

Arthur and Gorlagon the Werewolf

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In this study I am going to consider the Latin prose romance *Arthur and Gorlagon the Werewolf*¹ as a text which includes a primitive, ritual plot. This text does not show the kind of contradictions and incongruities that attract my attention and serve as a guide to analysis, but I have some questions about it which are worth following up. The clues to the presence of a ritual plot are never the use of particular story elements: they always lie in any marked uneasiness with which the details in the text hang together, because a ritual plot would be an entirely separate level of narration, using the materials employed by the text in ways which conflict with the uses made at other levels. *Arthur and Gorlagon* appears to be an integrated text, with an all-embracing comic treatment of its materials, but it does raise questions, and ritual plots do occasionally lie hidden within a text without causing much trouble there.

A ritual plot would be an entirely separate level of narration because it would belong to an unknown system, a system we can only learn a little more about with every relevant text studied. The ways in which it works bear no relation to anything we have seen in narrative before. It belongs to a part of the brain which has no contact with the conscious mind, but the genre of romance can sometimes unwittingly summon up one of these deep narratives, so that it appears unnoticed in the text alongside the author's work. Or an author might make use of a folktale already containing a ritual plot, without awareness that an alien system which cannot be altered has been borrowed too. When a ritual plot is present in a text, it is always dominant; an author's contribution can be no more than an overlay, dependent on it, and unable to make fundamental alterations. But authors make little attempt to rationalise these plots, and I think they simply tune into them and enjoy a glorious 'double' text growing under their hands. A ritual plot adds power to a text and the texts affected have been among the most popular we have. Distinguished authors have also produced distinguished overlays for these plots and a few have made delightful fun of them, particularly Hue de Rotelande in his treatment of the Ipomedon plot. I think this may also be the case with *Arthur and Gorlagon*. No author can consciously invent a ritual plot, and such a plot can be a gift to an author. Above all, audiences love them, for this kind of narration will *belong* to the human mind, performing functions essential to the mind.

Approaching *Arthur and Gorlagon* first as an integrated text, without a ritual plot, we have a tale within a tale: the werewolf narrative is tucked within an outer tale using Arthur in a demeaning version of the well-worn quest for an understanding of women. The werewolf tale is told as Gorlagon's answer to Arthur's question, and, like Marie's *Bisclavret*,² it tells how a treacherous wife gains the power to decide whether her

husband be a man or a beast, and how the werewolf restores himself with the help of a good king. This werewolf tale includes details of the wolf's service to the king, using material from other traditions, particularly from a tale which Kittredge calls 'The Dog and the Lady', where the dog helps his master deal with his wife's treachery.³ Gorlagon's treacherous wife is then punished, and the punishment used in this text belongs to yet another tradition in which the wife is forced to endure the daily spectacle of her lover's dead body: in *Arthur and Gorlagon* this is his severed head in a dish on the high table at dinner.⁴ In most versions of that tradition, the punishment is explained to a visiting stranger by the husband, and here we find Gorlagon explaining it to Arthur. In the masterly hands of the author, this is a splendid ending for audiences, while Arthur himself, his quest supplanted by Gorlagon's tale, makes what he can of his encounter with the fantastic.

My first question is a small matter relating to the purpose of Arthur's quest. He adds 'wiles' to his queen's words 'mind and desires' and 'nature and mind of women', when asking his question at the court of King Gorgol at the beginning of his quest [*artem et ingenium mentemque femineam*].⁵ *Arthur and Gorlagon* begins with a banquet at Arthur's court, where the king kisses his queen impulsively and she is shocked. She demands to know why he has kissed her at this inappropriate time and place. He replies that of all his pleasures nothing is sweeter than she is. The queen replies that if he loves her so much he evidently thinks he knows her mind and her desires [*mentem et uoluntatem*]. Arthur responds that he has no doubt that her mind is warmly disposed towards him, and that he is certain her desire for him is obvious. 'Arthur', says the queen, you have missed the point completely. Indeed, you reveal that you have never understood the nature or mind of a woman [*ingenium mentemque femine*].⁶ Arthur swears to discover the nature and mind of women, and he sets out on this quest at the end of the banquet, with Kay and Gawain. They make a threefold journey to three kings, whose names – Gorgol, Gorbeil and Gorlagon – reveal to the audience that they are the same werewolf king,⁷ and who each in turn happen to be sitting down to dinner when they arrive. Arthur refuses to dismount, as he has sworn not to eat until he has discovered the answer to his question. Gorgol replies that no one has ever disclosed that knowledge, and Arthur agrees to dismount and eat. Arthur then travels on to see King Gorleil, who passes him on to the third brother King Gorlagon, where Arthur refuses to eat until he has an answer. Gorlagon agrees to tell him a story which will be a great effort for him to tell and which will leave Arthur little the wiser, but which will enable him to understand the wiles, nature, and mind of a woman [*artem et ingenium mentemque femine*].⁸

