

THE MARVELLOUS DREAM OF KING ARTHUR

GRAHAM HARRIS

From the Morte D'Arthur by Sir Thomas Malory

"And as the Kyng laye in his caban, in the shyp he fyll in a slomerynge and dremed a merueyllous dreme hym semed that a dredeful dragon dyd drowne moche of his people and he cam fleyng oute of the west and his hede was enameled with asure and his sholders shone as gold his bely lyke maylles of a merueyllous hewe his taylle ful of tatters his feet ful of fyne sarble and his clawes lyke fyne gold. And an hydous flamme of fyre flewe oute of his mouthe like as the londe and water had flammed. After hym semed there came oute of thoryent a grymly bore al blak in a clowde and his pawes as bygge as a post he was rugged lokyng roughly he was the fowlest beest that ever man sawe he rored soo hydously that it were merweill to here. Thenne the dredeful dragon avauoned hym and cam in the wynde lyke a fawcon gynyng grete strokes on the bore and the bore hytte hym ageyne with his grysty tuskes that his brest was al bloody and that the hote blood made alle the see reed of his blood. Thenne the dragon flewe away al on an heygte and came downe with suche a swough and smote the bore on the ridge which was x foote large fro the heyde to the taylle and smote the bore all to powdre bothe flesshe and bonys that it flytteryd al abrode on the see. And therewith the Kyng awoke anone and was sore abashed of this dreme. And sente anone for a wyse philosopher commaundyng to telle hym the sygnifycacion of his dreme. Syre sayd the philosopher the dragon throw dremedest of betokeneth thyn owne persone that sayllest here and the colours of his wynges ben thy Royames that thow heste wonne. And his taylle whiche is al to tatterd sygnefyeth the noble knyghtes of the round table. And the bore that the dragon slough comyng fro the clowdes betokeneth some tyrannt that tormenteth the people or else thow arte lyke to fyghte with somme gyannt thy self beyng horryble and abhomyable whoos pere ye sawe never in your dayes wherfore of this dredful dreme doubte the no thyng but as a conquerour comme forth thy self."

HENRY V

The above passage appears in "The Tale of Arthur and the Emperor Lucius," in "The Morte D'Arthur." Malory started his work with the story of Arthur and the Emperor Lucius, which was based on the English alliterative poem *Morte Arthur*. It is significant that Malory should start here, for not only was it completely English, but it really is the only part of the *Morte* where Arthur is pre-eminent. Arthur is here the great conqueror, and Malory seems to have made comparisons between this conquering Arthur and Henry V. Malory even went so far as to change Arthur's route through France to compare with that of Henry's, and changed the ending of the tale to make it more acceptable to himself.¹ This must make the Tale of Arthur and the Emperor

1. Vinaver, E., *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, 1967, Vol. 1, p. 196-197.
2. Ibid, Vol. III, p. 1366.

pro-Lancastrian, although this may not have been obvious to any of Malory's contemporaries. The *Morte D'Arthur* was edited and then published by Caxton on the 31st of July 1485. Seven days later Henry Tudor landed at Milford Haven.

THE GRYMLY BORE

And so we have this dream, which like all good dreams is a prophecy. It depicts a battle between a boar and a dragon, and in normal times this dream would not have aroused attention. In 1485 it most certainly should have done, for Henry Tudor had unfurled his dragon banner in Wales in the hope of displacing Richard III, whose cognizance was of course a boar. There are other similarities between the events of 1483-85 and this dream. For example the part about the dragon drowning much of his people. This could be said to be referring to the Buckingham rebellion, which was thwarted partially by the intervention of a freak storm. This storm did considerable damage, which included the drowning of two hundred people.³ The next point of note, is the first clash between the boar and the dragon, when the boar successfully beats off the dragon. This again could mean the Buckingham rebellion, when Richard III did beat off Henry Tudor. In the next battle the boar is overcome and destroyed, this part was yet to come and of course is all important as it assured supporters of Henry, that this time they would be successful in their endeavour. The "summing of the wyse philosopher" tells Arthur that the "bore betokeneth some tyrannit that tormenteth the people." This must be a foretaste of Tudor propaganda yet to come. The philosopher then concludes by saying "wherfore of this dredful dreame doute the no thyng but as a conquerour come forth thy self." Once again a rallying call to the Tudor supporters.

THE POLITICAL PROPHECY

The political prophecy was of great importance during the Middle Ages, and never more so than in the 15th Century. The prophecy was at its strongest in Wales. Most of the prophecies originate from Geoffrey of Monmouth's "The History of the Kings of Britain" which foretold that one of Cadwallader's blood would come again to reclaim Britain for the Britons. The Welsh used this prophecy whenever they had a likely candidate for the position. One such candidate was Owen Glendower, and many prophecies were used by the supporters of Glendower to attack Henry IV.⁴ In these prophecies Glendower is referred to as the Dragon, thus emphasizing the point that Glendower was supposed to be of Cadwallader's blood. Henry Tudor was not slow in using Welsh Nationalism to further his own ambitions.⁵ The fact that the Tudors claimed descent from an ancient line of British Kings, and even as far back as Brutus himself strengthened Henry's cause. A good example of the type of

3. Gairdner, J., *History of The Life and Reign of Richard The Third*, page 142.

4. Kingsford, *English Historical Literature in the Fifteenth Century* 1913, p.236.

5. Garman Jones, M. A. W., *Welsh Nationalism and Henry Tudor*, 191, p.23.

thing being circulated at the time is

*Jasper⁶ will build for us a dragon
of the fortunate blood of Brutus, he,
a Bull⁷ of Anglesey to achieve,
He is the hope of our race.⁸*

Another much longer and obscure prophecy has some interesting lines which relate to Henry.

