Queen Guinevere in the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur*: The Celtic Heritage of Medieval Women

การสืบทอดวัฒนธรรมเคลติคของสตรีสมัยกลาง: กรณีศึกษาพระนางเกวนเนอเวียร์ในบทร้อยกรอง *Stanzaic Morte Arthur*

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Abstract

This study examines how much of Celtic Iron Age cultural heritage can be found in the depiction of a female, the legendary King Arthur's wife Guinevere, in a fourteenth century literary text, i.e. the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur*. First, the roles of a female Celtic aristocrat (warrior, queen, married woman and, possibly, priestess) are described, followed by an analysis of the roles their medieval counterparts were expected to fulfill (religious woman, married woman, queen) using diverse fields of study such as history, art history, (ecclesiastical) law and social studies, but also folklore and mythology. In the second part of the study, the analysis of selected scenes from the *Morte Arthur* show that Guinevere's *behaviour* identifies her as a representative of the Celtic "amour de fée". Her *name* ("White Phantom" or "White Illusion") and *colour symbolism* connects her with Celtic solar (horse) goddesses as does the *mode of punishment* for her adultery. The analysis of scenes featuring two other females i.e. the Maiden of Ascolot and Morgan le Fay, reveals Guinevere's and Arthur's connection with the Celtic otherworld.

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บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาอิทธิพลของมรดกตกทอดทางวัฒนธรรมเคลติคยุคเหล็กว่ามีปรากฏให้เห็นมากน้อยเพียงใดในวรรณกรรมอังกฤษสมัยคริสต์ศตวรรษที่ 14 โดยศึกษาจากบทพรรณนาถึงสตรีเพศกรณีของพระนางเกวนเนอเวียร์พระมเหสีของกษัตริย์อาร์เธอร์ ที่ถูกกล่าวขานจนกลายเป็นตำนานผ่านบทร้อยกรองชื่อ *Stanzaic Morte Arthur* ในขั้นต้นผู้วิจัยอธิบายถึงบทบาทของสตรีชาวเคลท์ในสังคมชั้นสูง (นักรบ ราชินี หญิงมีสามีแล้ว และหญิงที่ครองสมณเพศ) จากนั้นผู้วิจัยวิเคราะห์เทียบบทบาทที่ถูกคาดหวังว่าจะพบในสตรีสมัยกลาง (หญิงเคร่งศาสนา หญิงมีสามีแล้ว ราชินี) โดยใช้วิธีศึกษาจากประวัติศาสตร์ ประวัติศาสตร์ศิลป์ สังคมศาสตร์ บทบัญญัติ (ของศาสนจักร) รวมทั้งคติชาวบ้านและเทพปกรณัม ในส่วนที่สองของงานวิจัยผลการวิเคราะห์ฉากที่คัดเลือกมาจากบทร้อยกรองแสดงให้เห็นถึงพฤติกรรมของพระนางเกวนเนอเวียร์ที่เผยพระองค์ในฐานะตัวแทนของ “amour de fée” ในวัฒนธรรมเคลติค พระนามของพระองค์ (“ภาพหลอนสีขาว” หรือ “มายาสีขาว”) และสัญลักษณ์สีของพระองค์ตลอดจนวิธีการลงโทษการประพฤติผิดในกามของพระองค์เชื่อมโยงพระองค์กับเทพธิดา(อาชา)ของชาวเคลท์ที่เกี่ยวพันกับดวงอาทิตย์ นอกจากนี้การวิเคราะห์ฉากที่นำเสนอสตรีอื่นอีก 2 นาง คือ สาวน้อยแห่งแอสโคล็อต และมอร์แกน เลอ เฟย์ ยังชี้ให้เห็นถึงความเชื่อมโยงของพระนางเกวนเนอเวียร์และกษัตริย์อาร์เธอร์กับภพอื่นในวัฒนธรรมเคลติค

คำสำคัญ: การศึกษาเรื่องราวเกี่ยวกับกษัตริย์อาร์เธอร์ - เคลติคศึกษา เพศสภาพศึกษา - การวิจัยสหวิทยาการ - สมัยกลาง - พระราชินีเกวนเนอเวียร์ - บทร้อยกรอง *Stanzaic Morte Arthur*

Introduction

Variations of Arthurian stories had already spread all over Europe by the time the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur* was written. Together with the *Matter of Rome* and the *Matter of France*[1], the *Matter of Britain* belonged to the most widely known literary topics of the Middle Ages and has never completely ceased to fascinate readers and writers alike. This is evident in the almost unbroken chain of Arthurian literature from the early 1130s with Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* via Spenser's Elizabethan *Fairy Queene* and Tennyson's Victorian *Idylls of the King* through to the 20th century besteller *The Mists of Avalon* by Marion Zimmer Bradley, a book which rekindled worldwide interest in the Arthurian legends.

