

WILLIAM OF RENNES: *see* *GESTA REGUM BRITANNIAE*.

WILLIAMS, CHARLES (1886–1945), among modern English poets, the foremost reshaper and recreator of Arthurian mythology. Williams's Arthurian cycle is composed of two cycles of poems, *Taliessin Through Logres* (1938) and *The Region of the Summer Stars* (1944). At his death, he left an unfinished prose work on *The Figure of Arthur*, which was edited by his friend C.S. Lewis and published with Lewis's own commentary on the poems in *Arthurian Torso* (1948). Williams's first published novel, *War in Heaven* (1930), depicts a modern reappearance of the Holy Grail.

The individual poems in the Arthurian cycle are complex both in structure and interrelationships, but the overall structure is clear. *Taliessin Through Logres*

portrays the establishment, growth, and fall of the realm of Arthur. In a sense, it shows the progress through the earthly kingdom. The poems of *The Region of the Summer Stars* (the "third heaven" of poets and lovers) take up the same themes, but from a perspective *sub specie aeternitatis*.

Williams's original contribution to Arthurian legend lies in his development of the myths of King Arthur and the Grail, their gradual coalescence, and the further history of the Grail. Other elements, such as the story of Lancelot and Guinevere, are represented only in passing. From the outset, the empire of King Arthur is concerned with the Grail quest, which Williams treats as being mystic, unchivalric, and ascetic. The union of the legendary kingdom and the Grail is a highly complex symbol of the fusion of Empire and Christendom, and thus of Christ's Second Coming.

The cycle begins with the coronation of the King. Even at this early point, the reader is haunted by premonitions of disaster. Merlin does not take part in the coronation ceremonies. Instead, he sits in the steeple of St. Stephen's and meditates on the inevitable downfall of the realm. He foresees the Dolorous Blow, the wounding of the Grail-keeper with the Sacred Lance. Man wounds himself, and this is an image of Original Sin, of the Fall. The result is the destruction of order and the spread of anarchy. Balin kills his brother, Balan, without recognizing him. The Fall and the first murder destroy the innocence of the kingdom; the disease of disorder spreads throughout the land.

Even Arthur is affected. In the early versions of the Matter of Britain, Mordred was nephew to the King, but in later versions he became the son conceived in incest. This crime was usually recounted by medieval authors without explicit comment, even though they recognized that the result was the traitor Mordred, the destroyer of the Arthurian world. In Williams's Taliessin cycle, however, incest has become a symbol of egotistic self-love, which Williams calls "Gomorrah," and Arthur has thus become an antagonist of the Grail, which he betrays through his egotism, as well as his lack of *caritas* and *largesse*.

Arthur is an unmoved mover, the passive center of his kingdom. Another must act in his stead, and as in Malory this is Lancelot, beloved by both King and Queen. He serves as the poet's example for the Way of Affirmation, just as the nun Dindrane, who sacrifices her blood for a leper, is an example of the Negative Way of the soul's quest for the Eternal. ("This also is thou; neither is this thou.") Guinevere is marginal for Williams: he feels no sympathy for her. And so she can only sit, wait, and love. Galahad, the purest of knights, cannot be born from her. His mother must stem from the family of the Grail kings; his father must belong to the leaders of secular knighthood. Originally, Williams considered making Arthur the father of Galahad but gave up the plan because the fate of the Round Table had to be determined through the King. With Galahad's conception, Merlin's task is fulfilled; he disappears into the mystic darkness whence he came. In the person of Galahad, the symbols of stone and shell are united: the geometric and the vital, Byzantium and Brocéliande. Williams calls this process the finding of identity. Galahad is an image of the

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New Man, exemplary incarnation of the union of Arthur's world and the Grail.

