

Honors 101

28 November 2018

### Daniel of the Blossoming Valley: A Different Class of Hero

One of the most defining factors of a literary movement are the protagonists of the works that comprise it. The heroes of “the classics” are frequently a reflection of the ideals and values of a culture; such qualities are revealed through their words, decisions, and even physical attributes. Although the idealization of characters is often subtle, it is an integral part of connecting them to the meaning of the work as a whole as well as the society that enjoys it. This is particularly true of earlier literature, when production and consumption of art was limited by a lack of technology; stories were often the source of teachings about societal expectations and the good that comes from following them.

One telling example of this moralistic literature is the Arthurian legend. During the High Middle Ages in Europe, legends of the Knights of the Round Table were quite formulaic in that the tropes, characters, and plots were echoed for decades. The most frequently occurring element of the legends was the mighty ideal of chivalry that governed the minds of knights; they were expected to constantly act with valor, honesty, and force, all in the name of king, country, and spouse (Resler). Such high standards were deeply ingrained into the fabric of the storyline, and as such, were an important part of the meaning and interpretation of the work. The omnipresence of chivalry dominated European culture during the High Middle Ages, and is clearly seen in the portrayal of King Arthur and his knights.

It is because of the importance of chivalry to Arthurian literature that Daniel, the titular hero of der Stricker’s *Daniel von dem Blühenden Tal* (*Daniel of the Blossoming Valley*), is such a unique character; he differs from the typical Arthurian knight in several ways. He does not

consistently follow the expectation of chivalry through his repeated decampment of the knights without warning, his obsession with personal reputation, and, most notably, his use of *list*, or cunning, rather than brute strength alone (Resler). These differences mark an important departure from the conventional Arthurian hero and story, which is heavily emphasized by der Stricker's narration. Resler acknowledges the significance of der Stricker's departure from custom in the introduction to his translation of his work: "Certainly there is much about *Daniel* that is decidedly un-Arthurian, yet there is reason to believe that at least some of this was consciously and purposefully undertaken...a patchwork of a story which...has lost none of its appeal despite the passage of nearly eight hundred years" (Resler lii). It is clear that der Stricker's tale is a key component of a shift in literature, and Daniel himself is the medium through which that change occurs. Furthermore, although Daniel is not necessarily "Arthurian," he is still extremely successful in his pursuits to rescue damsels, destroy monsters, and rule as king, and is highly-regarded by the "classic" knights, especially King Arthur himself. Through the contrast of his character with the knights of yore, *Daniel* is a significant turning point for Arthurian literature, and as such, a segment of the base values of a society. Der Stricker's fresh portrayal of a heroic knight in Daniel is more than an oversight or accident, it is a truly transformative work, earning its place in the European canon.

The first instance of Daniel's divergence from typical Arthurian behavior is his frequent abandonment of the other knights. Although it was not unusual for knights to go off on their own, as the narrator states, "[King Arthur's] men were ever accustomed to ride forth from his court" (Resler 5), it was done openly and with flourish. However, when Daniel leaves, he does it in secret, and without warning. The first time he leaves, his naivety is revealed. As King Arthur and the other knights are biding their time, preparing to trick the giant, Daniel has other plans,

“spurred on by his own bold valor, felt so urgently pressed to launch the campaign...out he slipped from the court” (Resler 22). The “valor” of his decision is contrasted with the way he leaves; it is described more like an ill-conceived escape rather than a heroic ride to battle. The subsequent revelation of Daniel’s plan to go to the limetree alone further emphasizes the lack of Arthurian ideals; suddenly abandoning the other knights so shortly after becoming one himself to take on an opposing, hostile king by himself is far from the honest disposition with which the knights are expected to conduct themselves. The other instance of this unprecedented departure is somewhat more excusable on account of the difference in motivation. This time, Daniel leaves in order to rescue the Count of Bright Fountain, which is certainly more knightly than leaving simply because he is impatient and he can. Once again, his eagerness to leave the celebration after the first victory against the men of Cluse is accentuated: “Daniel’s own joy...was constrained...he could not locate the count...he yearned to set forth (this was a part of his very temperament!)” (Resler 74). Even so, abandoning comrades in such a precarious position, so near the opponent at midnight, virtually cancels the argument of change in Daniel’s motive to leave. By putting his own needs ahead of the other knights by acting on impulse to leave, Daniel defies the Arthurian decorum.

