

## LITERATURE

### A (CROOKED) MIRROR FOR KNIGHTS – THE CASE OF DINADAN

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#### ABSTRACT

The picture of chivalry in medieval romance was primarily an idealised vision of knightly custom. The world of King Arthur and Camelot codified moral and courtly standards which were presented in literature as patterns for emulation. The writings of Sir Thomas Malory, the last medieval bearer-up of Camelot, was understood and received by medieval readers as a traditional praise of chivalry. It is therefore especially intriguing to find in the *Morte Darthur* the irreverent figure of Dinadan, a knight more ready for a jest rather than a joust, a clown whose words and deeds ridicule chivalric customs. His light treatment of chivalric norm and of courtly love sets him apart from the otherwise traditionally-minded Camelot. On the one hand, Dinadan may be viewed as Malory's touch of comedy and common-sense in his late medieval treatment of the old, quaint world. On the other hand, Dinadan's irreverence may be seen as a serious breach in the otherwise didactically idealised image of Arthur's Britain. The presence of Dinadan complicates the moral appeal of Malory's Camelot and brings a dose of ambivalence and a lack of clear didactic closure into the text.

Any modern discussion about the medieval man, his mentality, his social and religious behaviour, even his spirituality, is dominated by the useful, though limiting assumption of the inherently normative quality of the medieval mind. It cannot be denied that many norms were defined, taught and followed in the Middle Ages: scholastic philosophy brought the imperative of normative authority into all medieval discourse, the teaching of the medieval church impressed the grid of normative thinking on human moral behaviour, the strict hierarchy of the medieval society and the patriarchal nature of the medieval family were certainly a source of everyday dos and don'ts for every man and every woman.

Medieval literature reflects this need for norms in its overtly didactic and instructional tone. Manuals of sins, monastic and rules, *specula* or mirrors for princes and other members of society, collections of moral examples, books on

*ars moriendi*, even guidebooks up the scale of spiritual perfection, all defined models of behaviour and encouraged their emulation. Latin and vernacular writings in many European languages confirm the universality of the prescriptive function assigned to literature, which, by quoting *sententiae* from recognised *auctores* and supplying *exempla* of proper behaviour, address the reader's ability to learn and follow norms (see Curtius 1948: 63-67). The frequently quoted sentence from St. Paul: "For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction" (Romans 5: 4), well summarises this exegetic and didactic attitude to reading and writing.

The medieval world and medieval literature, as we have learnt to know them, are indeed peopled by saints, holy women, ideal princes and the most chivalric knights. Yet right next to them, the student of the Middle Ages, finds practices and their literary expressions that undermine, questions, parody or even deny the moral or social teaching of the positive examples. One is usually determined to see them as *exempla momentia*, examples to be avoided vs. *exempla trahentia*, examples to be followed (Göller 1997: 93), but frequently such a reading is rendered dubious by the lack of a closed moral argument in the text. Baffled by the irreverence of the boy bishop traditions, the low humour of some plays in the mystery cycles, or the pornographic images in the fabliaux, we tend to call them marginal or lewd, insisting on the otherwise pure and conclusively normative message of medieval literature.

The genre of medieval romance is also generally believed to have been treated as an expression and a definition of the knightly ideal. Life and literature inspired each other and devised a set of chivalric role models, knights of Camelot and the Round Table, to whom real knights and courtiers would aspire. Medieval and later history is full of examples of symbolic identification of European aristocracy with the Arthurian world.

Towards the end of the Middle Ages, Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*, once more reiterates the good old days of chivalry and, with an overly nostalgic tone, recalls the ways of true knighthood. Whatever we believe about the implications of Malory's world picture today (see Whetter 2004: 169-170), the book was then received as a reminder of chivalric norms. This is clear from Caxton's preface to his edition of Malory:

... noble men may see and lerne the noble actes of chyvalrye, the gentyl and vertuous dedes that somme knyghtes used in tho dayes, by whyche they came to honour, and how they that were vycious were punysshed and ofte put to shame and rebuke; humbly bysechyng al noble lorde and ladyes wyth al other estates ... that they take the good and honest actes in their remembraunce, and to folowe the same ... For herein may be seen noble chyvalrye, curtosye, humanyté, frendlynesse, hardynesse, love, frendshyp, cowardyse, murdre, hate, vertue and synne. Doo after the good and leve the evyl, and it shall brynge you to good fame and renommee

(Caxton 1977: xv).