The addition of 'wiles' links the quest material more closely to Gorlagon's tale, which answers Arthur's question with an account of treacherous women. Arthur's queen does not speak of 'wiles': Arthur adds them, and it appears that he only wants to hear about the wickedness of women. He is in a huff after being reprimanded by his queen.⁹ The legendary king is evidently being 'sent up' from the beginning to end of this text, from the appearance of the werewolf king as three kings to Gorlagon's answer to Arthur's final question about the drama of the severed head in a dish before his eyes throughout the telling of the tale. The preposterous punishment is the culmination of a preposterous tale

of wickedness, and is Arthur now satisfied? This is a teasing text. Mildred Leake Day comments that Arthur is appalled, and so are the listeners; 'They have been tricked by the storyteller to see the whole fantastic tale through King Arthur's eyes.'¹⁰

The hero of Gorlagon's tale is a king whose humanity and sanity are enshrined in a sapling exactly as old as he is and precisely as tall, which is protected by a walled garden. If someone were to cut down the sapling and strike him on the head with the slender end, saying 'be a wolf and have the understanding of a wolf', immediately this would come about. The king allows no one in the garden except the caretaker, and checks on the sapling three or four times a day before every meal. His beautiful wife questions him about this; she accuses him of having a mistress in the garden and fasts for three days to get the secret out of him. She vows a sacred oath that she will honour the secret, but she is already in love with someone else, the son of a pagan.

So Gorlagon becomes a werewolf, one with the mind of a man, not a wolf, as his wife makes a mistake in her transformation injunction. The werewolf lives in the forest doing much damage, and his queen marries her lover. Eventually the narrative introduces the good king of the country where he now is, who is planning to track the wolf down. The wolf approaches him, behaving like a penitent asking for pardon, and he becomes the king's faithful servant, sleeping in his bedchamber. When the king is away, the wolf witnesses the queen's unfaithfulness with the seneschal, and he finds ways of revealing this betrayal: the king realises his human intelligence. This leads to his restoration, the king and his forces following the wolf back to his own country and learning from the lamenting population the truth about the reigning queen and king.

The pagan king is condemned to death, while the queen's life is spared. "'Now, Arthur, you have learned the mind and nature of a woman'", says Gorlagon. But Arthur has one more question: "'Who is this woman sitting opposite you with the grief-stricken face, who has in the dish before her a human head spattered in blood? She has wept when you have smiled and she has kissed the bloody head whenever you have kissed your wife during the telling of your tale.'"¹¹ Gorlagon replies that she is the one who has committed so great a crime against her lord: she committed it against himself, for he himself was the werewolf. The bloody head in the dish is that of the young man for whom she committed this crime, and her punishment is to have it ever before her eyes and to kiss it every time Gorlagon kisses the wife he has married in her place.

There is another theme of wickedness in the text, one relating in some way to the werewolf husband. The urgency of Arthur's quest is matched by the urgency of the vigilance which Gorlagon maintains over the sapling protected in a walled garden. Here the urgency is about the preservation of Gorlagon's humanity and sanity. Caroline Bynum¹² considers the difference between the werewolf of medieval literature and the werewolf of Roman writers and modern fictions. The ancient and modern werewolves are emblems 'of the periodic eruption of the bestial from within the human', double beings which are human and then animal by their very nature, while the medieval version has been seen by scholars as a 'sympathetic' werewolf, a victim changed into a wolf, usually

by a wicked woman, but retaining the ‘intelligence and memory’ of a rational human being. The opening lines of *Bisclavret* refer to earlier traditions where the werewolf is a savage beast during the time it is in the grip of this madness, devouring men, doing much evil and living in great forests; Marie’s own narrative which follows tells of a tamed, medieval werewolf. This tamed wolf, rational and faithful in medieval narratives and seeking his restoration to human form, is seen by Caroline Bynum and other recent scholarship as an attenuation of the horror of metamorphosis, even as a repression of the idea of it. But if a werewolf appeared in a ritual plot, it would be there to express a fear of the werewolf within, which the plot was designed to remove.

