The Charles Williams Society

NEWSLETTER

No. 53, SPRING 1989

MEETINGS OF THE CHARLES WILLIAMS SOCIETY

20 May 1989: The Society will hold its Annual General Meeting (agenda enclosed) followed by an exploration by Brian Horne of "The Cuttings from Colindale".

25 November 1989: There will be a reading of "The House by the Stable", introduced by Ruth Spalding.

These meetings will be held at Liddon House, 24 South Audley Street, London W.1., starting at 2.30pm.

LONDON READING GROUP

Sunday 28 May 1989: We will continue reading Descent into Hell. We will meet in St Matthew's Church Vestry, 27 St Petersburgh Place, London W.2. (nearest stations Queensway and Bayswater) at 1pm. Tea and coffee will be provided but please bring sandwiches.

OXFORD READING GROUP

For details please contact either Anne Scott (Oxford 53897) or Brenda Boughton (Oxford 55589).

CAMBRIDGE READING GROUP

For information please contact Geraldine and Richard Pinch, 5 Oxford Road, Cambridge CB4 3PH, telephone 311465.

LAKE MICHIGAN AREA READING GROUP

For details please contact Charles Huttar, 188 W.11th St., Holland, Michigan, 49423, USA, tel (616) 396 2260.

SUBSCRIPTIONS

Could we remind you that subscriptions were due on 1 March. If you have not yet paid yours, please do so as soon as possible. Rates are £5 single, £7.50p joint membership for UK members, £6 or US$13 single, £8.50p or US$18 for joint membership for overseas members. Please send a cheque made out to the Charles Williams Society to Peter Couchman, 85 Hangleton Way, Hove, East Sussex, BW3 8AF.

BOOK NEWS

Members may be interested to know that The Return of King Arthur by Beverley Taylor and Elisabeth Brewer has been published by D.S. Brewer, Barnes and Noble at £19.50p.

NEW MEMBERS

A warm welcome is extended to Mrs L S Kornicka, 12 Amherst Avenue, Ealing W.13.

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At our meeting on 25 February 1989, Mrs Elisabeth Brewer spoke to the Society about "Women in the Arthurian Poems of Charles Williams". We are very pleased to be able to reproduce the talk in this Newsletter.

"In Malory's Le Morte Darthur, we see Guinevere portrayed with increasing realism. As the cause of the divided loyalties which finally set Arthur against Launcelot and destroy the company of the Round Table, she has a significant function in the book. And Malory, the 'knight prisoner', seems to have lived in the company of these characters as he told their story, so that he is able to present them in dramatic interchange, with psychological realism, as they each work out their individual and corporate destinies.

Malory did not merely translate the French versions and reshape the old stories: he made them the bearers of his own meaning, as Charles Williams was to do so long after. To Malory, the creation of the noble institution and the gradual process of its subsequent tragic destruction, seems to have been of paramount interest. How consistently conscious his intentions were it is hard to tell. Charles Williams, however, makes very clear in The Figure of Arthur that he is very well aware of what you can do with stories, of the ways in which the author can bring out, or make implicit, meanings old or new. Of Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia Regum Britanniae, he says that Geoffrey 'seems to have meant to create ... one splendid and popular figure' ... 'he first made Arthur a king' (210). In the Taliessin poems, Williams uses to the full the possibilities open to the modern Arthurian writer, to select the form, the characters, the characterisation, and above all, perhaps, to give to old material a new significance of special relevance today. Speaking of Chrétien's Guenevere, he says that she is 'something nobler' than the Guenevere of Marie de France in Lanval - 'There is in her a touch of the Guinevere she was to become' in Malory (234). Williams' recognition of her potential, where Tennyson, for example, seems only to have seen a corrupting influence, is one of the great positive qualities which make Williams' Arthurian poems so impressive. In the medieval stories there was very little for Guinevere to do or be; she was not allowed to have a concern for religion, for example, as Williams points out (237). Though he only allows Guinevere to move on the periphery of the action, apart from her appearance in 'Taliessin in the Rose-Garden' (139), however, she not only incorporates a complex of significances but is also presented with deep human understanding.