The poem on Galahad closes with Taliessin's vision of the ascent of the soul to the inner heaven. Like Dante, Williams regards the planetary spheres as levels of holiness and as grades of spiritual development. The first planet is Mercury, the god of opposition and of change, an image of competition among the planetary houses. Venus is the sphere of orientation and decision, that is, "of preference." Jupiter, with its two moons, refers to irony and defeated irony, which does not take umbrage at the unavoidable vicissitudes of this world but smiles at the apparent absurdity of things. Saturn is the planet of loneliness and meditation, promise and symbol of a future Golden Age. Logres, Arthur's kingdom, has so far reached only the sphere of Jupiter. There, Galahad and Lancelot live side by side, the unrest of the human heart and the misery of existence. But the path of the future is already clearly recognizable. The enormous forces of Brocéliande have created Galahad but have exhausted themselves in the effort. Logres becomes Britain. Carbonek and Camelot are farther apart than ever before.

Like Galahad, who has already seen the Holy Grail in Camelot, Perceval and Bors are the Elect of the Grail. They are living flesh and blood but at the same time incarnations of typical attitudes toward life. Perceval is the pure lover, full of spiritual questions and problems; Bors is the ordinary mortal, married and the father of children, a person striving toward perfection but entangled in the needs and problems of everyday life. Galahad, however, is of a different make. He is not a "christlike figure" but a symbol of the divine spark in human beings, that is, the human "capacity for Christ." In Carbonek, after Galahad has healed the wounded king, he sees a vision of Christ in the Holy Grail. As instructed, he travels to Sarras, where he disappears from sight. This marks the final separation of the Arthurian world and the Grail. Arthur's thoughts center more and more on his own power, which results in his loss of *caritas* and *largesse*. He begins war with Lancelot; Mordred betrays the King; father and son kill one another.

The poem "Prayers of the Pope" ends the cycle. As a kind of refrain, we hear the desperate cry: "Send not, send not the rich empty away." The realm has been split into warring factions. The pope feels the schism within himself, the return of chaos and thus of spiritual death. The vision of the development of humankind toward the Epiphany has dissolved. A magnificent opportunity has remained unused.

But Williams does not dismiss us without hope. Taliessin's household will remain and the work will go on. Above all, there is the hope of Brocéliande. The roots of the forest grip the tentacles of Po'l'u; the forces of death are held in check and bound fast by the Mother of Making.

The constellation of characters, symbols, and images in Williams's Arthuriad is mapped out in a universe of the poet's own creation. Logres stands for both the genuine realm of Britain and the mythic world of Arthur. The

visionary city of Byzantium, like London, is the navel of the empire, the legendary New Jerusalem, and the emperor who reigns there is a symbol of God-in-action, the Divine Mover, or even Fate. The vision recedes; Logres is, on the surface of things, lost. But Brocéliande, the realm of forest and sea, points the way to hope. It stands for the untapped resources of the subconscious, the future path of the soul on its quest. In apparent defeat, humiliation, and even death rests the seed of salvation. The poems leave us with the certainty of the ultimate good. The rites of passage lead on.

Williams has widened the dimensions of the Arthurian story, reminding us of Milton and his representation of the Fall. Heaven and earth are united in a new mythic empire, which is not the less real because it never existed. Indeed, the poet has always in mind the spiritual reality behind the façade of material appearances. His *Arthuriad* is not a stylized portrait of a utopian *phantastikon* but a universally valid representation of the modern human situation.

The same tenor of thought underlies the plays and novels of the author, as well as his essays on literature and on Christianity. In many aspects, it is related to views shared by his old Oxford companions, C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, particularly in a tendency toward elements of fantasy and the supernatural. Certain themes re-echo: the primacy of the transcendental, the nature of love as a mirror of the Divine and as a mystical perception of the whole human relationship, the painful way of the soul in quest of perfection, and the image of the City as an image of the Church.

Williams returns the Holy Grail to a modern setting in his novel *War in Heaven* (1930), in which the struggle between Good and Evil for possession of the Grail takes place on both the physical and spiritual levels. The inadequacy of human reason to comprehend the reality of the mystical world again leaves humankind spiritually impoverished.

It can only be regretted that the work of Charles Williams, and in particular his poetry, has not yet found the appreciation it deserves. Williams recognized the potential of the Arthurian myth better than his predecessors, and he has expressed what others have only vaguely anticipated. [KHG]

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WILLIAMS AND THE ARTHURIAD: see LEWIS, C.S.