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A Collection of Essays Presented at the Seventh
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Charles Williams and the Quest for the Holy Grail

Susan Wendling

Charles Williams (1886-1945) devoted his life to "the Matter of Britain", seen in a private scrapbook, his novels and Arthurian poetry, and his prose analysis, *The Figure of Arthur*. Exploring two myths, King Arthur and the Grail Quest, Williams creatively combined them. Reasons are given why Williams was so intrigued with the Grail legends: the failure of earlier sources to develop the "never quite fulfilled hints of profound meaning"; the desire as a poet to discover images to convey his themes of romantic theology as well as the probing of the nature of co-inherence with its "doctrines" of Exchange and Substituted Love; the identification of Williams with Taliessin, King Arthur's poet, the central figure in his own poetry; and finally, the High Prince Galahad, who achieves the Vision of the Grail, but whose mysterious begetting fascinates Williams with its paradoxes and spiritual "contradictions" presented in the old tales.

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Charles Williams and the Quest for the Holy Grail

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The Matter of Britain

For those familiar with Charles Williams as a literary figure associated with C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, especially during the "War years" of 1939 to 1945, it is no surprise that Williams utilized the "Matter of Britain" in his writings. People interested in getting into C.W., as he is popularly known, often start by reading his first published novel, *War in Heaven*, which details the discovery of "the True Graal" in a little country church outside London. Of course, those who review his total literary output quickly discover his two cycles of Arthurian poetry, *Taliessin Through Logres* and *The Region of the Summer Stars*. Those serious about reading these poems and understanding what C.W. is achieving go on to discover the *Arthurian Torso*, which contains *The Figure of Arthur* by Charles Williams as well as the six-chapter *Williams and the Arthuriad* by C.S. Lewis.

The Figure of Arthur is Williams' unfinished prose study of the "tale of King Arthur in English literature" with "the main theme the coming of the two myths, the myth of Arthur and the myth of the Grail." Lewis, working from "the papers entrusted to him" by Williams--who had died suddenly in May of 1945--states that "Williams might be the greatest poet of his time" and defends his unfinished Arthurian poem cycle as the development of the combining of the two myths--Arthur and the Grail--in something of great beauty and intellectual significance. Lewis shares a scrap, a prefatory note, in which Williams states that the invention of Galahad in the old French Chronicles is "as much of a union and a redemption as of a division and a destruction. It is his double office with which the book is concerned, and the final chapter discusses the developed significance of the whole myth." (1)

Pursuing these tantalizing hints from stray scraps assembled by Lewis, the Williams scholar interested in the Grail legends as Williams' "life work" can discover more details by reading Anne Ridler's "critical introduction" to *Charles Williams: The Image of the City and other Essays*, long out of print but recently republished. Ridler, a fine poet in her own right, first heard Williams lecture when she was a schoolgirl, and they remained friends until Williams' untimely death in 1945. When discussing Williams' ambivalence of mind between belief and scepticism, Ridler states that for Williams, "intellectual honesty is the first necessity" but that "we must go further than that" as in his later poem, "Hymn to the Protector, or Angel, of Intellectual Doubt" in which he praises the Virgin Mary for her question "How shall these things be?" (2) Ridler then shares that "in his first plans for the Arthurian poems, he had related Mary's question to the Angel, to the Question which Percival, in the *Conte du Graal* of Chretien de Troyes, failed to ask about the nature of the Grail, the asking of which . . . was necessary to salvation." (3) So here we see an early example of Williams relating matters of literary myth and theology to his thinking on the Grail legends.

This early hint fully blossoms to our attention a few pages later in the "Introduction" when Ridler explains that Williams kept a "Commonplace Book" in which he drafted a couple of poems printed in *Poems of Conformity* (1917) but then kept for