Taliessin sees Guinevere, representing 'the feminine headship of Logres' in the company of Dindrane, and close to the toil-hardened girl who tends the roses. The romantic picture of Guinevere, 'Hazel-lithe', with

her 'massed fair hair under the gold circlet' amongst the roses, also shows us 'the sensuous mode' while it suggests the whole range of human experience represented by the other figures present. While Taliessin is making his poem, brooding on the abstract concept of the Queen's majesty, we are shown how far she falls short of the ideal, as she talked and laughed, while 'under her brow she looked for the king's friend / Lancelot'. The shy glance destroys the image of majesty, as the laughter seems to trivialise her. Later, Taliessin again formulates her role:

> 'Let the queen's majesty, the feminine headship of Logres,
> deign to exhibit the glory to the women of Logres;
> each to one vision, but the queen for all.
> Bring to a flash of seeing the women in the world's base . '

Meanwhile, she is seen talking 'sideways to Dindrane' and then asking, trivially, 'has my lord dallied with poetry among the roses?' How well her inability to fulfill her function is suggested by the implicit contrast with the other women, through the superficial words (becomingly expressed though they are) as well as by the apparently habitual obliquity of her glance. Her faults co-exist with the idea of what she should be. Yet, as in Malory, Guinevere is redeemed. In Blanchefleur's cell at Almesbury, she is at last 'reconciled', able in her lesser way to practise substitution, to allow the wounded and dead king to enter into salvation. 'She was a good lover, and therefore she made a good end', says Malory. But Williams suggests a whole new dimension of love here - love for her husband rather than for Lancelot her lover.

Guinevere, of course, not *only* fails in the role of feminine headship of Logres, but to be a mother. In 'The Son of Lancelot' (76) we are told that her 'tormented unaesthetic womanhood / alternately wept and

woke' when Galahad was conceived. When at his coming, he is laid in the king's bed, she lies thinking of Lancelot's son all night. Williams' sympathetic insight into women's feelings seems to me very apparent here; but the spiritual implications are of greater importance. Guinevere is not simply a frustrated woman - as her fingers tensely grip like claws, the stone fits itself not to the shell but only to its echo, and her thoughts are on death. That she is also spiritually barren (but that this is not necessarily a permanent or a hopeless condition) is made clear. Unlike Malory's Guinevere, she does not exist as a rounded individual. Though she is a regal figure, magnificently beautiful, because of her limited spiritual potential she cannot take a more dominant part in this Arthurian cycle.

'Taliessin in the Rose-Garden' is in some ways the most interesting of the poems for my present purpose, in so far as it contains a substantial reflection on the nature of women, from its beginning in 'the rosed femininity / particled out of the universe, the articled form / of the Eve in the Adam; the Adam known in the Eve' (142). When Williams says, 'Well are women warned from serving the altar / who by the nature of their creature .../ share with the sacrifice the victimization of blood' he may offend those who argue for the ordination of women, but he surely makes amends in the passage that follows: 'happy the woman who feels Galahad, the companion of Percivale, rise / in her flesh, and her flesh bright in Carbonek with Christ'. Williams, though he emphasises the essentially different nature of women, certainly never underrates their spiritual potential. In Malory, Guinevere is virtually without a function, like most of the other female figures; in the 'Taliessin' poems, everyone has a role, according to her, or his, capacity or choice. And the range of possibilities is enormous; even 'The women in the world's base' may be brought to a flash of seeing (and presumably the men too). But strikingly, the best

people, the best 'real' people, are almost all women.

In Williams and the Arthuriad, C.S. Lewis described the cycle as 'a work devoted mainly to the glorification of the flesh', a remark which at first sight seems extraordinarily inappropriate, though he is surely right to represent the world of the senses - Caucasia - as feminine, whether we like it or not. Guinevere represents the sensuous mode, but in so far as she fails to fulfill her function, she prevents the sensuous from achieving the integration with the intellectual and spiritual which is to be desired, as well as failing to show how such integration can be realised by ordinary people. Nevertheless, in 'Taliessin in the Rose Garden', the figure of Guinevere does give rise to the formulation of a series of insights into the nature of women. They enable men better to know and understand themselves: 'the Adam known in the Eve' (142). Taliessin's vision of women's potential emphasises their natural and innate spirituality: 'women's flesh lives the quest of the Grail ... blessed is she who gives herself to the journey' (144-5). At the same time he emphasises their unique grounds for felicity: 'happy the woman ... who feels Galahad ... rise in her flesh ... Blessed is she who can know the Dolorous Blow / healed in the flesh of Pelles, the flesh of women.' (145).

ii.

