"I See, Sir Luke!"

BY GREGORY M. AHRENHOERSTER

In the Autumn 1999 issue of Blue Harvest, Scott Coralles draws many fascinating connections between The Phantom Menace and the Arthurian tradition in his esaay *Phantoms of the Round Table: Obi-Wan, Qui-Gon and the Arthurian Cycle*. The similarities he draws between these two great stories are well founded; in fact, I suggest he should have taken this comparison further. Coralles discusses Episodes IV-VI only briefly in his essay; however, the influence of the Arthurian tradition is evident in all three films. I believe that interpreting the entire Star Wars cycle as a modernized version of the Arthurian Cycle is a useful tool in understanding the films and Lucas' vision.

Once *Star Wars: Episode I: The Phantom Menace* was released, it became clear that the Star Wars saga is not Luke Skywalker's story, as is logically surmised by the viewer of episodes IV-VI. Rather, when complete, these six films will detail the rise, fall, and redemption of Anakin Skywalker, who in many ways is a re-envisioning of the great Arthurian knight, Sir Lancelot. Although Lancelot is best remembered as the man who betrays King Arthur by having an affair with Queen Guinevere, one must recall his role in the quest for the Holy Grail to fully understand his relationship to Anakin Skywalker.

In Arthurian myth, legend predicts the coming of a great knight who will be brave and pure enough to be worthy of the Grail and will succeed in finding it. When he bursts on the scene, many assume that Lancelot, who appears to be the bravest and purest knight folks have ever seen, is the man they awaited. Sadly, Lancelot's purity is tarnished by his affair with Guinevere, and he is denied his chance to capture the Grail. TPM confirmed that Anakin's story is remarkably similar to Lancelot's. Likewise believed to be the hero predicted by legend (the one who "will bring balance to the Force"), Anakin, at first, seems to be a worthy candidate (great pilot, strong with the Force, etc). Yet, like Lancelot, Anakin allows himself to be "seduced," and his fate is sealed.

This difference in the type of seduction each hero encounters says much about the differences between medieval and twentieth-century societies, at least as perceived by Lucas. Lancelot falls prey to the temptation of a woman whom he genuinely seems to love, which to the modern reader is not only acceptable, but romantic and, perhaps, admirable. In fact, I suspect that many contemporary readers tend to side with Lancelot and Guinevere in this most famous of love triangles. Arthur is old and declining, after all, and Lancelot does resist his feelings (at first) and feels guilty for his sin, but love is ultimately too powerful a force. A twentieth century audience eats this stuff up. Lancelot is seen as a hero who sacrifices his honor and his best friend for true love (sniff, sniff). I strongly suspect that the medieval audience was much less forgiving. To them, Lancelot betrayed his king (a high crime), committed adultery (a major sin), and placed higher value on a romantic relationship than a friendship (a large social error at the time as friendships between men were seen as a purer form of love than romantic love between men and women, which was constantly tainted by sex and sexual jealousy).

Thus, Lucas needed to create a different kind of seduction and betrayal for his Lancelot figure that would be more meaningful to his audience than simple lust. For Lucas' Lancelot, the betrayal of friendship remains (with Kenobi taking the role of the betrayed), but the seductress is quite different. The pure evil of the Emperor, and the dark side in general, is much more intriguing to a contemporary audience than simple yearning loins. It is seemingly a less complicated question—a choice between good and evil—yet Lucas is exploring a complex but previously underdeveloped concept, namely the appeal of evil. Contemporary audiences tend to be curious about the complex psychology of the "bad guy" who is often all the more interesting because of his malevolence.

As the Holy Grail story continues, Lancelot is ultimately denied the opportunity to capture the Grail as a punishment for his sins. This honor, instead, goes to Lancelot's son, Sir Galahad, which obviously parallels Anakin's son, Luke, being the one who truly restores order to the universe. However, Lucas was keenly aware that he could not simply create Luke in Galahad's image for fear of his audience's reaction.

Galahad, one must recall, was perfect: brave and strong and pure and devout and well, perfect. Twentieth-century Americans hate perfect people; we like our heroes nicely flawed so we can relate to them as humans. Arthurian scholars often note the negative response Galahad elicits from modern readers, who frequently see him as a "cardboard saint" whose "austere virtue excludes humanity" (Matarasso 17). Thus, Lucas wisely chooses to present Luke as somewhat flawed, though he does continue to draw from Arthurian tradition in his presentation of the younger Skywalker.