In the context of these words of Caxton, it is especially surprising to find in Malory the troublesome character of Dinadan, a knight in the fellowship of Tristan and Lancelot, who, like the other knights errant, travels the expanses of Arthurian Britain, but often refuses to accept a challenge or revenge the failure of a fellow knight. His name appears in the *Morte Darthur* several hundred times: Dinadan is a talker, a jester, the author of a lay mocking King Mark, an object of knightly pranks. Undoubtedly, the author modelled this character on his French sources, where Dinadan also avoids battle and prefers a good laugh to a joust, but in Malory's *summa* of medieval chivalry his role is considerably more important. He brings the tone of ambivalence into Malory's vision of knighthood: while he fails to follow the basic rules of chivalry he is described as a favourite companion loved by all good knights. Tristan introduces Dinadan to the Belle Isold by calling him "the myrryeste knyght that ever ye spake withall, and the maddyst talker", "... he is the beste bourder and japer that I know, and a noble knyght of his hondis, and the beste felawe that I know, and all good knyghtis lovyth his felyship" (Malory 1977: 423). The narrator himself calls Dinadan "a great bourder and a passing good knyght". It is truly intriguing why Malory, seen by most readers as the last bearer-up of Camelot, decided to keep Dinadan and make him an almost continuous presence, especially in the second part of the work.

We meet Dinadan among the knights of Arthur who come to the tournament between the Round Table and the Castle Perilous (1977: 213-216). Unhorsed more than once, he appears less able from the start. Later he asks Tristan, just banished by King Mark, to be admitted into his fellowship, thus making a declaration of chivalric conduct (1977: 309-310). The first trial of Dinadan's loyalty comes immediately as, through a damsel they meet, the knights learn of a treacherous ambush prepared for Lancelot by thirty knights. Tristan's immediate reaction is to ride and help Lancelot, but Dinadan, reasonably rather than heroically, refuses to go as he gauges their meagre chances of success against thirty men. It is here that he voices his wish to have never met Tristan for the first time (1977: 311). This wish will be repeated several times and will put in question Dinadan's understanding of loyalty. But in the end, seeing Tristan do well, he joins the battle and they win. Grudgingly, he stands up to the demands of his vow of fellowship. On many occasions Dinadan is unwilling to fight, but, cursing his lot, he never fails when truly needed.

However ambivalent his attitude to the basic virtues of chivalry, such as courage, loyalty, honour, duty to revenge, Malory never denounces him to be a recreant knight. On the contrary, we often hear that Dinadan is loved by all good knights and that he loves all good and valiant knights. The modern reader is likely to identify with this unusual knight because of his attitude to, as we may see them today, absurdities of the knightly custom. Dinadan refuses to

joust to be allowed to lodge at a castle. Pushed by Tristan he fights and wins and is now himself required to follow the custom of the castle and demand a joust for lodging from the passing knights. His reaction is one we gladly accept, "I wolde fayne have my reste", he says. "In the devyl's name cam I into youre company!" he complains to Tristan (1977: 312-313). In the midst of the joust he deserts and rides away.

However commonsensical Dinadan's decision may seem to us today, we need to remember the importance of custom to the medieval understanding of order. Karl Heinz Göller (1997: 94) notes that Malory uses the term custom not only in the sense of habitual behaviour, but also as expected behaviour or even law. For our purpose custom as used by Malory can be understood as the accepted norm. Thus Dinadan becomes a critic of knightly norms. He calls them foolish and the knights who follow them, fools:

... "ye fare," seyde sir Dynadan, "as a man [that] were oute of hys mynde, that wold cast hymself away. And I may curse the tyme that ever I sye you, for in all the worlde ar nat such two knyghtes that ar so wood as ys sir Launcelot and ye sir Trystram! For onys I felle in the felyship of sir Launcelot as I have done now with you, and he sette me so a work that a quarter of a yere I kept my bedde. Jesus defend me," seyde sir Dinadan, "from such two knyghtys, and specially frome your felyship"

(1977: 313).

