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DREAM READING IN *ARTHUR OF LITTLE BRITAIN* AND OTHER MEDIEVAL ROMANCES. THE NARRATIVE AND DISCOURSE LOGIC OF PROPHETIC DREAMS

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Abstract

Prophetic dreams have always inflamed our imagination and stirred controversy and passionate debates. Psychology, literature, myths, and religion speak widely of dreams; prophetic ones have held a special position in the writing and reading of texts, at all times, in all geographical areas. Our paper concentrates on this topic of the prophetic dream as raised by a famous yet not very discussed French medieval text, “Arthur of Little Britain”. It is not only the symbolism or even the allegory behind the dream that concerns us, but mostly its narrative and discourse logic. Why has the author of the text (unknown to us nowadays) decided to use the dream theme in his romance?! Was it just a literary technique, or have his intentions gone further?

Keywords: *Arthur of Little Britain*; Arthurian romance; dream; narratology; rhetoric; animal symbolism.

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1. Introduction

Dreams were common in the Middle Ages (Kruger, 1992, 15-16, 21-23, 58, 89, 129; and in Kruger, 1992, reviewed by Uebel, 1993, 135-138; Dark, 2010, v-vi), both in literature and in the collective imagery (Bezard, 1986, 139-143). They were given divine, demonic, or miraculous meaning. Medieval man, like modern man, responded to dreams (whether in literature or in real life) “with both belief and skepticism, but perhaps with not the same proportional emphasis, for the perceived source of the dream is conditioned by the beliefs of a society and by the sophistication of the various classes within that society” (Carty, 1999, 45). In other words, the divine nature of dreams was a risky territory. The Word of God was no trifle to the Christian and to vouch for the holiness of a dream was serious business. Preference was given to doubt and hence to interpretation when it came to dreaming, especially in the realm of imagination.

Medieval romances are full of dreams, many of them mixed with animal allegory and symbolism, with mythological creatures, biblical characters, or hagiographical elements. Variety, creativity, and profound meaning best describe texts belonging to the Matter of France, the Matter of Britain or that of Rome. Be they about the ancient, French, or Briton/ Celtic heritage, these stories all reflect how the medieval man felt, thought, and lived. Mentalities mingled diverse traditions and customs and so did dreams as described in what we may call written adventures of the imagination.

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We have chosen to analyze several passages concerning dreams from some very famous medieval romances, as mentioned in our *Corpus Texts* (see the *Bibliography* section). Narrative and discourse terminology and concepts (Şleahţiţchi, 2017, 144-149) will be used for a better understanding, together with medieval studies most accepted notions of historical thinking. We will also have in mind Whetter's views on genre, politics, and power (1991, 56-78), as he identifies them in English and French medieval romances.

2. Arthur of Little Britain

2.1 A Short Summary

Arthur of Little Britain (ed. Costache-Babcinschi, 2012, PhD dissertation), known in French as *Petit Artus de Bretagne*, is not a very well-known *prose romance* nowadays. Still, it was very famous in both England and France during the Middle Ages, as attested by the existence of various French manuscripts and editions. The early 16th century Middle English translation by John Bouchier, lord Berners, implies a very late interest of the English public in Arthurian legends, which continued throughout the literary history, up to the 19th century.

Since the story itself combines basic Arthurian themes, historical and political interests, as well as considerable curiosity for miraculous and exotic adventures, we have considered this text suitable for our study of medieval dreams from both Eastern and Western traditions.

And the story goes as follows: Arthur, a Breton, son of the Duke of Brittany, has a chivalric destiny. His life is that of a hero, and of a role-model. There is nothing throughout the whole story that Arthur does which proves disloyal, evil, immoral, or simply human...He is both the perfect warrior and the humblest Christian. He is the prototype of the Knight who fights for the good and defeats the evil. He even pardons when asked, however serious the offence.