"notes in connexion with the Arthurian cycle" and "which he gave me many years later."
 (4) She relates that this book was a binder's dummy made for the Concise Oxford Dictionary, which first came out in 1911. Of course, Williams could use such a blank book since he worked his whole life as an editor for the Oxford University Press. At any rate, Ridler says that this book had 174 filled up pages, and that underneath the title of the C.O.D. on the spine, Williams had written "The Holy Grail." On the title page Williams quotes the first line from Tennyson's introductory poem to his *Morte d' Arthur*, and the piece from the Vulgate "contains the words which Williams intended as the motto of the whole of his work: '*Ecce nova facio omnia.*' There is then a passage from Dante's *Vita Nuova*, describing his self-dedication to a life's work, which Williams wished to renew for his own part." (5) She says that there are several sketches of possible general plans for Williams' work, including one for a trilogy: "Three volumes--Tristram, Lancelot, Galahad. Each divided into, say, four or five books; . . . and describing the circumstances of Love in each--Love overpowered, Love in error, Love triumphant. Three circles having one centre, the Achievement of the Grail." (6) And near the beginning he writes: "Love, as God, and as the Way, to dominate the poem." (7) Ridler feels the "fascination of all still-potential things" and feels the book "contains a number of the ideas which, later developed, were his own contribution to the great Arthurian myth."

The Failure of Earlier Sources

At this point you might be asking why Williams was so intrigued with the Grail legends! I think there are multiple answers, and we can explore several of them as a backdrop to discussing Williams's contributions to the Grail legends. The first and most obvious reason, of course, is that Williams wanted to develop out certain things only hinted at in his prime source, Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*: "Malory, however, as we at present have him, never quite fulfilled the hints of profound meaning which are scattered through him." (Williams' "prefatory note" to *The Figure of Arthur*.) Williams was also displeased with Tennyson's treatment of the Grail legends in his famous Victorian poem cycle, *Idylls of the King*. In an article "The Making of Taliessin" in the *Poetry Review*, April, 1941, Williams says:

It began also, perhaps even earlier, in a vague disappointment with the way in which Tennyson treated the Hallows of the Grail in Balin and Balan. I am not attacking Tennyson as a poet; I am only saying that in this particular respect his treatment of the Sacred Lance as a jumping-pole left a good deal to be desired and even to be done. . . I am not claiming to be better than Tennyson. It was clear that *the great and awful myth of the Grail had not been treated adequately in English verse. . . .* [my emphasis] (8)

This is the obvious, "external" reason for Williams making the Grail legends his life work.

Williams' Identification with Taliesin, King Arthur's Poet

Another reason would be that as a poet looking for images to convey his great themes of romantic theology, entailing the fusion of human love and divine love, the probing of the nature of co-inherence with its "doctrines" of exchange and substituted

love, and the fusion of more ancient esoteric ideas with Christian orthodoxy, Williams found in the Grail legends complex, substantive materials to act as vehicles for his own thought. His blurb for *Taliessin through Logres* says 'the names and incidents of the Arthurian myth are taken as starting points for investigation and statement on common and profound experience.' (9) Williams the poet surely identifies with Taliessin, King Arthur's Poet, whom Williams places as the central figure in his own poem cycle. C.S. Lewis advises readers to "attach ourselves to him" in order to deal "with the main regions of Williams's poetic universe one by one as Taliessin comes to them . . . Otherwise we should be at a loss where to begin; for many 'huge cloudy symbols' of equal importance, and inter-related with sensitive complexity, demand our attention." (10)

Joe McClatchey, in his detailed article "Charles Williams and the Arthurian Tradition," further elaborates the significance of King Arthur's "failure" in Logres and Williams's choice of Taliessin as the central symbol of his reworking of the Grail legends:

When Arthur turns Logres into an idea--his own idea--he is reversing the very nature of the Incarnation. His mental act is a great sin because it nullifies the Emperor's plan, which was an incarnational plan--that is, to prepare a habitation on earth for the physical return of the Incarnate Logos. As in the First Advent, a woman, Mary, provided the human habitation for the Incarnate Logos, so now; only now, instead of a single human being to receive Him, the whole kingdom of Logres must do it. But Arthur, on whom it depends, fails, for he unconceives the incarnate thing back into the idea and uses the idea for his own purposes.