Gorlagon’s version of the werewolf tale inserts material from another tradition, ‘The Dog and the Lady’, giving his narrative a second treacherous queen. The effect is repetitive, but repetition is strategic in ritual plots. Gorlagon fails to detect the betrayal of the first treacherous queen and falls into her power, and then he is immediately effective on detecting the betrayal of the second. The use of ‘The Dog and the Lady’ puts the good king in Gorlagon’s own position as betrayed husband and gives the werewolf the role of good agent helping the king to retain power over the queen. The result is the werewolf’s restoration to manhood and power, and the episodes of the walled garden and the good king look like two moves to a victory for the hero. In a ritual plot, the hero would fail and then restore himself through using the power and goodness of the good king. He would transform his failure into success – he would reverse it through the additional use of ‘The Dog and the Lady’.

It does not come as a surprise to find that Gorlagon’s tale ends with the punishment of the treacherous queen. The punishment of the treacherous queen is usual in folklore, but I think it also has a vital purpose here, in the ritual plot I propose. A final move is needed. When he is once more a man and a king, Gorlagon will need to find measures to preserve his restored condition, and if these measures are in the text, they could only be the daily appearance of the lady and the severed head in a dish, because there is no other remaining material in the tale. But could such material have a serious function in this text – a ritual plot always has a serious purpose – and could it play the role of a safeguard? If it were a safeguard, it would have to be so in its role as a punishment, but as a punishment permanently on display it could be a powerful safeguard. It could act as a statement that the woman and his desires are under his control. The punished queen and the new queen would both be playing the queen: characters in a ritual plot are all figures playing roles in a sequence of rituals.

A ritual plot is designed to secure remedies for inner desires and fears and it uses narrative as its medium. If there were a ritual plot in *Arthur and Gorlagon*, it would be an interesting one where passages of narrative from different traditions have been put together for the creation of its remedies. As in all ritual plots, the narrative gathers power to bring about a solution in its later stages. The power of the good king can restore the werewolf to human status, while ritual punishment can prevent a recurrence of the werewolf. The ritual plot I propose for *Gorlagon* would probably be a purification plot, designed to remove a fear. The cause of the fear would appear at the beginning of the plot, and the remedies would follow, beginning with a failed remedy which allows the

fear to take shape (the 'eruption of the bestial') and lead to more powerful remedies. Meanwhile, the author's overlay also begins at the beginning and the quest for answers to the question 'what do women want?' must belong to that level; the ritual plot could not be concerned with philosophical questions or rational inquiry, only with subjective feelings such as a fear deep in the mind. Arthur's wild embrace of the queen would be well placed in the narrative to express the nature of the fear. The text then takes Arthur on a journey to the werewolf kings, and his question concerning women leads to our hearing Gorlagon's narrative: I believe that this narrative provides the next two moves of a ritual plot, underlying the fun provided by the overlay. The beginning of Gorlagon's werewolf tale has the interesting feature of the walled garden, an asset in the lives of medieval kings which is sometimes used to portray the Garden of Eden; here it plays the role of a beautiful place of safety which fails because Gorlagon fails to defend it. Gorlagon's werewolf tale is then a version of the tale in Marie's *Bisclavret*, but Marie's text does not have a ritual plot, and her hero divides his time between being a wolf and being human, restoring himself by finding his clothes up till the time when his wife hides them. In her tale two characters consult, deduce the identity of the wolf and find out the culprit and then reverse the metamorphosis. A ritual plot does not have characters, only figures used in the rituals by the single point of view. Gorlagon's narrative, with its crucial insertion of a version of 'The Dog and the Lady', and its use of identification with the goodness and power of the good king, brings about the hero's restoration to manhood and kingdom. It then culminates in the brilliant scene with the severed head.

