

Literary Analysis: Fred Saberhagen's "Dominion"

Introduction

Fred Saberhagen's "Dominion" presents a complex supernatural thriller that weaves together Arthurian legend, vampire mythology, and contemporary horror. The novel demonstrates both sophisticated plotting and some structural weaknesses that merit careful examination.

Plot Structure and Vivian's Grand Design

Vivian's (Nimue's) plot operates on multiple temporal levels with a millennium-spanning scope. Her ultimate goal is to facilitate the arrival of her lover Falerin from the 6th century into the modern world, where his magical powers combined with contemporary technology could establish global dominion.

The plan's architecture involves several interlocking elements:

1. **Bloodline Management:** Vivian has spent generations breeding specific family lines (Littlewoods, Collines, Wedderburns, Picards) to produce individuals with latent psychic abilities, particularly the power of "seeing" - the ability to locate hidden magical objects.
2. **The Sword Obstacle:** The primary impediment to Falerin's arrival is a protective sword (presumably Excalibur or a similar Arthurian blade) that blocks interdimensional passage. Vivian needs someone with exceptional sight to locate it.
3. **Sacrifice Rituals:** To power the magical working, Vivian requires blood sacrifices, particularly from her own bred lineages, which explains her cultivation of the servant families at the castle.
4. **Strategic Positioning:** The reconstructed castle serves as both a focal point for the magic and a cover for her operations, while the secret passages provide practical means of manipulation and control.

The plan's logical coherence has both strengths and weaknesses. Saberhagen creates a believable supernatural ecosystem where magic operates according to consistent rules, but some elements strain credibility - particularly the notion that such an elaborate multi-generational conspiracy could remain hidden while involving dozens of people across centuries.

Vivian's Methods of Control

Saberhagen presents a nuanced analysis of manipulation that operates on multiple levels:

Psychological Manipulation: Vivian exploits Simon's formative sexual experience, creating an obsession that persists into adulthood. This mirrors real-world patterns of how early experiences can create lasting psychological vulnerabilities.

Magical Compulsion: Direct supernatural control supplements psychological manipulation, but notably, this appears to require ongoing effort and proximity - suggesting limits to magical coercion.

Social Positioning: By controlling wealth and family structures, Vivian creates dependencies that make rebellion practically difficult even when magically possible.

Graduated Revelation: Information is revealed gradually, preventing victims from grasping the full horror of their situation until escape becomes impossible.

Simon Hill: Character Analysis

Simon represents a fascinating study in manipulation and complicity. His character arc reveals how victimization and collaboration can intertwine:

The Formative Trauma: His sexual encounter with Vivian at age 15 creates both psychological fixation and supernatural vulnerability. Saberhagen suggests this experience simultaneously empowered and damaged Simon, giving him enhanced psychic abilities while creating an obsessive dependency.

Professional Identity as Defense: Simon's career as a stage magician serves as psychological armor - by explicitly denying real magic, he attempts to maintain sanity while suppressing awareness of his actual abilities.

The Recognition Scene: When Simon realizes Vivian is his mother (in the climactic scene), Saberhagen achieves genuine horror through the revelation that his obsession was not only supernatural manipulation but also involved incest - adding another layer of violation and corruption.

Agency vs. Victimization: Throughout the novel, Simon exercises genuine choice within constrained circumstances. His final refusal to reveal the Sword's location represents authentic moral agency, even though it proves futile.

Historical Integration and Female Characters

Saberhagen's treatment of Arthurian material shows both scholarship and creativity, but his handling of female characters from legend is problematic:

Nimue/Vivian Synthesis: The novel conflates several legendary figures - Nimue (the Lady of the Lake), Vivian (another name for the same character in some versions), and Morgan le Fay (through her role as antagonist to Arthur's legacy). This creates a powerful composite villain but sacrifices the distinct characteristics of each legendary figure.

Historical Accuracy: The 6th-century sequences demonstrate solid research into post-Roman Britain, with authentic details about warfare, social structure, and material culture. The portrayal of Artos (Arthur) as a practical military leader rather than a romantic king reflects modern historical scholarship.

Gender Dynamics: Problematically, Saberhagen reduces complex legendary women to variations on the "femme fatale" archetype. His Nimue lacks the nuanced motivations found in medieval sources, where her betrayal of Merlin often stems from self-defense against his sexual pursuit.

The Significance of Multiple Names

Saberhagen's use of shifting names operates on several symbolic levels:

Identity Fluidity: Characters who change names (Feathers/Hawk/Falcon for Merlin, Vivian/Nimue for the antagonist) exist partially outside normal temporal and social constraints. The name changes reflect their supernatural nature and multi-temporal existence.

Progressive Revelation: Each name change reveals more of a character's true nature. "Feathers" suggests degradation and worthlessness; "Hawk" implies predatory potential; "Falcon" suggests nobility and power - tracking Merlin's recovery of his abilities and dignity.

Power and Identity: In magical contexts, true names carry power. The proliferation of names both protects characters and reflects the multiplicity of their existence across time periods.

Social Camouflage: Modern aliases allow immortal characters to function in contemporary society while maintaining connection to their legendary identities.

Falerin: Analysis and Origins

Falerin appears to be Saberhagen's original creation rather than a figure from traditional Arthurian legend, though he incorporates elements from several sources:

Historical Parallels: The name may derive from "Falerne," a type of Roman wine, suggesting corruption and intoxication. His association with Comorr connects him to historical Breton figures.

Composite Villain: Falerin combines traits of various legendary antagonists - the magical power of Morgan le Fay, the temporal displacement of sleeping heroes like Arthur himself, and the corrupting influence of figures like Mordred.

Symbolic Function: As the ultimate evil that never quite arrives, Falerin represents the perpetual threat of authoritarianism and the corruption of power. His failure to cross into the modern world suggests that some forms of evil cannot fully adapt to contemporary contexts.

Limited Characterization: Significantly, Falerin remains largely off-stage, defined more by his influence than his direct actions. This may reflect Saberhagen's recognition that some evils are more frightening when incompletely revealed.

Critical Assessment

"Dominion" succeeds as a supernatural thriller through its intricate plotting and psychological insight, but contains several significant weaknesses:

Strengths: The novel demonstrates sophisticated understanding of manipulation dynamics, creative integration of legendary material, and genuine horror through the revelation of familial corruption.

Weaknesses: The plotting occasionally becomes overly complex, some character motivations remain unclear, and the resolution feels somewhat rushed given the elaborate setup.

Thematic Coherence: The novel effectively explores themes of inherited corruption, the persistence of evil across time, and the complex relationship between victimization and complicity.

Conclusion

Saberhagen creates a work that functions both as entertainment and as a meditation on power, corruption, and the ways historical evils perpetuate themselves across generations. While not without flaws, "Dominion" represents a sophisticated entry in the urban fantasy genre that predates many of its conventions.

The novel succeeds in exploring themes of inherited corruption, psychological manipulation, and the complex relationship between victimization and complicity, making it a work that rewards careful analysis beyond its surface entertainment value.