The Grail is of course Charles Williams' real subject, though for Malory it was only incidental. 'No invention can come near it; no fabulous imagination excel it. All the greatest mythical details are only there to hint at the thing which happens.' Naturally, therefore, the selection of characters and the parts that they play in Williams' cycle were controlled by the focus on the Grail. The topic of courtly love, so important in many Arthurian stories of the Middle Ages and also, in a different way, in the nineteenth century, is necessarily of minor importance here. That is not to imply that Williams did not consider such

love to be significant. In the Figure of Beatrice, he discusses the initial experience which is an essential feature of love whether medieval or modern, the moment of revelation which 'presents the lover with a way of effort towards nobility and sanctity'. He is not interested in the problems and pains of the lover; we hear nothing of the sighs and tears, the sufferings and delights of the courtly lover, for obvious reasons. Though he could well describe the more sensuous aspects of such love - 'The body of the beloved appears vital with holiness; the physical flesh is vital with sanctity - not her sanctity, but its own' - the obsessive love which blights the lives of Tristan and Isolde, for example in the traditional story has virtually no part to play in these Arthurian poems. 'Love, and so what you choose', we are told; but a higher range of choice, a more spiritually-oriented range of choice is held out in these poems than in the other Grail poems, and above all, we see that it is women who are to choose. These women, from Guinevere and Blanchefleur to the slaves, thus have a far greater autonomy than they appear to have in the medieval stories. They are not simply the passive objects of male adoration; they are not merely presented with moral choices - between fidelity and adultery, for example - rather, they are allowed to choose their whole way of life. Some choose well, others do not.

The Elaynes provide an interesting illustration. We read in Malory's story of Elayne of Astolat (or Escalot) a touching account of this young firl's fatal, infatuated devotion to Lancelot. It begins when he visits her home on his way to the Great Tounament and leaves his shield with her so as later to conceal his identity; then when he is seriously wounded, she goes to nurse him. Her brother is also devoted to Sir Lancelot - the whole episode is designed to represent him as a charismatic figure, who will nevertheless help to bring about the downfall of the Round Table. When he is recovered, Elayne openly says that she wants him to marry her, or if that is unacceptable, to let her be his paramour - anything, as long as she can stay with

him. It is impossible, of course - there can only be Guinevere for Lancelot - and so Elayne falls into a decline and dies. When the priest comes to shrive her, she refuses to renounce her love, which she insists comes from God, and so cannot be sinful. Williams understood very well 'the passion that caused the code' (239), but this story, popular with many nineteenth-century artists and writers, was not relevant to his purpose. Instead of Elayne of Astolat, we have Elayne, Bors' wife, who we see only indirectly, as the source of inspiration to Bors, as the beloved should be. In the two poems, 'Bors to Elayne; the Fish of Broceliande' and 'On the King's Coins' we see, not the sterile infatuation that brings death to an innocent young girl, but the suggestion of a love that grows into reciprocity, partnership, and unselfish, positive action. The king is building Camelot, and, says Bors, 'He has sent me to be his lieutenant on the southern coast'. He speaks of Taliessin's song of the 'sea-rooted western wood':

> 'his song meant all things to all men, and you to me,
> A forest of the creatures; was it of you? no? ...
> and I plucked a fish from a stream that flowed to the sea
> from you? for you? shall I drop the fish in your hand?'

He speaks of the imaginative experience; as C.S. Lewis says, 'of course, of course she is Broceliande' (299), and she understands. Unlike the girl in the preceding poem, 'Taliessin's Song of the Unicorn', who 'cannot like such a snorting alien love' as she is offered, Elayne <u>can</u> accept Bors' vision: 'everywhere the light through the great leaves is blown / on your substantial flesh, and everywhere your glory frames'. As Lewis says, 'These two must try together that great experiment, must become that double-natured creature, that 'one flesh' which alone can utter the secret name of their love ... when the two lovers become a 'twy-nature' (one organism in two sexes) they are a living

symbol of the grand Twy-Nature, Christ ... who alone can utter celestial, as they utter earthly, love'. Together with the poem of the Unicorn, says Lewis, 'Bors to Elayne' introduces us to Williams' doctrine of Love. So, instead of Malory's picture of fatal love, we have through Bors' vision of the Elayne he loves, a projection of the length and breadth and height, as it were, that love can achieve. 'She / translucent, planted with virtues, lit by throes' who 'should be called the Mother of the Unicorn's Voice' in the preceding poem, of course represents love on an altogether higher plane, 'by intellectual nuptials unclosed'. This hypothetical woman, who 'dare set palms on the point' of the Unicorn's horn, 'twisting from the least / to feel the sharper impress, for the thrust to stun / her arteries into channels of tears beyond blood', can only be seen as the most extreme example of a transcendent spiritual love and devotion.