In spite of Daniel’s blatant failure to live up to several of the expectations of Arthurian knights, both instances of him leaving have similar, positive outcomes. After leaving, Daniel quickly faces some conflict with a monster; the first time, he duels with a dwarf, then a race of “bellyless” demons, a mysterious knight, and, finally, a giant; the second time, he challenges a blood-thirsty ogre. In every battle, though he is alone, Daniel is victorious, and the spoils he receives, including a magic sword, become vital to later triumphs. As a result, the spoils gained justify Daniel’s unexpected absence, and his companions are quite forgiving and grateful. This

cycle of Daniel going against the unwritten Arthurian code by running away, facing challenges alone, conquering the challenges for a prize, then returning to acclaim from the others is an important aspect of Daniel's character. His actions and the reaction to them add depth to the reader's perception of him, and it becomes clear that there is more to his character than what typically defines an Arthurian knight. Daniel's actions present a juxtaposition between acting with confidence and valor, as knights are expected, while also working alone, without the common cooperation and camaraderie that defines the Round Table. Furthermore, the language used by the narrator to describe those events paints Daniel in an even more positive, heroic light. One example of such a glowing depiction of Daniel is when King Arthur and his three trusty knights, Sir Gawain, Parzival, and Sir Iwein, approach Daniel as he delivers his final blow to the giant's brother: "They recognized Daniel and rejoiced at the giant's death and at Daniel's survival. They were certain that, if Daniel were to be anywhere else but there on the battlefield with them, they would surely fare ill" (Resler 54). The strong assertions made by the narrator make it clear that any misgivings the knights had about Daniel leaving melt away once they see his heroic ability. The narrator's description in that scene ostensibly suggests that victory, regardless of cost, is more important than adhering to Arthurian ideals. Finally, after Daniel successfully finds the Count of the Bright Fountain and rescues the Green Meadow from the ogre, the narrator outspokenly commends him for it, even though he made the unknighthly decision to leave his men: "It was an act of great valor on Daniel's part that he had left King Arthur's camp around midnight to fight for his comrade...Daniel...displayed an intrepid spirit" (Resler 93). Once again, these statements affirm Daniel's actions as heroic and morally sound, even though they do not align with Arthurian values.

Another departure of Daniel's character from that of other Arthurian knights is his preoccupation with his reputation; behind every decision he makes, the effects of the choice on his name is at the forefront of his mind. A prime example of this is when Daniel contemplates battling a giant he finds on his way to Cluse, shortly after he leaves King Arthur's domain: "Thus Daniel weighed the dilemma in his mind... [seizing] the courage of a lion... 'I should gladly be seen wounded in body, but with my reputation unblemished before I would ever shrink from battle or injury—and, what is worse, be laden with shame'" (Resler 23). Although Daniel does display his courage through his thoughts, acting solely to further one's reputation is not a pillar of knighthood, rather it would be expected Daniel would slay the beast if there were other people in danger. Because there is no true, active provocation by the giant, the circumstances do not present the need for such heroics, and Daniel contemplating them further reveals that his motives are not quite in line with those of true Arthurian knights. His over-the-top heroism is not necessary for the threat the giant poses. Furthermore, this is unusual because, according to Resler, the primary motivation of an Arthurian knight should be "love for his spouse" (xxx). Daniel is much more interested in his notoriety than any woman; his repeated rejection of them makes that quite obvious to the reader. The most prominent example of Daniel's rejection of such an important pillar of Arthurian knighthood occurs when he is preparing to fight Juran, the dwarf, early in his heroic journey. In the passage, the narrator discusses Lady Love, a personification of courtly affection, and how it relates to Daniel and Juran: "Lady Love proved here than any man whom she fails to entice into servitude for the sake of her reward must indeed possess a strong will in his steadfast mind... she was victorious here too, for every man on whom she exerts her power has no choice but to subjugate himself to her. Sir Juran did likewise" (Resler 31-32). This quote reveals a great deal about Daniel, and greatly heightens his un-

Arthurian ways. It states that Daniel is able to defeat Juran because his mind is too strong to be penetrated by Lady Love's allure, although it was essentially expected for knights to lay down their lives in the name of courtly love; Daniel's invulnerability to the draw of love is portrayed as a heroic quality. In this way, by personifying Lady Love and her inability to "entice" Daniel, the narrator candidly redefines heroism, which is quite significant to the development of Daniel's character as well as the meaning of the work as whole. Overall, Daniel's rejection of motivation by courtly love, opting instead for personal reputation and pure heroism, further exposes the disparity between his ideals and those of Arthurian knights.