In short, Arthur wants to build his own destiny, following, of course, in the footsteps of the other Arthur, the more famous one, Arthur of the Round Table. It all begins with a dream he has in Chapter 16. Full of symbols, it haunts him until his friend and tutor, Gouvernar², interprets it. The decision is made, Arthur will fulfill his dream. Fulfilling his dream will prove to be fulfilling his destiny. He is in all situations the savior of the day, he is aided by friends (Gouvernar, Hector, nobles, Master Steuen, the Fairy Proserpyne); he achieves the adventures of a terrible place called Mount Perilous, the Porte Noyre, he has a powerful sword, Clarence, and a White Shield; obtains lands and titles from evil people who do not surrender to the good Arthurian deeds; he marries the most beautiful and powerful lady, Florence, daughter of the King Emendus of Soroloys, vanquishes the Emperor of Ynde the More (the most malefic of all counties), and finally becomes Duke of Brittany, King of Soroloys, Emperor of Ynde and of Constantinoble. He is ruler of both East and West. His son, Alexander, will inherit all this. Arthur embodies all qualities a perfect hero or knight is expected to have in the medieval times.

2.2 The Three Dreams

Three chapters of the book concentrate on three different dreams that are all important for the understanding of the story.

In **Chapter 16** Arthur dreams of being in the most beautiful place of the world, sitting next to a fountain. He washes his face and hands, and, to his right, there is a tent on top of which there is an *eagle of gold* that shows him her love. A terrifying griffon, accompanied by serpents, approaches. Arthur fights them and he gets helped by a turtledove and some doves. Then, a spar hawk and falcons help him too. A little later, Arthur is in a high tower, accompanied by the eagle, the turtledove, Hector, and Gouvernar. A lion, four leopards with golden crowns, as well as other people bow before him and entrust him the eagle.

² We have kept the spelling of the proper names as they appear in our edition of *Arthur of Little Britain*.

Gouernar interprets the dream: Arthur will become the King of all (as the lion is king of all beasts) and marry a Queen (as the eagle is King/Queen of all birds).

In **Chapter 24** Mayster Steuen, Florence's clerk, and best friend (a sort of Merlin), as well as Florence herself have the same dream: two queens (Proserpyne and Florence) talk about a Leopard with seven heads, all crowned with gold. This Leopard will become master of the eagle. He looks like a boar, has the heart of a lion, the body of lead, and the feet of a white stag. Steuen helps Florence interpret the dream: the Leopard is probably a knight born somewhere in France; he is very strong, and his blows are mortal. The seven heads would be the seven kingdoms that belong to the Emperor of Ynde the Moor and will one day belong to the knight coming from the West. The stag would be the symbol of *all-mighty*. As an outcome of this shared dream, Florence and Steuen both start waiting and searching for the Leopard Knight.

In **Chapter 46** Proserpyne shows herself in Arthur's dream and tells him where he can find the White Shield and the Sword Clarence. The day after, Steuen (who has already met Arthur) and Arthur go to the garden of the Porte Noyre where Florence's tent can be seen. On its top there is an eagle of gold, two griffons, and a queen wearing a crown with six branches. Each of them represents a kingdom and the name of the ruler is written upon each branch: Emendus (Florence's father), Florence, and the four vassal kings.

2.3 Symbolism, Politics and Rhetoric

The first aspect to notice is that the first dream is the one announcing Arthur's destiny. All elements are symbolic in this dream; we can talk about animal allegory (Llinares, 1971, 1-30), all animals standing for symbols of something that becomes clear with the developing of the plot. The reader is presented with quite an easy explanation, given in the text itself by Gouernar, and later confirmed by two other characters that also play the role of a guide and of a mistagogue, Steuen and Proserpyne.