In 'Bors to Elayne; on the King's Coins', we again see Elayne through the eyes of Bors. Now she is the mother of two children, the mistress of a large household, the manager of estates, 'the sole figure of the organic salvation of our good', he says. We see what love has achieved in the mature relationship of these two. Bors makes explicit the mutuality of their love:

> When you saw me a southern burst of love
> tossed a new smile from your eyes to your mouth,
> shaping for that mind's while the corn of your face
> .... I am come again
> to live from the founts and fields of your hands.'

So, though this Elayne can be said to inspire courtly love as a medieval heroine might do, there is something down-to-earth and modern about her at the same time. As Blanchefleur embodies the spiritual ideal, choosing the Way of Rejection, Elayne represents the practical, secular operation of love in the everyday world. She is further defined by the contrast between the form of exchange represented by the King's coins - 'Money is

the medium of exchange' - and the values which she represents. Bors says:

> I saw you stand,
> in your hand the bread of love, in your head lightness of law.
> The uprightness of the multitude stood in your figure'.

Love, goodwill, generosity, order, plenty, 'organic salvation', are contrasted with 'ration and rule, and the fault in ration and rule' of 'organisation in London'. 'O lady, your hand held the bread / and Christ the city spread in the extensor muscles of your thumbs'. Elayne is no more than a symbolic figure, seen through the eyes of another, but the vision of the way of life which she embodies is splendid in its richness and positiveness and illustrates women's potential, as well as the scope and importance of their traditional role.

iii.

Speaking of Dante in The Figure of Beatrice (231), Charles Williams says: 'It is in a way astonishing (but blessed) that this great poet should have said so little in the ordinary speech of Christians', a remark which seems true to a large extent of Williams himself, too. It is often through the symbolic women in these poems that he is able to communicate the deepest spiritual meaning. Sometimes, as with Guinevere, their traditional role is diminished, while as others it is increased, as with Elayne, the wife of Bors. Similarly Nimue, the Lady of the Lake, becomes a far more significant figure than in the earlier Arthurian literature; she is 'the great mother and lady of Broceliande' - Nature, as it were, or all the vast processes of the universe imaged in a single figure, terrestial Nature. As Lewis points out, she has almost nothing in common with Malory's Nimue. For obvious

reasons, she never becomes an individual; indeed, is little more than a name. As the 'first mother of making', 'time's mother on earth', she might be said to represent the life-force. Nimue brings all natural becoming to her shape of immortal being, as to a flash of seeing the women in the world's base', as 'nature sets before us for our delight the unfathomable feminine principle which would otherwise be invisible', as C.S. Lewis puts it. Rather similarly, her daughter Brisen, sister of Merlin, is also an abstract figure representing space, 'Time and space, duration and extension'. Traditionally she is the waiting-woman who administers the drugged drink to Lancelot, to cause him to beget Galahad. Her enhanced role in Williams' cycle effectively suggests the inevitability of the divine purpose working through her to bring about the birth. Taliessin sees the whole process in his dream in 'The Calling of Taliessin'. Here, Brisen has become 'the engine of the first Mover', whose 'dark and mighty shadow' falls on 'the wide waste of Logres', in the spells of Merlin which reveal the future.

In a quite different way, Williams breaks away from tradition in his presentation of Iseult, a figure particularly fascinating to writers, especially dramatists, from the end of the nineteenth century into the 1920s, as a symbol of sexual love in revolt against the social convention of the loveless marriage of convenience. The passion glorified by Wagner and Swinburne and the romantic elements of the story are of no significance to Williams. Iseult is seen, of course, only in relation to the Saracen knight, Palomides. Her arm is the basis of his vision;

'I saw the hand of the queen Iseult;
down her arm a ruddy bolt
fixed the tinder of my brain
to measure the shape of man again'. (52)

In 'The Coming of Palomides', he expounds the complex meaning of what he has seen, 'the doctrine of Euclidean

love', but, as Lewis points out, the Saracen knight has a Beatrician experience which goes wrong. He can not love without desiring to possess Iseult, and we see him debased and distracted, deflected by the Questing Beast. Nevertheless, Taliessin can liken himself to Palomides, as sharing in the same vision: 'Palomides and I, see everywhere the hint, in a queen's shape or a slave's; we bid for a purchase'. Iseult's function in the poem glorifies her, for she provides the hint of beauty, of divine perfection. It is her loveliness and what it represents that is significant; though Palomides and Taliessin may experience frustration after each has seen his vision.

