tuscany, where so many innocent people are brought to death. At the apex of his power Arthur calls out: We shall be lords over everything that lives on earth! This act of *hubris* leads inevitably to metaphysical guilt and therewith to downfall.

In this way the dream interpretation of the sages is fulfilled: Arthur, the dragon, destroys his own people. The dragon was already an ambivalent symbol during the Middle Ages. In the *AMA*, however, the dark side of Arthur is represented in the image of the bear (*Arth*). The law-abiding and just king becomes a tyrannical and barbaric conqueror, who cares nothing for the laws of God and chivalry.

Like all other conquerors, Arthur falls by the sword. He fails to pray for the souls of his fallen men, as is traditionally expected of noble kings and heroes (Byrhtnoth, Oswald, and even Gawain in the poem). Unlike Gawain, who explicitly states that he prays for the souls of his men and not for himself, Arthur's only thought is for himself, his honour and his great loss. It is true that, on a purely formal level, he dies reconciled with God; and yet he remains recalcitrant, entrapped in worldliness to the end. The last prayer he utters is one of thanks to God who granted him sovereignty over all other kings and preserved him from shame. The last command he utters is to have Mordred's children killed and flung into the water. King Arthur has not learned his lesson.