Having in mind common medieval animal symbolism (Chevalier, Gheerbrant, 1969, various; Pastoureau, 2014, various; Eliade, 1998, various), as it appears in bestiaries and encyclopedias, as well as the Celtic and Christian traditions, we may take a clear look at what these animals represent in Arthur's dreams. First and foremost, the leopard is the degenerate offspring of a king, but also similar to a lion in heraldry, representing force and royal rights. Bartholomaeus Anglicus, in Book 18 of his *De proprietatibus rerum* (Steele, 1905, unnumbered), mentions wisdom and intelligence as associated to the leopard. The boar, on the other hand, stands for physical strength, while in Celtic tradition it represents priesthood, i.e. knowledge. The stag is the common symbol of Christ, similar to the unicorn, embodying innocence and uprightness. Lead is a basic natural element that is supposed to be transformed into gold, a superior metal, if purity of mind, body and spirit is to be attained, indicating maybe the knight's quest, his effort to transform mundane qualities into spiritual ones, on the condition of virtue being kept. The eagle is naturally from Antiquity to the present day an imperial sign. Arthur will not only be king, but also husband of an empress, generous, strong, pure, a real messenger of the skies. Doves and turtledoves, hawks and falcons help Arthur, all birds representing purity, love, courage, loyalty. Negative symbolism is associated with our hero's enemies. The griffon is the most terrific monster for the medieval imagination, it has both the force and savagery of the eagle and the lion, but the nobleness of neither. Let us not forget that crossbreeding was no joke in those times, but rather a trespassing of natural order. Serpents are no mystery either, they are devilish creatures, sly and false, biblical references being most present and evident in everyday life and stories.

Considering the dream animal allegory from a wider perspective, we notice some interesting aspects. One of them is political. The leopard, as stated above, was considered a crossbreed. *Arthur of Little Britain*, originally written in Old French most probably in the 1320's, anticipates what was later called the Breton War of Succession, a battle fought on the one side for the independence of the Duchy of Brittany, and on the other for the benefits of the opposing France and England. The leopard could be here a symbol of a dual political representation, in the person of Arthur.

Another aspect concerns the nature of the three dreams. Chapter 24 and 46 present two miraculous dreams, inspired by a fairy, Proserpyne. They are certainly no saintly or divine dreams, even if there is no devilish intention involved. No surprise in these two instances, we deal with a romance, an adventure, and the miraculous is accepted as part of the story. The first dream though, in chapter 16, the most important one, is quite different. The animal symbolism is quite heavy, true, but we cannot only rely on this kind of interpretation. We do not know who inspires the dream, we can nonetheless guess sometime later that it may be Proserpyne. This is no sure thing though. The dream is given to Arthur and is later fulfilled to the very little detail.

In our opinion, to establish the role of this dream within the whole story, we need to make use of some principles and methods typical for narratology and discourse studies (Canvat, 1996, cf. Wirthner, 1997, 26-28; Plett, 1999, 313-329). We will employ only those terms that are commonplace in the analysis of a text as we do not intend to raise any issues on the topic. Our objective is to employ narratology and discourse/ rhetoric principles (Hohmann, 2000, 223-234) to better understand the role of Arthur's dream, and not to discuss narratology or rhetoric as such.

The animal symbolism becomes an allegory, a “rhetorical figure” (Desblaches, 2011, 41), so very much like the parable, the apologue or the fable, genres widely used in medieval texts. Animal allegory is not just a simple metaphor, but a whole narrative construction, a way of *telling* a story, since we are still in the *story telling* rather than in the *story writing* paradigm.

Stephen Russell states that in the medieval literature the dream vision “provided a way for writers to explore fantastical and allegorical themes with greater freedom and creativity” (Russell, 1988, 21-23), and proved a constant fascination with the biblical narratives. This “revelation literature” developed and continued naturally and purposefully the ancient texts. Thus, Arthur's dream is not a mere narrative technique to attract the reader's or the listener's (books were commonly read during the Middle Ages) attention. Arthur's dream functions as a type of “oraculum and revelation”, only we do not know who inspires it. The dream is true, and we know that from the very beginning, there is no ambiguity or enigma, these elements lacking from the Old Testament event dreams (idem, 29) too.