Iseult, then, is a rather shadowy figure, presented without either censure or sympathy. That other famous queen of Arthurian legend, Morgause, is a very different matter. 'With the begetting of Mordred and the striking of the Dolorous Blow all is lost', says C.S. Lewis, in a splendid discussion of 'Lamorack and the Queen Morgause of Orkney' (56). The whole poem, he comments, 'marks strongly the difference between the technique of narrative or drama and that of the metaphysical ode.' The symbolism in the two poems in which we encounter Morgause not only leaves us in no doubt of the extent to which she is evil, but also makes apparent the terrible results which are to ensue from her lust, and Arthur's. In 'The Crowning of Arthur', as Logres heraldically flaunts the king's state, and Merlin looks through the depth to the dome of Sophia, where 'the kingdom and the power and the glory' chime, Morgause leans from a casement to watch. Immediately we are reminded of that other evil queen who looked from a casement, Jezebel.(38). Like the other participants in the ceremonial, she is presented in heraldic terms; a sea rises black against the azure of Percivale's shield, with a red moon on a fess of argent. The images are sinister in the extreme; the crimson of blood, the sterility associated with the moon. They are linked, through Dinadan's dolphin, 'a

silver fish under bloody waters', to the shield of Bors which depicts a pelican in golden piety, drawing bloody drops to nurture its young. Morgause is further contrasted with the lovely young Guinevere, whose emblem is rather surprisingly a red chalice on an argent field, perhaps suggesting her spiritual potential and final redemption. But sinister as Morgause seems here, it is as nothing to the vast, comic dimensions of the evil associated with her in the second poem, in which she is seen through the eyes of Lamorack her lover. 'There is, if I may so put it, a mineral quality in Morgause', says Lewis, rather uncharacteristically seeming to minimise thereby the effect so carefully built up by Williams. For, in her, Lamorack sees 'the source of all stone / the rigid tornado, the schism and first strife / of primeval rock with itself'. Williams is surely drawing on the Inferno in the images of whirlwind and tornado (reminding us of Paolo and Francesca), and in 'the storm's shock', the 'hideous huge forms' hewn in a cleft of the remote and desolate scenes visited by Lamorack, as he explores 'the coast of the kingdom towards the Pole'.(Traditionally, too, the north is a quarter of the compass associated with evil and the devil.) The images associated with Morgause, the pre-Adamic sculpture on an ocean rock' from which his vision of her face rises, also suggest the dark, formless chaos before the Creation. When Lamorack sees Morgause in Arthur's hall (seated, of course, on the king's left hand), he sees again in her long eyes the humanised shapes of the cleft'.

C.S. Lewis has discussed this poem so fully and so brilliantly that there is little more that one can say, except perhaps to remark that once again, Williams has emphasised the conscious and deliberate evil in Morgause as no other writer has done, because from her conscious choice and intention stems 'the web of all our doom'.(58). She knew what she was doing: 'the eyes of the queen Morgause were a dark cavern; / there a crowned man without eyes came to a carved tavern'. She

could see, Arthur could not. Later, she is eyeless, 'a blind woman under a blind man', as they make the 'beast with two backs', while 'below them both, the shape of the blatant beast matches the 'cipher of the Great Ban' above them.

It is a relief to turn from the nightmarish images in which Morgause is presented to us, to the princess Blanchefleur, 'who walked dropping light'. Her rare face, seen by Taliessin in a Beatrician moment, is an image of grace, of the grace which fulfills, completes, brings to perfection and full circle what is begun in the slave drawing water in the yard when Blanchefleur arrives with her two brothers. The gold on her gown symbolises perfection, as the red here suggests her sacrificial death. We feel her radiance, a radiance that she owes entirely to Charles Williams, for in Malory she is a colourless figure, without definite personality. Her life at Almesbury further defines her, in 'The Son of Lancelot'. The comprehensiveness of the ideal that is embodied in her makes her an interesting figure. At Almesbury, Blanchefleur is among the nuns 'of infinite adoration, of veiled passions, of sororal intellects'. They are 'earth's lambs, wolves of the heavens, with heat's pallor's secret within and beyond cold's pallor'. All these features of the community as a whole go to define her, but beyond that, of course, she is 'the contact of exchange', to a degree unrivalled by any other. Deep in exchange with the world, she is 'love's means to love', a phrase which sums up her whole function and significance.