What is interesting is the significant shift in attitude towards the Arthurian cycle. For centuries, British rulers from Angevin Henry II up to Scottish James I, traced either their own or at least their throne's lineage back to King Arthur and thus, according to Geoffrey's *Historia*, back to ancient Troy. In doing so, they claimed a noble pedigree that equalled the French and even the Graeco-Roman heritage of other European royal houses. Henry Plantagenet's keen interest in and sponsoring of Glastonbury Abbey, which even in his day claimed to be Arthur's final resting place, is a good example of the importance given to such a pedigree. Perhaps the most obvious evidence, though, is provided by King Edward I. This king saw himself as Arthur's heir and actually went so far as to claim Scotland from its current king on the grounds that Arthur had once given it as a fief to his vassal Aguisel (sometimes also spelled Angusel)[2]. Therefore Edward insisted that, as Arthur's successor, he was naturally the fief lord of Aguisel's successors (see Jenkins 1990, 120).

After the Plantagenets, the Welsh Tudors styled themselves as the royal descendents of a Welsh Arthur, destined to unite a people torn by the War of the Roses just as Arthur had united a people rent asunder by internal fights (see Rogers 1987). Even King James I, with his mixed Scottish, Welsh and Anglo-French descent, was considered a legitimate heir to King Arthur's throne, as shown by this anagram that one William Quin dedicated to the king:

Charles Iames Stuart Claimes Arthur's Seat (see Ashe [9]1971, 19)

Today, it is mainly the tourist industry that profits from the Arthurian legends and the veritable "pilgrimages" they inspire. For most tourists, Tintagel as Arthur's alleged birthplace and Glastonbury Abbey are the most prominent among countless Arthurian sites. There have been claims since the Middle Ages that the area around the Tor is the legendary Isle of Avalon which harbours not only the graves of King Arthur and his queen but also the well of the Holy Grail. Neither of these claims is undisputed - nor entirely unfounded, either, as we will see later on.

Eventually, what had happened centuries earlier to the Arthurian legends happened to Arthurian Studies: more and more characters were drawn into the circle, such as Merlin, Lancelot, Tristram, Perceval and other knights, as well as mystic objects such as the Round Table or the Holy Grail. Less effort was put into unravelling the "secrets" of female characters who, on the surface, appear to be almost entirely type-cast: Ysseult/Isolt (Isolde in the German spelling) is known as the adulterous wife of King Mark or as Tristram's beloved. Morgan le Fay is the evil sorceress and Elaine of Astolat (also spelled Ascolot) according to some stories is Lancelot's saintly wife. With the exception of the dark "witch" Morgan, these ladies are all fair-haired, white-skinned and exceedingly beautiful[3]. However, if the stories are put together, a more complex image of these figures emerges.

Morgan le Fay is not only a one-dimensional sorceress; in quite a number of epics she is also Arthur's loving sister who, in the end, is the one to take him to Avalon to try and heal him of the grievous wound inflicted upon him by his own son. Ysseult is torn between the revenge she owes her uncle and her own sexual needs. This inner conflict is settled by a magic potion, but almost instantly replaced by another when that very potion makes her fall in love with the wrong man: Tristram. This second conflict is about the love a woman owes her husband but has given her lover.

Guinevere's conflict mirrors Ysseult's but she is denied the moral absolution Ysseult is granted. There is no magic potion taking her free will when she falls in love with Lancelot, only attraction. The author of the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur* (a title conventionally shortened as *Morte Arthur*) does not tell the story of where she came from and how she got married to the king, and he does not tell of how she and Lancelot grew close. He can draw upon that as common knowledge amongst his hearers since this was one of the most commonly known stories of the Middle Ages. Instead, he concentrates on the downfall of King Arthur's realm, on a tale of intrigue, abandonment, betrayed trust, revenge, and torn loyalties. In this story, the queen is seen in the role of the weak woman, weeping a lot and swooning on more than one occasion[4], a woman sentenced to death on the mere suspicion of having committed a crime, a woman nobody except her lover is ready to champion.