If we use Charles Morris' semiotic concept of discourse (Salavastru, 2005, 40), it is essential that a text be *effective*. The dream as discourse technique must have a purpose. Going even further back in time and remembering Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (Cope, 1867, 40, 120, 138), we notice that one of the genres of the rhetoric is the *epideictic* one. This adds to our previous remarks and makes us believe that the whole narrative of *Arthur of Little Britain* is an epideictic discourse which praises not only a courtly and epic hero, but also the Duchy of Brittany. Its purpose is both to divert (in terms of Aristotle's rhetoric a dream is poetic language meant to impress) and to support the political ruler who had probably sponsored the author (unknown today) of the text. The dream functions as *prolepsis* (Genette, 1972, 132) and is used to impress, attract attention, and mostly to confirm, foresee, and legitimize/ justify reality. It is, to use a strong word, an annunciation to be confirmed as revealed truth. The dream is an authoritative discourse which foresees reality, justifying political power in real life and symbolic power in a work of the imagination. Moreover, it is a mark of orality since repetition is achieved through the dream technique. The reader/ listener hears once, twice, thrice the same story, until the message is fully memorized and understood. Therefore, the dream in the medieval story telling proves to be a complex tool.

3. Dreaming in Other Arthurian Romances: *Le Bel Inconnu*, *Le Roman de Tristan*, *Cligès*, *Guillaume d'Angleterre*

We shall now proceed to a brief comparative analysis of a few other important medieval romances mentioning dreams. **Beaujeu**, in the *Fair Unknown (Le Bel Inconnu)* (Beaujeu, ed. Hippeau, 1969, lines 4513-4576 and 4454-4512; Beaujeu, transl. Perret, Weill, 1991, p. 80-81), a late 12th century romance, describes several dreams, having in mind very different purposes than the author of *Arthur of Little Britain*. Guinglain, the famous knight of the Arthurian cycle, son of Gawain and of a fairy, is tortured

by love during his sleep (ibid.). Dreaming of terrible torments only shows his daily troubles and erotic desire (Beaujeu, ed. Hippeau, 1969, lines 2439-2450; Beaujeu, transl. Perret, Weill, 1991, p. 53) for a lady he cannot have. Sleeping unrest is a sign of a distressed spirit, of a sexually aroused body. The episode is almost ridiculous, since our hero dreams of big battles and monsters only to wake up tossing in his bed, suffocated by his pillow or his sheets, provoking the laughter of his companions. Later, he even goes through a sleepwalking crisis, rising from his bed and trying to break into a different room. He is aware in his sleep that he has been bewitched but cannot control what he does or feels, he has no power whatsoever over himself. The dream functions in this text as a sort of magic spell meant to control someone's will and destiny, somewhat like the magic potion works for Tristan and Iseut in the *Prose Tristan*. Likewise, but the other way round, works a magical potion in **Chrétien de Troyes' Cligès** (Chrétien de Troyes, ed. Poirion, 1994, lines 3319-3356). Here, an unfortunate husband, Alis, marries a woman who does not love him, she loves young Cligès, her husband's nephew. She concocts a plan to not make love to Alis. He drinks a magic potion and only dreams of making love to his wife, never realizing that he has been duped. The dream is this time a trick, a lure, a tool used by two lovers to deceit and succeed in having their love fulfilled, be it illicit and unchristian. If Arthur is the perfect hero who is never wrong, Cligès is a more mundane hero, a trickster for love's sake, and the romance just a mere story for entertainment. While Arthur's dream is an expression of power and entitlement, Alis's dream is an expression of two lovers' adulterous but courtly love. As we well know, courtly love was a double-sided ideal of the Middle Ages, positive and negative, forbidden and accepted.