Line 20 *A blake cowe shal aryse ageyne of a trew lyne
Ne the blode of Cadwalidus a grete gentilman is he
A banysshed man ys he far beyonde the see.*

Line 74 *A blake cowe shall come thorow Bretayne to Albion.⁹*

Once Henry Tudor was on the throne, he took great pains to convince people that he was the fulfiller of these prophecies. He had his first born son christened Arthur in the ancient capital of England, Winchester, because of its association with Arthur and his knights.¹⁰ He also had his line traced back to Brutus. It was necessary for him to convince people of this not only to stop any further insurrections, but also to help his weak claim to the throne.

DELIBERATE PROPAGANDA

The next thing to consider is whether or not he deliberately produced propaganda, and if so, why? Until 1934 it was always believed that Caxton's *Morte D'Arthur* was the same as that of Malory, as there were no known copies of Malory's M.S. in existence. So there was thus no way of verifying that Caxton was the same as Malory. All this changed in 1934 when a copy of Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* was found in the library of Winchester college. It now could be seen that Caxton had made many changes, cutting out some parts altogether and making many word changes.¹¹ The part which changed most happens to be *The Tale of Arthur and the Emperor Lucius*, which he reduced by half. The most important of these from our point of view, is the changing of the bear in the dream to boar. The Winchester M.S. says beare, the Thornton M.S. which is the only surviving copy of the English alternative poem *More Arthure* says bere. This was the common spelling in the 15th Century for bear. Geoffrey of Monmouth's "History of the Kings of Britain" where the dream is also found, tells us that it is a bear. Historians have attempted to explain why Caxton should have changed this. Sommer suggested that the "bere" in the Thornton M.S. may have been a northern dialect spelling for boar, but there is no evidence to support this.¹² Vinaver believed that Caxton changed it to boar, because "bears do not normally have tusks," but he goes on to say that "boars do not normally have paws" and in any case it would surely have been wiser to have changed tusks. Another point against Caxton is that he could have cut the dream out altogether, without any great loss to the whole. He did cut out other parts of the tale of Arthur and *The Emperor Lucius*, such as the wounding of Sir Kay.¹³

6. Jasper Tudor, uncle of Henry Tudor.

7. Henry Tudor was known as the Black Bull of Anglesey.

8. Simons, E., *Henry VII*, 1966, page 9.

9. Scattergood, *Political Poems in the Fifteenth Century*, 1971, Appendix B.

10. Simons, E., *op. cit.* p. 87.

11. Vinaver, E., *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, 1967, Vol. III, page 1366.

12. Sommer, O., *The Original edition of William Caxton, 1369-91*, Vol. III, p. 157.

13. Blake, Caxton and His World, 1969 (p. 45).

Neither Edward IV or Richard III paid any great attention to the press.¹⁴ Caxton had thus to look to the Woodvilles for patronage, especially Anthony, Earl Rivers, who was not only a great patron, but a translator and friend to Caxton. In the formative years, Caxton, who was a successful mercer, did not have to rely on his press. This however was so successful that by 1483 he most certainly did rely upon it for his livelihood. The death of Edward IV and the ensuing downfall of the Woodville party, brought about a sudden change of circumstances for Caxton. He now found himself without patrons and probably an object of suspicion having been a friend of the Woodvilles. He now had to find new friends from Richard's court, and had very little success in the venture. The only person who patronized him was the Earl of Arundel, and then only for one book "The Golden Legend." From then on all his patrons were anonymous, which may show that these people were out of favour with the new regime. Even so, Caxton makes it very obvious to whom he is alluding, when he refers to "a noble lady" and again to "a noble and virtuous Earl." It seems more than probable that he was using books commissioned prior to April 1483.¹⁵

By 1485 these books seem to have been running out. This may have been why Caxton was persuaded to publish "The Morte D'Arthur" the preface of which suggests that Caxton was somewhat reluctant to undertake the work. As it was Caxton certainly chose the right time when Richard was out of London and involved with keeping his crown. Any other time could have been dangerous.

If Caxton did produce propaganda then his only motive was to see the Woodvilles restored to power, his press would then hopefully again be a viable proposition. He did not really get back into favour though until 1489, when he enjoyed the patronage of John de Vere, Earl of Oxford and Margaret Duchess of Somerset.

14. It has been said that Richard was a patron of Caxton, there seems to be no evidence for this. Caxton did of course dedicate to him the "Order of Chivalry" but this proves only that he was trying to interest the King in the Press.

15. Ibid (p.90-94).

RESEARCH

Would members willing to undertake Research Projects, or who would like help with a project that has already started, please write to:—

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