But whom might Williams choose to contrast to Arthur? The answer catches us by surprise. It's Taliessin. Why Taliessin? Why a poet of all people? Why not someone practical? . . . But that's just it. It is *because* Taliessin is a poet that he is chosen. For poets are the people most concerned with concrete things. Poets give form to concepts. . . It is the poet Taliessin--who really lived and whose poetry nourishes us still--who must set the incarnational example for Arthur's kingdom. Taliessin's very name places him among those most like the Lord. His name means, "Behold, the Shining Brow!" Like Moses, whose face shone when he descended Mount Sinai; like Diomedes, on whose shield and helm Athena "kindled fire most like midsummer's purest flaming star in heaven rising" in the *Iliad*; like Beatrice's radiant beauty that undoes Dante's vision in the Eighth Sphere of Paradise; like the Lord, nimbused in glory on the Mount of Transfiguration, Taliessin bears the light in which all the poetic images clothe themselves with appropriate tangible form. (11)

Another feature linking Charles Williams the poet to his central symbol, Taliessin, is that Williams himself, like Taliessin, quietly serves the Grail through his poetry, embodying incarnational Love even as Logres itself is given over to "the wolves, the pirates and the pagans." (*Taliessin's Song of Logres*) He gathers about him a Company of folk who "live by a frankness of honorable exchange," "dying each other's life, living each other's death," in the co-inherence of "full salvation." ("The Founding of the Company" in *Taliessin Through Logres*, 155, 156, 157) . Alice Mary Hadfield relates how Williams "began to agree to his friends' pressure to form an Order concerned with

his ideas of co-inherence, substitution, and exchange--a step he had refused for three years. . . . He wrote to a friend, 'I am all but quite seriously proposing to make this small motion towards the Order. I have gone as far as making up six short statements as a beginning, and I am disposed at least to promulgate them among the household. . . .' He regarded it as established by September [of 1939]: and *The Descent of the Dove* is dedicated as 'For the Companions of the Co-inherence'." (12)

The High Prince Galahad

A third reason for Williams being attracted to the Grail legends (besides developing out Malory's hints and using poetic symbols such as Taliessin to convey his own ideas) has to be the complexity of the begetting of the High Prince Galahad by Sir Lancelot on the Grail Princess Elayne. Of all the knights at Arthur's court, it is Lancelot who "has his heart mostly on love" and who is "mostly concerned with choosing necessity (which is the subject of all great poetry)." (13) Williams is fascinated with all the paradoxes and all the "contradictions" presented in the old tales of Lancelot and Galahad. In a piece written for the *Dublin Review* in April of 1944, "Malory and the Grail Legend," Williams discusses Lancelot's fine character in rescuing Palomides and also showing courtesy toward someone who has injured him. Immediately after we find Lancelot riding towards the mysterious castle of King Pellus, who is the Keeper of the Grail. Lancelot sees the Grail being held by a fair maiden and asks the King what it means:

This is . . . the richest thing that any man hath living. And when this thing goeth about, the Round Table shall be broken; and wit ye well . . . this is the holy Sangreal that ye have seen . . . The king knew well that Sir Lancelot should get a child upon his daughter, the which should be named Sir Galahad, the good knight, by whom all foreign country should be brought out of danger, and by him the Holy Greal should be achieved . . . (quoted by Williams in his article "Malory and the Grail Legend")

Williams remarks that there is about this account a "known predestination":

Lancelot is here the predetermined father of the great Achievement; he is the noblest lord in the world, the kindest, the bravest, the truest. But he will not have to do with any woman but the Queen [Guinevere] . . . And Galahad must certainly be the child of the Grail-princess and certainly not of Guinevere. How is it to be done? *It is brought about by holy enchantment and an act of substitution.* [italics added] Lancelot is deluded . . . into riding 'against night' to another castle, where he is received 'worshipfully with such people to his seeming as were about Queen Guinevere secret.' He is given a cup of enchanted wine and taken to the room where the supposed Queen is . . . The vision is of 'the best knight,' labouring in that threefold consciousness of God, the King, and Guinevere, received into the outlying castle of the Mysteries, and then *by the deliberate action of spiritual powers drawn on into a deeper operation.* [italics added] He dismounts . . . the assumed forms, the awful masks, of this sacred mystery attend him; he is taken to a chamber as dark as the dark night of the soul; and there the child who is to achieve the Grail is begotten. . . . [Lancelot] is merely overthrown by that element

in him which, because of his love and courtesy, is predetermined 'where Will and Power are one' to make him the father of Galahad. . . . (14)

Williams continues the tale of Lancelot's madness, his healing in the house of the Grail, and his knighting of Galahad years later, not realizing that the young and fair knight is his own son. He discusses the sitting of Galahad in the Siege Perilous, the condition necessary to all achievement. The Grail appears while the knights are seated at the table at the feast of Pentecost, and later the Queen declares Galahad to be Lancelot's son, leading him to rest in King Arthur's own bed. Williams states that this incident is at once