A final impetus of Daniel's repudiation of Arthurian ideals is his use of *list*, or cunning, to gain victory. This is perhaps the most significant element of his divergence, as it heavily contributes to the plot of the story, and most strongly contrasts with Arthurian expectations. In the introduction to the legend, Resler states, "cunning (*list*) in place of valor... may well have been conscious poetic design—and not mere ignorance of convention—which prompted der Stricker to rethink and recast certain features" (xxxvii-xxxviii). Such "recasting" naturally occurs most prominently regarding Daniel and his actions. The first example of Daniel's utilization of *list* is when he battles Juran. Not only is he already invulnerable to Lady Love's influence, he also makes use of his wit to ensure victory. In this instance, Daniel furthers his advantage by convincing Juran to relinquish his sword, knowing that he is under the influence of Lady Love, primed to commit hubris. Daniel essentially uses reverse psychology, validating Juran's incorrect assumption that his strength alone will allow him to win: "It is your sword alone which is credited with all the slaughter which you have wrought, for no man has been able to withstand that weapon. Now show my lady and her retinue whether or not you are capable of inflicting death on any man without the aid of that sword" (Resler 31). His conniving words work

perfectly, and Juran haughtily gives up his sword, which shortly thereafter is used for his beheading. Another prominent example of Daniel's use of *list* is when he slays the Ogre in the Green Meadow. After a great deal of strategic discussion with the Maiden of the Green Meadow (over 100 lines), Daniel swiftly rides off to the ogre's lair and implements his cunning plan: "Daniel perceived that they were utterly robbed of their senses, and he began to imitate them in their gestures. He glanced all about and carefully observed all that they did, then assumed the same mannerisms himself" (Resler 88). As Daniel continues to blend in, he is able to "[slip] up behind" the ogre and get close enough to swiftly behead him (Resler 90). This scene is particularly suspenseful because Daniel's plan is never revealed to the reader; he merely agrees to help the maiden after their long discussion, and rides off to execute the plan. This suspense makes his actions all the more cunning and wise. Because such care and attention to detail was required to carry out the mission, it is made perfectly obvious that brute force would not have been an appropriate solution; Daniel was able to succeed due to his reliance on *list*, again contrasting with Arthurian morality. A final, yet still notable, moment involving Daniel's scheming ability comes at the end of the work, as the Knights of the Round Table face their last trial: the abduction of King Arthur. After Parzival fails to defeat the giant's father, to the surprise and chagrin of the Knights, they are seemingly hopeless. In this moment, Daniel sets out, "for it was his plan to win a truce from the old man, once he had acquired that...net" (Resler 134). However, that was not the end of his wit; upon his return, once the trap was set, he had to ensure that King Arthur's captor would fall into the net. In order to achieve that, he had to creatively challenge the captor to tug-of-war, casting away his sword and any semblance of traditional knightly battle with it. Again, his plan works, and the old man "flew at [him] at an immense speed, rushing like a blind man straight into the middle of the net" (Resler 139). After becoming

trapped, Daniel convinces the old man to join his kingdom with persuasive, shrewd words. All of these instances of *list* are integral to Daniel's character development as well as the sequence of action of the tale. Furthermore, they enhance the meaning of the work as a whole because with each instance, Daniel's character, and, as such, the heroic ideals he is supposed to embody as the protagonist of an Arthurian legend, further deviates from what is expected of him. Daniel's reliance on *list*, and the success it brings him, heavily contrast with the traditional Arthurian ideal of brute strength and reserved piety (Resler).

The divergence of Daniel's character from typical Arthurian heroes via *list* is further enhanced by the frequent presence of the supernatural when he employs it. According to Resler, the existence of supernatural elements was not uncommon in Arthurian literature: "*Daniel*, like most other chivalric romances, features a full complement of supernatural objects" (xxxix). However, Daniel's story is unique because of the way that the mythical objects are utilized: in acts of cunning, nearly exclusively. One such example of this is Daniel's duel with Juran; Daniel tricks Juran into giving up his sword, and ends up killing him (and scores of others as the story progresses) with it. Another example is regarding the invisible net; without it, the capture of the old man would not have been possible. The synergetic combination of Daniel's cunning with the supernatural widens the gap between Arthurian heroism and Daniel's new heroism; put simply, the inclusion of the supernatural adds another dimension to Daniel's dependence on *list* and emphasizes the power of *list* alone; both of which are integral parts of the meaning of the work.

By analyzing the ways in which Daniel differs from the expectations of the Arthurian knight, it becomes clear that while he is certainly not a member of that league of characters, he is a divergent, new hero in a class that was all his own in the High Middle Ages. Indeed, because heroes are meant to be role models, the fact that Daniel is so different, revealed through his

decisions to embark on his own adventures, the source of his motivation and decision-making, and his frequent use of cunning, marks an important departure from Arthurian expectations and a shift in the meaning and importance of chivalry in literature and society (Resler). By taking the points of divergence of Daniel's character and analyzing them through the lens of society, he becomes much more than an unconventional protagonist; rather, Daniel is a significant point on the timeline of literary heroes, marking the beginning of a different class of heroes.

## Works Cited

Resler, Michael. *Daniel of the Blossoming Valley*. Edited by James J. Wilhelm, Michael Resler, 2005. Translation of original work by der Stricker.

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