The evolution of Blanchefleur is in itself interesting. In one of the early French versions she is the niece of Gournemant, besieged in a castle to which Percival (not her brother in this story) comes. He defends the castle, and the two spend the night together and are betrothed. But in the High History of the Holy Grail which Charles Williams read later, Blanchefleur, here named Dindrane, is Percival's sister, and it is she who gives her blood to save another lady, as in Malory.

Clearly, the story of Blanchefleur in the first version included features much less well suited to Williams' purpose than the story of Dindrane in the High History.

Blanchefleur's life of devotion and supreme sacrifice present an ideal and an inspiration, and yet we feel that within the limits imposed by the medium, she is a real person. In 'The Departure of Dindrane', we see her with her two friends, Elayne, Bors' wife, and Taliessin - male and female friends. 'Her nature was sweet to all; no call in vain reached her, but these two she loved', and 'her best arts', we are told, 'changed toils with Elayne and studies with Taliessin'. (To Taliessin, of course, she is much more than an ordinary friend.) Even the slaves in the king's house know her well, indeed she is an eidolon of the slaves.

iv.

One of the most striking features of the cycle is the introduction of the slaves, all of them female. Because of their status, and because they have no traditional place in the story of the Grail and do not appear in Malory's Morte Darthur - they are of course sheer invention on Williams' part - they often seem convincingly human to a greater extent than such characters as Iseult or Morgause can be. In 'The Sister of Percivale', however, the slave drawing water in the courtyard seems little more than a foil to Blanchefleur; and yet in Taliessin's version, each is necessary to the other, since both go to make up the circle of perfection. Without both, the circle would be incomplete, not perfect. The scar on the slave's bent back begins the pattern of circularity as it 'lightens over a curved horizon', and at the same time reveals to Taliessin the 'curved bottom of the world'; but the horizon in the slave's eyes as she swings the handle of the well is 'breaking with distant Byzantium'. Humble though she is, she is capable of vision, too. In the water in her bucket, however, she sees only her own face reflected, while Taliessin in the same moment sees the 'rare face' of Blanchefleur.

In 'The Departure of Dindrane' (147), we have a slave who though nameless, is yet a well-realised individual. 'One of the company, a girl bought in Athens' is seen in a crucial situation, in which she is confronted with a moment of choice. It is, of course, the mere sight of Blanchefleur that enables her to make the vital decision correctly,

> 'whether with a passport under the king's seal
> to return safe to Athens through the themes;
> or whether with a dowry to wed some friend;
> or to swear herself still of the household, and leave
> what end would to come - and then to grieve
> perchance for all forgone'. (148)

Taliessin cannot help her: the decision must be hers. This girl's sensitivity allows her to perceive how painful Blanchefleur's departure is for Taliessin; as well as to understand the nature of her own servitude in the light of the princess's own 'bondage', and to evaluate it more correctly. As she understands the power that comes from discipline, 'at once, in her heart / servitude and freedom were one and interchangeable'. The journey of the cavalcade along the road allows the girl to think out her whole situation in the light of her perception of the implications of Blanchefleur's choice. There is an unreality about the centaur shapes of the cloaked riders in the rain which assists this girl to consider, dispassionately, detachedly, the choices before her, and to know that there is 'no choice then or ever' for her, for 'fixed is the full'. Blanchefleur both enables others to realise their vocation and gives them a yardstick to measure themselves by. We see in this poem, in the representative figure of the slave girl, the complex process of realisation that even lesser natures must go through in order to reach their own certainties and to make their own vital decisions.

Other slaves also illustrate the spiritual potential of the ordinary person; in 'The Star of Percivale' (64), the serving-maid whose 'face is flushed with the mere speed of adoration' as Taliessin plays, is contrasted

with Lancelot, whose gaze at the Host 'found only a ghost of the Queen'. In 'The Ascent of the Spear', (66), however, another girl - or perhaps the same one - is in trouble, in the stocks for 'taking a stick / to a sneering bastard slut'. One's sympathy is at once engaged for the sulky, defiant girl whose indignation, one feels, was probably entirely justified, at least by the ordinary standards of this world. Taliessin's gentleness elicits from her a half-sobbing laugh and a blush, as she chokes on her words. Again and yet again in this scene she tries to speak and cannot finish the sentence, but with her last words, "I was wrong from beginning", she has reached full understanding, and her attitude has completely changed. The psychological realism of the little scene is very convincing; while this ordinary girl's experience makes apparent the difference between the world's order, and heaven's.