Luke's childhood strongly resembles that of Sir Perceval as described by Chretien De Troyes in *The Story of the Grail*. Whereas Perceval was raised in the Waste Forrest, hidden from the outside world, Luke is raised on the desert planet Tatooine, which he describes to C-3P0 as follows: "If there's a bright center to the universe, you're on the planet that it's farthest from." Both Perceval's mother and Luke's Uncle Owen do not want their boys to learn about knighthood/Jedihood, despite the fact that both boys have strong knightly heritages. However, in both cases, they realize their efforts are futile. "You were destined for knighthood," Perceval's mother admits just before he departs (Chretien 386). And Owen seems to realize that Luke indeed "has too much of his father in him" to remain a farmer, as Aunt Beru astutely points out.

This similarity continues as both young men go through their knightly training. Both Gornemant, Perceval's teacher, and Yoda, Luke's Jedi master, see a need to completely remake their pupils, and both pupils' naivete and stubbornness make them difficult to train. It should be noted here that Lucus does not paint Luke to be as foolish as Perceval appears during his training. Luke is naive about a great many things, to be sure, and he is exposed as egotistical and headstrong during his training, but Lucas stops short of presenting Luke as foolish, in the "silly" sense of the word, as Perceval often is. Yet both characters, I think, are appealing for the same reasons. Contemporary audiences like rags-to-riches heroes with humble beginnings; there is something very pure and appealing about the child raised in the wilderness, untainted by corrupt society.

Yet, Luke is more than just a knight; he is the chosen one, the "son of the sun," who is supposed to lead the universe out of the dark times. To help portray this aspect of the character, Lucas again looks to Arthurian myth; this time drawing from the stories of young Arthur himself.

To establish this correlation between these two "chosen ones," Luke and Arthur, Lucas supplies an advisor for his young hero who is noticeably reminiscent of the wizard, Merlin, who advises young Arthur. Ben Kenobi, espe-

cially early in A New Hope, is presented as something of a wizard and even identified as one by Owen: "That old man is just a crazy wizard". Furthermore, the Jedi mind trick that Kenobi uses to get Luke and the droids past the storm troopers at Mos Eisly is remarkably similar to sorcery that Merlin uses to sneak Arthur past King Pellinore: "Merlion had done suche a crauffte unto kyng Pellinore [that he] saw nat kynge Atrhure, and so passed withoute wordis" (Malory 36). Ben, who clearly suspects Luke's greatness, takes on the same guiding role that Merlin takes with young Arthur.

Lucas also borrows from Arthurian tradition by using the gift of a sword as a means of identifying the "chosen one." Whereas Arthur gets Excalibur from the Lady in the Lake, Luke's light saber is bestowed upon him by Kenobi with the words "this is the weapon of a Jedi Knight," though, perhaps, "the Jedi Knight" would have been more appropriate. Furthermore, Arthur's other sword experience, the famous sword in the stone myth, is also duplicated by Luke.

Early in *The Empire Strikes Back*, even before he has begun his Jedi training, Luke is captured by the Yeti-like Wampa and hung upside-down from the ceiling in the Wampa's cave. Lodged in a snow pile, a few feet out of his reach is Luke's light saber. (As I frequently point out, to the annoyance of my friends I am sure, the handle of the light saber sticking out of the snow pile looks remarkably like a sword handle sticking out of a stone.) Luke, of course, is able to use the force to get his weapon and free himself. This display of telekinesis is arguably the first blatant sign to the audience that Luke is indeed special in a way that marks him as the chosen one, just as dislodging the sword from the stone initially designated Arthur as king.

I could go on, but I believe the connection between these two stories is now firmly established, which leads to the question of why Lucas was so drawn to the Arthurian tales as models for his own myths and heroes. I will offer one answer, though certainly dozens more exist.

I surmise that Lucas may have related to Geoffrey of Monmouth and the other early shapers of the Arthurian tradition because of the similarity of their tasks. When Geoffrey set out to write *The History of the Kings of Britain* (the earliest existing detailed account of Arthur's life) in the early twelfth century, England was a relatively new land, with few established myths or heroes to call its own. Thus when Geoffrey created the adventures of King Arthur out of some vague historical records, the British had their first real cultural hero to believe in and identify with. Furthermore, for the first time the British had their own set of stories to look to for guidance, inspiration, identity, and entertainment. I suspect that Lucas had a similar goal in mind when he began formulating Star Wars in the mid-1970s. By then, science and cynicism of the modern age had successfully driven almost all of the heroes and myths from our culture. As Mary Henderson reminds us in *Star Wars: The Magic of Myth*, "When the first film in the Star wars trilogy appeared in 1977, the ancient myths no longer seemed relevant for many people in the culture; pressing present-day problems absorbed our attention, and hope itself seemed in short supply". Here was a culture that needed new stories to inspire and instruct it—stories that would speak to modern concerns and at the same time offer some timeless wisdom" (6). For many of us who stared wide-eyed and slack-jawed as that Imperial Star Destroyer first chased Leia's ship across the giant screen in 1977, Star Wars has become such a story.

Works Cited

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