But behind this imperfect "role model" is another Guinevere, one who must have wielded power enough to have her own champions, one whose counsel was of value to her husband, one whose possession was so desirable that eventually three men – Arthur, Lancelot and Modred – wanted and/or needed to fight for her.

In a purely medieval subject matter, we would expect equally purely medieval characters, values, settings and motifs, and this notion actually does hold quite true for much of the *Morte Arthur*. However, there are some scenes in this epic in which the characters go almost directly against what was accepted and expected for a man or a woman of their position and/or gender. These scenes will be another focus point of this study. Some of these scenes do not centre around Guinevere herself, but they feature women who are usually set in opposition to her, either in matters of love (the Maiden of Ascolot) or in matters of power and healing (the unnamed Morgan le Fay).

Methodology

First, it was necessary to establish exactly what is known about the roles of aristocratic women, particularly the queen, in Celtic society and then do the same for medieval women so that we can see what would have been expected of a queen in the Middle Ages. Actual examples of Celtic or medieval queens are presented, at times going into biographical detail. The latter was done as sparingly as possible and only when there was a direct connection with the discussion of Guinevere's portrayal in the *Morte Arthur*.

After establishing this general framework, Queen Guinevere herself was discussed. As an introduction, her popular "biography" was presented and the meaning and origin of her name discussed. The study then focussed on selected scenes in the *Morte Arthur* to discuss how Guinevere is portrayed. Those scenes in which Guinevere more or less adheres to the expectations in a medieval queen were excluded from this study in favour of scenes in which Guinevere deviates from medieval convention in behaviour, character, appearance or in the way other characters (re-)act towards her. This discussion includes scenes that do not directly involve Guinevere but rather two other female characters (the Maiden of Ascolot/Astolat and

Morgan le Fay), for the reason that they are usually seen and presented in direct opposition to Guinevere. By this very virtue these two characters help us better understand the queen's contradictory character.

This qualitative study is rooted in several traditions of 20th century literary criticism. One major influence is Stephen Greenblatt's **New Historicism**. In this approach, it is important to see a literary text as a product of its cultural, social and political surroundings. Thus, a study of relevant sources – textual as well as archeological or artistic – is essential to analyse a text. This approach lends itself to this kind of analysis as it clearly goes further than Taine's earlier Positivism (which focuses on milieu, origin and time of the author) or Adorno's New Criticism (which excludes everything outside the text itself).

The second approach employed in this study is a traditional version of **Gender Studies** as described by Judith Butler: looking at female characters as characters in their own right and not as mere backdrops for their male counterparts. Butler's approach sees "woman" as a category whose definition constantly changes depending on its historical, social and/or cultural environment. It also encourages and compliments the study of a character's world and surroundings and to see the text and its protagonists, much in the spirit of New Historicism, as a mirror and product of the culture that produced it. My study, therefore, took into consideration how "good" / "accepted" / "expected" behavior of a Celtic royal female would be perceived and judged in the Middle Ages. Thus, Butler's emphasis on "roles" and the implications of roles for a female – be it in real life or in literature – has inspired the basic structure of this study.

Another important approach was **Intertextuality**. This approach sees each text as a conscious or unconscious product of everything both the author and the reader have ever encountered. This approach lends itself particularly well to the study of text corpora that have at their core the same theme or character, as is obviously the case with the Arthurian cycle. In this

study, the vast network of Arthurian texts has been limited to the medieval British, Irish, French and German sources. Later versions were excluded.

In order to lessen the impact of the hermeneutic circle, there was a constant reading and re-reading of both primary and secondary sources. The increase of knowledge about the laws and societies of the Celtic Iron Age, Antiquity, Roman Britain as well as the Middle Ages proved invaluable in the discussion of which parts of the *Morte Arthur* are most likely to have Celtic origins.

While these approaches are in themselves highly applicable to this kind of study, there is a methodological dilemma which is due to the subject matter itself, as eminent historian Ronald Hutton (2011, 30) explains in his discussion of the Celtic Druids: “the evidence that has turned up is itself in need of interpretation and the interpretations made have tended to rely on the privileging of certain texts over others.” The same is true for the discussion of the Celts and Celtic women and it is also true for many aspects of the lives of women in the Middle Ages. For that reason, it is often simply not possible to give one straight answer to a point of discussion. Often, there are relevant diverging or even opposing points of view and in some cases there are several plausible answers/interpretations to a point under discussion. Whenever this was the case, all arguments were introduced and discussed as fairly and objectively as possible.