It is interesting to see that the punishment chosen is the severed head in a dish. The permanent display quality of the punishment may be a reason, but it must also be significant that kissing is a feature at both the beginning and end of the text. Arthur's public kissing of his queen is echoed at the end by Gorlagon's public kissing of his queen, and Gorlagon's public kissing is echoed in its turn by the punished queen's kissing of the severed head. Why should a quest which began with the rejected kiss of an uxorious king end with the spectacle of the kissing of a severed head? Arthur alters the quest's initial proposition from learning the mind and desires of women to an investigation into their 'wiles', and all he actually hears about is their treachery. Why should Gorlagon's answer to Arthur's question be about a treacherous woman? The text conveys a sense of the threat women present to men, and the difficulty men have in coming to terms with their sexuality. I suspect there is a powerful ritual plot here: the hero needs a powerful safeguard for his restored manhood and goodness. The queen and his desires must remain under his control. The spectacle of the punishment of the treacherous queen who robbed him of his manhood and kingdom gives him the freedom to embrace his wife without fear of surrendering his power to her. Interpretation is hazardous and this particular plot would have a wide usefulness, particularly as a narrative providing a sense of power and control in the mind, replacing a sense of wickedness with one of goodness. Its application could go far beyond the details of a particular text.

If we suppose that there is a ritual plot beneath the story of Arthur's quest and Gorlagon's response, we can see what might be a progression of four steps engaged in removing an anxiety. The embrace at the beginning of this text would be the opening feature in the

ritual sequence, expressing much more than it does in the overlay, where we have the author's light-hearted treatment of the character Arthur, who has misunderstood his wife's feelings about a very public kiss. The deeper plot would enter a second move where the ritual king-figure installs himself as a sapling in a place of safety which his wife cannot enter, only to fall victim to her power nevertheless. In the overlay the queen discovers his secret and uses her knowledge to turn him into a wild beast. In the third move of the ritual plot, the werewolf restores himself to manhood and kingdom through using the power of a good king. At the higher level of the text, using the power of the good king would mean winning the king's goodwill and understanding, and finally his military assistance. In the final step, the plot sets up fresh, powerful means of preserving the hero's restored manhood. It employs as a safeguard an image of punishment constantly on display, which states that woman and his own desires are under his control. He can embrace his wife freely without fear, for, each time he does so, he has the spectacle of the wife who had seized his power now forced to kiss her punishment. In the overlay, Gorlagon tells Arthur he has now learned the mind and nature of a woman and must take care that he is the wiser for it. He clearly thinks he has answered his visitor's question, but Arthur has one more, for the woman kissing the severed head at the table has still not been mentioned. Gorlagon explains the punishment, saying that he chose it because he knew no punishment more severe than this constant display of her crime for all to see. Arthur marvels over what he has heard, and we never learn what answer he gives to his queen.

The conclusion of the overlay is difficult to fathom. Arthur's quest seems to drop out of the text. The well-known answer that women desire sovereignty would have fitted the narrative, but it is not actually stated. The text ends with a queen's loss of her sovereignty and Gorlagon's reinstatement, and we learn little about what Arthur thinks of Gorlagon's answer. But the humour in the author's treatment is sustained to the end. Much of it lies in its ridiculous portrayal of Arthur, rushing about to do the will of his queen. The answer he hears from Gorlagon is a tale about a king who loses his power to his queen, and then wins it back from her. The punishment he chooses for her reveals a vindictiveness which leaves Gorlagon without any of the nobility of the good king who restored him to his humanity and kingdom. The quest leaves Arthur with nothing to tell his queen that she would want to hear, but perhaps with a resolve that he should be the wiser for his adventure and show this wisdom in his marriage. Could there be any weightier conclusion? Perhaps only that the human comedy is funniest when it comes to relationships between the sexes.

I cannot feel sure that a ritual plot is present in *Arthur and Gorlagon*. This is because I expect relevant texts to show particular problems which I do not see in *Arthur and Gorlagon*, the kind of problems which would be thrown up when two radically different narratives unaware of each other use the same material in a single text. However, the lack of conflict could simply be because the two narratives I find in this text are not of a kind which would be very uncomfortable with each other. Only at the end, where the severed head would have to be both a deeply serious safeguard and a hilarious joke, could there be a clash and yet there isn't: the safeguard could sit quietly behind the fun enjoyed on the surface of the text.