In **Béroul's** 12th century *Roman de Tristan* Yseut has a dream (Béroul, ed. & transl. Lacroix, Walter, 1989, 23, lines 2063-2074) that functions as an animal metaphor, like the first dream in *Arthur of Little Britain*, without having its complexity though. The lady sees two lions trying to devour her in her sleep; they obviously represent Tristan and Mark, both fighting for her. Her fear shows her troubled mind and her indecision. The dream offers no solution to the problem, it is just a mere nocturnal activity that reflects diurnal worries.

Chrétien de Troyes' Guillaume d'Angleterre (Chrétien de Troyes, ed. Poirion, 1994, lines 2556-2625) shows the magical and religious function of dreams. Guillaume is a misfortunate king who loses position, his wife (who marries another, not knowing her husband is still alive), and his children (who are raised by foreigners). His adventures show us the ups and downs of destiny but also the fatalistic nature of life for the medieval man who is in God's hands and at his mercy. Life plays with him, no matter how highly he is born, raised, or placed and mere bad luck may alter his life. Endless struggles cannot always achieve something good; therefore, the religious role of the dream in this romance; it is only through divine intervention that truth is restored, and the king gets his life back. King Guillaume dreams of a hunting scene (ibid.) where he chases a stag. It is a sort of daydreaming, people around him believe him to be a lunatic, only his wife recognizes him and tries to be part of his vision, to help him see the truth. The stag stands here for Christ, a powerful medieval image. The Savior shows him the way to his lost wife and children, to his former life. The hunting is more of a truth chasing than anything else. The stag is a guiding friend, a force from the Other World that drives him into the right direction. The medieval author dares not use a biblical-like vision in a story meant to divert. He needs to convey religious meaning nonetheless, so he chooses to do it via animal symbolism.

4. Conclusions

As we have seen, the dreams in medieval romances may be interpreted in varied ways and fulfill multifaceted functions. Looking back at the given examples, we observe that Arthur's main dream (the other ones only accompany it for the sake of confirmation) is constructed on a different type of rhetoric than the dreams in the other texts.

Even if the animal symbols can be repeatedly employed in the Middle Ages literature and their interpretation is the same, the role of the discourse using animal imagery can vary widely. *Arthur of Little Britain* is a coming-of-age story with an oratorical value. The dream gives Arthur's destiny authority and legitimacy, thus having argumentative value. It becomes an authoritative technique of

persuasion and power affirmation. In the texts from Chrétien de Troyes, Beaujeu, or Béroul the dream is mostly the sign of the miraculous, the magical, the religious or the mundane preoccupations, while in *Arthur of Little Britain* the dreams are an enactment of political, spiritual and knightly strength, rightfulness and valour.

In « Universalité et limites de la rhétorique », Aron Kibedi Varga (2000, 1-28) speaks of three civilizations: the oral one, the written one, and the media one. In the written civilization (which starts with the printing revolution), the art of *saying well* transforms into an art of *writing well*. Repetition is rather a mark of orality and one of the functions of the prophetic dream in a discourse is to repeat the information in a flash forward mode. *Arthur of Little Britain* is written at a time when listening to a story was part of the literary process. It was more of a group activity than an individual one, an attitude that reveals more how society functioned than what a private pastime was. *Arthur of Little Britain* was meant to be listened to and the dream was used almost as we would use a movie trailer in modern times. Audience is targeted, caught, and dragged into the unfolding story. Publicity worked in the Middle Ages too, but its means were different.

We could apply Jacobson's well-known theory of language functions (1960, 350-377) to all medieval romances that we have presented. The dream has a metalinguistic function (it is a code that needs deciphering), a poetical function (the message entertains), and a conative function (the addressee must be called, persuaded, convinced). Symbolism may have changed from late Antiquity to the present day, but ancient concepts of rhetoric are still true nowadays and contemporary notions of narratology are abstract enough to be relevant for old texts. Meaning and discourse techniques might have changed over time, but the story teller's goal is still to convey correctly and beautifully a message, while the listener's interest is still in understanding the world while diverting himself.

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