Discussion of findings

It has become clear that much about Queen Guinevere is as deeply rooted in Celtic tradition as it is in a medieval context. Her name (“White Phantom”) clearly points towards a Celtic origin and may reflect her status as a divinity or at least as a representative of one. Remnants of possible associations with horse goddesses such as the Welsh Rhiannon and the Irish Sidhe - Finnabair in particular - have been shown through her solar aspect and the

symbolism of her dominant colour: white. The first syllable of her name “Guin” is phonetically identical with the Welsh “gwyn” and related to the Irish “finn”, both meaning “white”. This colour as well as the connection reappear in the episode of Guinevere and Lancelot’s return from Joyous Gard where both are dressed in white, riding white horses. The solar aspect of this colour may be the underlying reason for Guinevere’s enmities as well as her alliances, considering that the – here unnamed – Lady of the Lake and Morgan le Fay can both be traced back to aquatic and lunar goddesses.

If we accept the queen’s connection with the Sidhe[5], we would expect her to behave like one, as well. Frappier’s concept of the **amour de fée**, an Arthurian variant of the medieval idea of courtly love was an important aspect of the study of Guinevere’s character. It was established that the queen’s imperiousness and moodiness as well as her constant testing of Lancelot is a perfect fit for this concept, as is her obvious dallying with other knights. This behaviour would not have been morally reprehensible for a Celtic queen who was not defined by her relation to the males in her life but who was able to rule in her own right. In this position, she was also entitled to choose her consorts/lovers as she liked. In a medieval context, this kind of behaviour (even as toned down as it is in the Arthurian context) is in utter contrast to the way a Christian married woman – and even more so a queen – was expected to fulfil her role. With extremely rare exceptions, medieval queens did not rule in their own name, and if they did – like the Empress Mathilda – they encountered insurmountable obstacles to remain on the throne. Choosing lovers would have branded any queen as an immoral adulteress guilty of high treason, a crime punishable, possibly, by death.

Guinevere, too, is accused of adultery (as well as of murder), and her enemies demand the death penalty for her. It is the manner of death that is chosen for her, burning at the stake, that is further evidence that Guinevere as a literary character is not a creation of the Middle Ages. In fact, there are two attempts to have Guinevere burnt at the stake, but we have found that not a single English or French queen was ever burnt alive. Even though we have seen quite a number of queens who became "burdensome" to their husbands to the degree that they openly cuckolded or plotted against them, they would "merely" be banished from the court (mostly to a nunnery) or otherwise disposed of but not burnt at the stake in a public spectacle. For the medieval feudal society marriage was a means of forging (and *keeping*!) bonds with equally or more powerful allies. Any execution of a wife, but especially executing her in such a manner would have been an unthinkable insult to her family and equal to a declaration of war. It was, therefore, concluded that the choice of *this* kind of punishment may reflect an earlier stage of Guinevere's development as a character, one in which she was considered sacrosanct/sacred and in which her inherent magic could only be safely destroyed by fire, once again recalling her solar character.

It is within the context of magic that we find Guinevere's adversaries more clearly explained as well. Morgan le Fay, Arthur's sister, is not named in the *Morte Arthur* but in its source, the French *Mort Artu*, she is behind the assassination of the Scottish knight. From both the French source (by naming Morgan's accomplice in the murder as Avallach) and the *Morte Arthur*, we can deduce that, at least on a mythological level, Guinevere is in a battle with another Sidhe for the possession of the land. As long as Guinevere is still married to King Arthur, she is the representative of the Goddess of the Land and it is in this function that her stepson, Mordred, needs to make her his wife.

The Maiden of Ascolot/Astolat is another of Guinevere's rivals, but one who – at least in the *Morte Arthur* version of the story – has no chance against her. Both women want Lancelot's love, but it is very clear in the *Morte Arthur* that he only loves Guinevere and that is why the Maiden dies of a broken heart. It has been shown how her boat and her journey to Arthur's court resemble a journey to the otherworld. The rivalry between the Maiden and Guinevere is, therefore, one that is as entirely hopeless for the Maiden as she reveals in her accusatory letter: no human could possibly win against a fairy/goddess in matters of love.