From a norm-searching scholarly perspective this critique questions the fame of the role models of chivalry and undermines the essence of knighthood.

Dinadan's attitude to courtly love is similarly sceptical. Malory's Tristan strongly insists on the customary link between love and chivalry, "a knyght may never be of proues but yf he be a lovear" (1977: 420). In his reaction Dinadan questions this romance truth and laughs at Tristan:

For suche a folyshe knight as ye ar ... I saw but late this day lyyng by a welle, and he fared as he slepte. And there he lay, lyke a fole grennyng and wolde not speke, and his shyld lay by hym, and his horse also stood by him. And well I wote he was a lovear

(1977: 420).

Similarly, La Belle Isold, surprised that Dinadan has no lady of his heart explains, "ye may nat be called a good knyght by reson but yf ye make a quarell for a lady", to which Dinadan replies, "God deffende me ... for the joy of love is to shorte, and the sorrow thereof, and what cometh thereof, is duras over longe" (1977: 424). Asked by Isold to do battle with three knights that do her wrong Dinadan answers, "I shall sey you ye be as fayre a lady as evir I sawe ony, and much fayrer than is my lady quene Gwenyver, but wyte you well, at one worde, I woll nat fyght for you wyth three knyghtes, Jesu me defende" (1977: 424).

The irreverence of Dinadan is received by other characters with friendly laughter – not scornful but amused as if he was telling a joke that had no practical consequence. “Isode lawghe, and had good game at hym”, Malory tells us (1977: 424). Queen Guenevere and others laugh at Dinadan when they see him dressed in a woman’s clothes. They laugh because he is different, he is the other and thus their laughter becomes a laughter of incomprehension. Göller notices the incongruity of Dinadan’s attitudes to chivalry with the Arthurian world:

Dinadan distances himself in word and deed from the role stipulated by the knightly order and the Round Table. From his very first appearance on the scene, he is an outsider or even an antagonist of Arthur’s world. His highest authority is not the knightly code, but his own common sense

(1997: 102).

How then do we reconcile the two parallel visions and two different attitudes to chivalry that Malory presents? Of course, one character among many does not make Malory a critic of the chivalric code. Yet, the didactically useful ideal integrity of the represented world is shaken. Dinadan speaks a different voice, if not the author’s voice then one that the author knows and recognises. The overly praising opinions about him uttered by other characters and by the narrator, “a noble knight of his hondis, and the beste felawe that I know” (Malory 1977: 423), make his attitude an accepted one, even if misunderstood. So, like in many other instances of medieval discourse, the norm is paralleled by the anti-norm, the mirror is appended by a crooked mirror, and all that without a clear didactic valuation. To understand, or maybe only to accept, this quality of Malory as a universal feature of medieval literature it may be useful to conclude with a reference to Rosemarie McGerr’s *Chaucer’s open books. Resistance to closure in Medieval discourse* (1998). Professor McGerr discusses the open-endedness of Chaucer’s narrative poems and uses the post-modern theory of the open form to comment on the inconclusiveness of Chaucer’s arguments. I propose to view Malory from a similar perspective. Even without recourse to deconstruction we can accept the opinion that the *Morte Darthur*, primarily because of Dinadan, fails to satisfy the norm-searching medieval scholar. The book appears to be much more polyvocal and rejecting a simple didactic closure. The anti-chivalric, or at least ambivalent, image of Dinadan supplies the reader with an alternative, sometimes contradictory voice. Chaucer’s ambiguity, long accepted, is often explained as a quality of his narrative style, that of a keen, observant and ironic commentator of the world around. The reader is less likely to welcome ambiguity in Malory as this author wrote about a receding past that had come to represent some of the basic norms of the medieval world. Yet if we are ready to accept Dinadan as more than a comical distraction, which

I believe we should, Malory's vision of chivalry becomes much more intriguing because of his parallel admiration for and subversion of the chivalric norm. The "mirror of honour and virtue", as C. S. Lewis (1963: 7) called the *Morte Darthur*, reads at times like a crooked mirror, a humorous parody, which builds a healthy distance to the ideal code that it otherwise praises.

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