The girl in 'The Coming of Galahad' (87), who asks Taliessin what food he had preferred at the coming of the Grail, does not have quite so much personality or individuality as the girl in the stocks, though she, too, has known the hazel's stripes on her shoulders. She is searching for understanding; her function in the sequence is to ask the questions that should be asked, to enable Taliessin to comment on the great event that has just taken place. Yet this unnamed girl, who certainly was and perhaps still is a slave, can break in upon the king's poet's conversation, smile gravely, hold out her hand to be kissed by Taliessin, and finally let cry, '"Lord, make us die as you would have us die"'. The presence of such figures as this girl and the other slaves makes clearly apparent the courtesy of the Household, of Byzantium, as well as suggesting the necessity for the discipline without which it could not exist.

'The Queen's Servant', as C.S. Lewis points out, makes even clearer the significance of the slave's status, and of her emancipation for a higher service. This girl, bought by Taliessin in Caucasia, has emerged from barbarism with a fuller capacity for the Christian

life. She will be required to read Greek and translate, to manage the building of rose-gardens, and to know how to wait upon her mistress. More than this, she must know the rhythms of ceremony, and of the grand art. However one understands these symbolic accomplishments, they constitute a wide range of desirable faculties, intellectual, practical and intuitive. In the casting off of all superfluities, of her old nature, the girl is prepared for her new and fuller life, clothed anew in the beauty and splendour of the roses and wool, with all their symbolic undertones. She is made free, in readiness for more strenuous service. Her eyes are now set upon Taliessin, 'companion to companion, peer to peer', 'flesh and blood and soul / whole and organic in the divined redemption' under the Protection.

It is such astonishingly poems as this, so extraordinarily and so rich in symbolic meaning, that seem to me to make Taliessin through Logres and The Region of the Summer Stars the most distinguished and important rehandling of the Arthurian myths in the twentieth century. By relating the myths to Byzantium, instead of limiting the setting to medieval Britain, Charles Williams was able to introduce the slaves. And these slaves, presented to us with so much sympathy, understanding and psychological realism, are vital to the communication of his deeper meanings, since they help to make apparent the implications of Byzantium in ordinary human terms.

So what conclusions can one draw from all this? Charles Williams' emphasis on the importance of women in the life of the City, obvious enough perhaps in the novels, seems to me even more apparent here. We see that they have many different roles; Helayne the mother of Galahad, of the mother of the Unicorn's voice, are of course special cases, but for every woman there exists the possibility of being the intrument of divine purpose. Blanchefleur is the mother of the nature of lovers. Women are shown as - at their best - love's

means to love, though Guinevere fails to fulfill her role, and Morgause knowingly brings evil into active life. The City also needs those who, like Elayne the wife of Bors, have vision and ideals and can bring order and abundance into everyday life, for ordinary people. (It is easy to see why Elayne of Astolat could not serve Williams' purpose.) But with the practical, the spiritual must go hand in hand; mere do-gooders do not have enough to give. Elayne, as Blanchefleur's friend and Bors' inspiration, embodies both the practical and the spiritual.

Charles Williams also asserts, through the women in the cycle, the intrinsic beauty and goodness of the flesh appropriately disciplined, as reflection of the divine beauty, source of inspiration, and constant delight. It is in and through the flesh that we learn: through the scar on the slave's back, through the arm of Iseult. We also see that the life of the City, of the Company, of the Household is open to all, from the princess to the slave. The City can of course accommodate all, needs all, and it offers scope for growth in spirituality, through discipline and service, through the servant's own initiative and through the operation of grace. But by means of such figures as Blanchefleur, so perfectly realised, and the anonymous slaves, Charles Williams ensures that the life of devotion never appears dreary or disagreeably pious. The Grail offers meats of 'love, laughter, intelligence and prayer'; and the importance of the more unexpected gifts of <u>laughter</u> and <u>intelligence</u>, so characteristic of Williams' teaching (if one can call it that) is, I think, made apparent in these poems. The intelligence of the girl in 'The Queen's Servant' and Blanchefleur's smile are examples. Williams understands <u>joy</u>.