. . . the fulfillment and the frustration of the three lordliest personages, whether they like it or not. There lies in the King's bed that which is the consummation and the destruction of the Table. To Lancelot it is the visible defeat of his treasured fidelity, and the success and defeat of his own life. And to the Queen it is her lover's falsity and her lover's glory. . . . It is then this living, tragic, and joyous Resolution of all their loves that now enters on its own adventure. . . . Its quest begins . . . Towards the conclusion the High Prince reaches Sarras with two companions; they are Percivale and Bors. . . . These are functions each of the others. The High Prince is at the deep centre . . . These are three degrees of love. Their conclusion is proper to them. Galahad is assumed into the Grail. Percivale after that assumption remains a hermit by the City of Sarras . . . Bors [who is married] returns to Camelot, joins Lancelot . . . (15)

These episodes embody paradoxes of love seen in the actions of Lancelot and the spiritual fusions of the High Prince Galahad in his final vision of the Grail, where Joseph of Arimathe says Mass; but there is a phrase which suggests more: "a man kneeling on his knees in likeness of a bishop, that had about him a great fellowship of angels *as it had been Jesus Christ himself; and then he arose and began a mass of Our Lady.*" Williams, adding special emphasis to these last two phrases, notes that Galahad is called, parting after Communion from his companions. It is then that, according to Charles Williams, one of the greatest phrases in Malory is used. Galahad says to Bors: "Fair lord, salute me to my lord Sir Lancelot my father, and as soon as ye see him, bid him remember of this unstable world." Williams tells us:

If the state of these great mysteries, where one like Christ begins a mass of Our Lady, is recognized, that final salutation has its full value. It is then that the High Prince remembers, recognizes, and salutes his father. The times have been changed since the love of Guinevere and the enchanted darkness of the chamber of Elayne, but Galahad derives from all. 'The unstable world'--yes; but it was thence that he himself came. The rejection of importunate love--yes; Guinevere herself is to say so; but it is through the mystical substitution which lies even there that the High Prince was begotten. Lancelot was a master of courtesy, and it is so that Galahad is fathered on him. He himself never achieves the Grail, but at the point of a greater achievement than any he could have known, his son's

greeting (full and ungrudging) reaches him, through another (still and always through another), 'Fair lord, salute me to my lord Sir Lancelot my father.' (16)

All of these mystical substitutions and spiritual paradoxes of predestination and free choice, not to mention the spiritual sorrow and desolation (what Williams refers to elsewhere as "The Impossibility") experienced inwardly in the "citadel of the soul" by Lancelot (as well as Guinevere and Arthur, of course), place us with certainty in the spiritual universe of Charles Williams.

Hopefully, the delineation of these elements in Williams' writings--his devotion to the Matter of Britain, his personal identification with the poet Taliessin, and his unique use of the character of Galahad to convey his own peculiar spiritual vision--will help you in your own reading of Charles Williams to understand just how central "the Grail Quest" was not only for his poetic achievement but also to his spiritual vision.

Notes

1. C.S. Lewis, "Williams and the Arthuriad," in *Arthurian Torso* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1974), p. 278.
2. Anne Ridler, "Introduction," in *Charles Williams: The Image of the City and Other Essays* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. xli.
3. *Ibid.*, p. xli.
4. *Ibid.*, p. lviii.
5. *Ibid.*, p. lviii.
6. *Ibid.*, p. lix.
7. *Ibid.*, p. lix.
8. Charles Williams, "The Making of Taliessin," in *Charles Williams: The Image of the City and Other Essays*, op. cit., pp. 179-180.
9. Cited in David Dodds' "Introduction", in *Arthurian Poets: Charles Williams* (Boydell Press, 1991), p. 11.
10. C.S. Lewis, "Williams and the Arthuriad," op. cit., p. 281.
11. Joe McClatchy, "Charles Williams and the Arthurian Tradition," in *Seven* (Wheaton, IL: The Marion Wade Center, Vol. 11, 1994), p. 57.
12. Alice Mary Hadfiend, *Charles Williams: An Exploration of His Life and Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 173.
13. Charles Williams, "Notes on the Arthurian Myth," in Anne Ridler, op. cit., p. 177.
14. Charles Williams, "Malory and the Grail Legend," in Anne Ridler, op. cit., pp. 189-90.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 192.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 194.