

Professor Fanni Bogdanow¹

1927-2013

In the 1450s, Sir Thomas Malory sat down at his prison table to write his glorious *Morte d'Arthur*; he had had sent in a rich and exciting library of Arthurian romances - romances of Arthur and Tristan, Lancelot and the Grail - a few of them in



Middle English but far more in French, and these he translated, condensed and extended, amended and dramatized, to create the Arthurian story as it is known to English-speaking audiences worldwide. What Malory had in his prison cell was something now known as the 'Post-Vulgate *Roman du Graal*' - and for the fact that we understand something of just what he translated, and just how, we owe a great debt to the devoted, painstaking life's work of my former colleague Professor Fanni Bogdanow, who has died in Manchester aged 86.

Fanni's life-story was as remarkable as any romance.² She was born in Düsseldorf in 1927, to parents who had, with tragic irony, escaped the pogroms in Minsk to take refuge in Germany. When she was 11, in 1939 and just in time, the British government, with the

¹ An abbreviated version of this obituary appears in the Guardian newspaper (2 September 2013).

² She gives a fuller, and moving, autobiographical account in an article entitled 'From Holocaust Survivor to Arthurian Scholar', in *On Arthurian Women: Essays in Memory of Maureen Fries*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler and Fiona Tolhurst (Dallas: Scriptorium Press, 2001), pp. 387-94; I derive much of my information about her early years from this.

greatest generosity, agreed to take in 10,000 unaccompanied German-Jewish children. Fanni's parents, rightly fearful of what Kristallnacht (1938) meant, loaded her onto one of the Kindertransport trains; she was taken in by a Quaker family in Manchester, the Clements, to whom she remained ardently grateful. In 1945, she won a scholarship to enable her to read French at Manchester University, then housing Eugène Vinaver, Fred Whitehead, and T. B. W. Reid; she was to stay in Manchester, dedicated to medieval romance, as undergraduate, post-graduate, lecturer, reader, professor and emeritus professor, for the whole of her professional life. Her parents, astonishingly, survived between them Dachau and Wülzburg, Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen; Fanni traced them in 1947 to a displaced persons' camp in Bavaria, and although her father never recovered enough to travel, to her intense joy her mother later joined her in Manchester, where Fanni would station her – later in a wheelchair – at the back of lectures and seminars.

Meanwhile, however, Fanni had discovered Arthurian romance and her life's passion; the portrait that accompanies this obituary shows her posed and poised in her doctoral robes, her expression serene with the complex but reassuring certainties of scholarship. She had been – and was to remain – inspired by Eugène Vinaver, then the pre-eminent Malory scholar, and had encountered what was until then an invisible romance, the Post-Vulgate Grail. Her first foray, inspired by Vinaver and his work with Merlin and Malory and for her Manchester M.A, was an edition of a section of *Queste del saint Graal*, from two manuscripts in the BnF, fr. 112 and fr. 12599, which differs significantly from the Vulgate version of the same text;³

³ *La Folie Lancelot, a hitherto unidentified portion of the Suite du Merlin contained in mss. B.N. fr. 112 and 12599*, ed. Fanni Bogdanow (*Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für Romanische Philologie*, 109), Tübingen, 1965, lxiii + 323 pp.

this was followed by a monumentally detailed, breathtakingly scholarly, study of *The Romance of the Grail*,⁴ in which she subjected the whole manuscript tradition of the *Queste* to a exploration of variants, thereby elucidating in minute detail the processes, which gave birth to what she was later to publish as the *Post-Vulgate Graal and Mort Artu*.

The Vulgate Cycle of Arthurian romances, incorporating the story of Arthur's kingdom, the story of Lancelot and Guinevere, the story of the Grail, is a product of the early thirteenth century – but what Malory knew was not that version, which is canonical in French, but another Arthuriad, the Post-Vulgate cycle; Fanni herself reconstructed its *Queste* and its *Mort Artu* from an incomplete version in French and major segments in Spanish and Portuguese: not just reconstructed but published, in five immense volumes.⁵ Perhaps no-one other than Fanni would have had the patience, and the stubborn commitment, to complete the edition: when the publishers first got her typescript but told her that unless the romance was in camera-ready form they could not contemplate it, she taught herself to word-process, pounding the keyboard as if it were her old typewriter: she was notorious for destroying a keyboard every six months or so.⁶ In the end, she presented the editorial board of the Société des Anciens Textes Français – perhaps to its dismay – with thousands

⁴ *The Romance of the Grail: a study of the structure and genesis of a thirteenth-century Arthurian prose romance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press/ New York: Barnes and Noble, 1966), xi + 308 pp.

⁵ *La version Post-Vulgate de la Queste del saint Graal et de la Mort Artu. Troisième partie du Roman du Graal*, ed. Fanni Bogdanow, 5 volumes, Société des Anciens Textes Français (Paris: Picard, 1991-2006): I, 599 pp.; II, 601 pp.; III, 806 pp.; IV/1, 324 pp.; IV/2, 814 pp.

⁶ Fanni adopted new technologies with the misdirected zeal of the true convert: when, to her intense pleasure, she discovered the Oxford Concordance Programme, she instructed it to concordance the whole of her huge, 5-volume Post-Vulgate *Queste*, without understanding about lemmatization. She immobilized Manchester University's mainframe for an entire long weekend, and got the French Department banned ...

of perfectly accurate pages each with two or three banks of footnotes. Every page, every word of this magnum opus had required her to compare and collate; she needed to master two further romance languages; she scurried across Europe in pursuit of manuscripts in elusive monasteries and obscure provincial libraries; she consulted with a network of scholars in France and the US and Spain and Portugal; she published dozens – perhaps more than a hundred – articles, many of them entitled ‘Another Undiscovered Manuscript of ...’, which charted her crusading exploration of her chosen texts.

But not only that. The less than complete *International Medieval Bibliography* lists 42 articles of hers, the most recent published in 2006, and bearing on a wide variety of Arthurian topics: Fanni rarely moved far from her first and all-embracing enthusiasm for the Arthurian legends in their different versions. If an ‘undiscovered manuscript’ of some other text – *Aliscans*, for instance (*Romania* 2001) – surfaced in the course of her Arthurian researches, she would naturally report it, but the topic was of very little interest to her. Her last major publication, also in 2006, was resolutely Arthurian: an edition of the *Queste* from a manuscript in the Bancroft Library in Berkeley, with a translation into modern French done by a Manchester colleague who normally specialised in Saint-John Perse, Anne Berrie.⁷ Fanni was painfully conscious that her own laborious expertise in medieval French was becoming rare: conscious therefore that an inexpensive scholarly edition, and a graceful modern French translation, were indispensable if scholarship on, and interest in, the *Queste* were to continue. It took her in all some eleven years ...

⁷ *La Quête du Saint-Graal, roman en prose du XIIIe siècle* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 2006).

All this industry, all this dedication, meant that she was not the easiest of colleagues. She had little or no sympathy for anything written later than 1300 or so, and if driven to teach subsidiary students elementary French, or approaches to Gide or Racine or Sartre, she would do so with amiable but determined perplexity. Medieval literature she taught with a bright-eyed enthusiasm that mystified generations of undergraduates – but they remember her vividly where they have long forgotten the rest of us, with our tediously conventional seminars. Meanwhile, as a colleague in the Middle East writes, for Fanni's edition of a cycle of romances thought to be 'among the most remarkable Arthurian sagas ever written', scholars will be grateful for her unparalleled, if eccentric, scholarly drive.

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