It is interesting to consider the way in which women are presented in some other Arthurian works of the 19th and 20th centuries by way of comparison. In the <u>Idylls of the King</u>, Tennyson - for his own very good reasons - showed the ladies of the court as contemptible in their coarse superficiality and lack of moral fibre, and Guenevere, at the end, as humiliated, grovelling in

acknowledgement of her wrong-doing, a painful spectacle. In The Once and Future King, T.H. White understands all, forgives all, and shows Guenevere as a lovable individual, More recent retellings of the story in the form of out-and-out romances, such a Marion Bradley's The Mists of Avalon (1983), often take a mildly feminist approach, and tend rather to focus on the sexuality of Guenevere and other female figures. To do so is usually to trivialise both character and story. But by comparison, Williams in my view can be seen to have greater insight into at least some aspects of women's experience than do many writers, and to represent women, as women, with remarkable fairness. Of course women in the 'Taliessin' poems are important for him as symbols rather than as individuals, and for their spiritual potential rather than as sexual objects, but such recognition as this implies is surely to be welcomed. Women are presented as symbols, without condescension, enabling Williams to make profound observations about the nature of women's experience: 'dying each other's life, living each other's death' (63).

Though Williams fully acknowledges the significance of the body, 'the substantial flesh', he recognises that relationships between men and women are not necessarily always sexual. Women may be friends and equals, the slave-girl with the King's poet, 'slave and squire, woman and wizard' (109). 'Her eyes were set / upon him, companion to companion, peer to peer' (163), we read, of 'The Queen's Servant' and Taliessin. And as Williams also suggests in The Figure of Beatrice (182), an interchange of function between men and women is often possible. 'Hell is the cessation of work', to have no function is unbearable. Beatrice requires of Dante that his function should be perfectly fulfilled. We see that in the 'Taliessin' poems, most figures have a function of some kind in the Household, They may be mere slaves, at the other end of the scale from Dindrane and Elayne, but as such they show that many

different roles are available to women, according to their gifts and their natures. The household is hierarchical, but the hierarchy does not place women below men as a matter of course.

Williams also suggests in these poems as elsewhere, that women - and once again, especially such women as Dindrane and Elayne who have fulfilled or are fulfilling their spiritual potential - offer like Beatrice a 'way of knowing'. 'Beatrice is the knowing', Williams says (231), and so too is Dindrane. They demonstrate, as Beatrice does, what Love is 'about', what Love is 'up to' (232). The Beatrician moment (which of course can be seen to occur in Williams' poems, as elsewhere in his writing) is as he says, a moment of choice, and his identification and definition of the experience suggest his understanding of psychology. It does happen. The experience may not be literally restricted to a girl and a lover; other relationships may offer such moments of revelation. But perhaps one of the main points suggested by Williams' definition of the 'Beatrician moment' as a moment of choice is that such experiences often occur through human relationships rather than from, say, intellectual effort. The 'Taliessin' poems also take for granted that such experience is possible; the moment of revelation, of realisation can and does change lives. And through the women in the poems, Williams shows significant changes constantly taking place. Symbolic though they remain, Williams' characters are dynamic, and their capacity for experiencing and for initiating change makes the poems themselves dynamic.

Many of the traditional figures who appear in the Arthurian stories make their appearance in the cycle, and with few exceptions, the author has set them before

us very much as they figure in the medieval versions. Arthur and Guinevere, Lancelot and Gawain, Kay and Bors and Percivale and Merlin come before us in more or less familiar form, except in so far as the fresh insights which Williams brings to the story enable us to see new facets. But within the traditional framework, women appear who are virtually or entirely his creation, from Blanchefleur - source of illumination and understanding - to the slaves, humble servants and learners. They can show us more of the practical, day-to-day aspects of the spiritual life, I think, than can be learnt from any other version of the Grail story."

(Page references in the text are to Taliessin Through Logres and The Region of the Summer Stars by Charles Williams and Arthurian Torso by Charles Williams and C.S. Lewis introduced by M.M. Shideler, Eerdmans Publishing Co., Michigan 1974).

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STOP PRESS! BOOK NEWS

Barbara Reynolds' exploration of Dorothy L Sayers' encounter with Dante The Passionate Intellect was published by The Kent State University Press, Box 6525, Ithaca, New York 14851, USA in April 1989, price $ 22 plus $ 2.50 for postage for overseas orders. It will also be available from the publishers agent, Eurospan, 3 Henrietta Street, London WC2E 8LU by the end of May, price as yet not known. The book contains many references to Charles Williams.

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