These are the Celtic traits in Guinevere's heritage that we can assume to be more or less secure. It has been pointed out that the *Morte Arthur* poet also uses Germanic and Roman literary motifs along with local and contemporary (i.e. medieval) references. Sometimes it is possible to distil the Celtic elements from his material more or less clearly, but at other times (as in the use of the boar as a metaphor for a warrior or the origin of the ship burial, for example) this is impossible and provides clear proof of how thoroughly these traditions have merged in medieval English literature in general and in Arthurian literature in particular.

Conclusion

Guinevere's mixed heritage is symptomatic of the Europe of her day and age. Celtic, Roman, Germanic, medieval French and even Arabic traits and influences can be found in the way this female character is presented. Some of her most characteristic traits may be of Celtic origin and had become old-fashioned or obsolete even by the fourteenth century, while some may be echoes of a pre-historic/mythological past. Other traits may be traced back to local traditions and/or well-known concepts whose origins can be traced back both to ancient as well as contemporary sources, while still others may be little more than the creative inventions of a writer dreaming of a (bygone) age of chivalry and heroism.

This convoluted heritage is as much a product of the Middle Ages that created and enjoyed it as it is a product of the ancient/pre-historic world. Medieval society and culture had itself grown out of diverse traditions and was constantly changing, as the gradual (re-)introduction of Roman law, the (re-)discovery of Greek philosophy and many other examples show. This study has proven that a literary text can be seen as a quarry: the deeper we go into the textual analysis, the more evidence of earlier cultures can we discover that can then be compared with the findings of related fields of study.

Implications

Medieval texts are often neglected as reliable sources of historical information on account of their fictional character and the high degree of invention to be found there. In addition, they are almost always excluded from foreign language teaching on account of the fact that they represent an outdated stage of language. While there is definitely truth in both opinions, it would be short-sighted to adhere to them in the extreme, and it has become evident in this research that much information on the role of women in a medieval society can be distilled from a literary text that is their contemporary. The same holds true for other aspects of a society, such as values, habits and even dress codes. Medieval literature should, therefore, still be treated with the necessary caution and any findings need to be substantiated with the help of other relevant fields of study, but it still contains valuable information that should not be discarded lightheartedly.

Within the context of foreign language learning, there is definitely no question that reading an entire medieval epic should be reserved for higher levels. On the other hand, in English the spelling has changed relatively little since the Middle Ages (unlike in German, for example) so that short texts may very well be used both for linguistic purposes (to discuss

orthographic or phonetic changes, for excample) and as source material for a study or discussion of cultural and/or historical background.

Recommendations for further study

Looking at both the conclusion as well as implications of this study there are several openings for further study. Most obviously in a Thai context, a comparative study looking at literary medieval Western and corresponding Thai texts such as *Lilit Phra Lor* or *Nang Nophamat* would be very rewarding. An analysis of how aristocratic women in both cultures are presented, which behaviours, values and taboos are found in their depictions and how the women are judged on the background of these aspects, may yield valuable insights. It would then be worthwhile to examine where there are parallels and discrepancies in the way both cultures see and portray women, and to find out exactly how the discrepancies in particular can be explained, again using an interdisciplinary approach. In the same way, research into different layers of society, age groups and gender should also certainly yield valuable results.

Another venue of research would be a diachronic research into the literature of one country that looks at the depiction (and possibly the evolution) of gender roles in an earlier era in comparison to later ones. Studies such as this would help to elucidate the development of women – of all classes, ages and eras – in their respective eras and societies. In addition, they help us to better understand the roles women play today and how modern expectations in a "good" woman are not and have never been fixed and "chiselled in stone": these roles have gradually developed over time and, by the very nature of this development, they continue to change.

ENDNOTES

[1] Epics covering the fight around Troy (including the *Aeneid* and the foundation of Rome) and the epic cycle around Emperor Charlemagne are titled Matter of Rome and the Matter of France respectively.

[2] According to Wace's *Layamon*, Aguisel is the brother of Urien and Lot, which makes him Gawain's uncle.

[3] The fair hair and white skin in particular play a highly important role in Celtic judgements on the beauty of women, as can be deduced from Celtic stories and folklore by popular characters such as the Irish Grainne, Finnabair, Deirdiu and Etain. These features are shared not only by most fairy tale princesses but are still a standard for modern ideas of beauty.

[4] Even though swooning and crying was certainly not as tabooed in a medieval context as they may be today, her breakdowns are quite excessive when compared to other epics.

[5] A legendary race of Irish Otherworld beings that may (or may not!) reflect memory traits of a pre-Celtic population.

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