The Purification Plot of Arthur and Gorlagon the Werewolf

The Overlay	The Plot
<p>1. Arthur kisses his queen impulsively in full view of the court and she is shocked. He says he knows she is warmly disposed towards him, and she says he has revealed his ignorance of the nature and mind of women. He sets off on a quest to repair this ignorance.</p>	<p>1. <i>His wild embrace frightens the king and he sets out to deal with the untamed creature lurking within and unleashed by sexual desire.</i></p>
<p>2. In answer to Arthur's question about women, King Gorlagon tells him a tale about a king whose queen tricks him into revealing his secret that his humanity and sanity are enshrined in a sapling in his walled garden. She uses her knowledge to turn the king into a werewolf.</p>	<p>2. <i>He installs himself as a sapling in a beautiful garden which his wife cannot enter, a tamed area protected by strong, high walls. But the sapling still carries the curse of the untamed creature which would emerge if the curse were revealed and used. He falls victim to his passion for his beautiful wife and she learns his secret and gains power over him. He becomes a werewolf and she reigns with her lover.</i></p>
<p>3. The werewolf is restored to manhood and kingdom through winning the goodwill and understanding, and finally the military assistance, of the king of the country where he is now living.</p>	<p>3. <i>In his struggle for power over his werewolf nature, he now uses the power of a good king. This is a process of forgiveness and service, and of becoming identified with goodness. He puts the king in his own position as betrayed by his wife and plays the role of good agent helping the king to retain power over her. The king recognises his goodness and intelligence, and restores him to his manhood and kingdom.</i></p>
<p>4. When Gorlagon has told his tale, Arthur asks a question about the woman who has spent the time kissing a severed head in a dish at the table. Gorlagon tells him that she is the queen of his tale who betrayed her husband and the head belonged to her lover; he himself was her werewolf husband. Arthur returns home full of wonder.</p>	<p>4. <i>He sets up a powerful safeguard for his restored manhood. An image of punishment constantly on display acts as a statement that the woman and his desires are under his control. He can embrace his wife freely without fear of surrendering his power to her, for, each time he does so, they have the spectacle of the wife who seized his power now forced to kiss the resulting punishment.</i></p>

¹ Mildred Leake Day, ed. and trans. 'Arthur and Gorlagon the Werewolf, in *Latin Arthurian Literature*, Cambridge: Brewer, 2005, pp. 208-35; G.L. Kittredge, ed. 'Arthur and Gorlagon', in *Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature*, Vol. 8 (1903), pp. 149-275.

² Alfred Ewert, ed. 'Bisclavret', in *Marie de France: Lais*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1944, pp. 49-57; trans. Glyn S. Burgess and Keith Busby, in *The Lais of Marie de France*, Penguin Classics, 1986. For similar werewolf texts, see Prudence M. O'Hara Tobin, ed. 'Lai de Mélion, in *Les Lais anonymes de XIIe et XIIIe siècles*, Geneva, 1976, trans. Dr Helen Nicholson, <http://freespace.virgin.net/Nigel.nicholson/Melion.htm>, copyright 1988, 1999; and Joseph Jacobs, 'Morraha' in *More Celtic Fairy Tales*, Vol. 2, Nutt, 1894, pp. 80-96. These three texts are not relevant to my particular investigation.

³ See Kittredge, ed. 'Arthur and Gorlagon', op. cit., particularly pp. 246-254.

⁴ In other versions, she has to drink out of his skull, go to bed with the corpse or live with the corpse in the chamber of her crime. The severed head in a dish appears in Hue de Rotelande's *Protheselaus* (see A.J. Holden's edition, *Anglo-Norman Text Society*, no. 47-48, 1991, ll. 4522-5012). For a full discussion of the tradition, see Félix Lecoy, in *Romania*, no. 76 (1955), pp. 477-518).

⁵ Mildred Leake Day, p. 210, ll. 7-8.

⁶ Ibid, p. 209.

⁷ Ibid. pp. 42, 46; G.L. Kittredge, *ibid*, pp. 200-206.

⁸ Mildred Leake Day, p. 210, l. 31; p. 212, ll. 24-26.

⁹ Ibid, p. 46.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid, pp. 232-3.

¹² Caroline Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity*, New York, 2001, pp. 94-95.

With gratitude to Dr Mildred Leake Day for reading my drafts and making comments which have taken me forward to greater efforts. The remaining shortcomings are my own.

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