



Roda da Fortuna

Revista Eletrônica sobre Antiguidade e Medievo
Electronic Journal about Antiquity and Middle Ages

Jordi Morera Herrero¹

Arthur Reformed: The Malorian Legacy of Edmund Spenser:

Arturo Reformado:
El Legado Maloriano de Edmund Spenser

Abstract:

Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* stands as one of the greatest literary achievements of the Middle Ages, a central cornerstone of Arthurian literature as well as a potent source of inspiration for future generations of authors. This paper examines how this inherited Arthurian tradition -inevitably filtered through the Malorian lens- was received, assimilated and transformed during the Early Modern period. By focusing on the works of Edmund Spenser, and very especially his monumental epic poem *The Faerie Queene*, this paper will try to explain how the character of Arthur had to be fundamentally reshaped in order to better fit the political and religious demands of Elizabethan England.

Keywords:

Malory; Spenser; Protestantism.

Resumen:

Le Morte Darthur de Malory se encuentra entre los mayores logros literarios de la Edad Media, siendo un pilar central de la literatura Artúrica así como una potente fuente de inspiración para futuras generaciones de autores. Este trabajo examina cómo esta tradición Artúrica heredada -e inevitablemente filtrada a través de la lente Maloriana- fue recibida, asimilada y transformada durante el Renacimiento. Centrándose en las obras de Edmund Spenser, y muy particularmente en su monumental poema épico *The Faerie Queene*, este artículo pretende explicar como el personaje de Arturo tuvo que ser fundamentalmente reconfigurado para responder mejor a las exigencias políticas y religiosas de la Inglaterra Isabelina.

Palabras-Clave:

Malory; Spenser; Protestantismo.

¹ M.A. Advanced English Studies - Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.

1. Introduction

Le Morte Darthur is, without a doubt, one of the greatest literary achievements of the Middle Ages. The exhaustive Arthuriad penned by Sir Thomas Malory in the fifteenth century stands even today as the most popular and best-known version of the legend of the fabulous King and his equally famous Knights of the Round Table. Malory's influence as both a receiver and continuator of older traditions is undeniable. His compilation, the first great prose narrative in the English language, not only kept alive the interest in chivalric romance during a period of political turmoil and civil war; it also went down in history as the central cornerstone of Arthurian literature as well as a potent source of inspiration for future generations of authors.

One of the writers who was clearly affected by Malory was Sir Edmund Spenser, poet and courtier of the Elizabethan period. Spenser's *magnum opus*, *The Faerie Queene*, is an epic poem of monumental proportions even in its unfinished state, a mythopoeia simultaneously constituting a tight mesh of allegory and allusion, a superb instance of early modern imitatio and one of the greatest examples of literary syncretism. Like Malory, Spenser presents a world populated by questing knights, ladies both maidenly and duplicitous and fearsome giants and dragons. All the trappings and themes of medieval romance are present in *The Faerie Queene*, and Spenser uses certain elements from the Matter of Britain as central figures in his elaborate pageant, most notably the character of Arthur himself.

The century that separates Spenser from Malory, however, had changed the political and religious face of England almost beyond recognition. The rise of the Tudor dynasty, the increasing imperial ambitions and the religious upheaval induced by the Reformation all contributed to make a straightforward adaptation of Malorian material virtually impossible. Thus, Spenser transforms the inherited Arthurian tradition according to the necessities and demands of his times and also to suit his own purposes. As the analysis of particular episodes of *The Faerie Queene* will reveal, the volatile mingling of Elizabethan politics and religion is transferred to the poem under a chivalric mien. Spenser's Faerie Land may resemble Malory's mythic England, but the giants and monsters that lurk there are radically different in their allegorical nature.

In *Le Morte Darthur*, Malory intertwines the medieval romances protagonized by several knights with the story of King Arthur's life to provide a structured and comprehensive view of his reign. Like Malory, Spenser also surrounds his Arthur with a plethora of knights errant in search of chivalrous adventures, but his approach to the character is completely different. The present article examines the process of transformation endured by the figure of Arthur at the hands of Edmund Spenser, in an attempt to establish the effects that a period of particular historical

significance such as the Reformation had on the reception of one of the most prominent narrative cycles of all times.

2. Arthur of Newgate

Although the debate about the authorship of *Le Morte Darthur* is not entirely closed, it is now widely accepted that its writer was Sir Thomas Malory of Newbold Revel in Warwickshire, a soldier, land-owner and member of Parliament during the decade of the 1440s. The exhaustive research conducted by P. J. C. Field –detailed in his book *The Life and Times of Sir Thomas Malory* (1993)– contributed decisively to this general agreement. Field, through painstaking and rigorous detective work, investigates every possible candidate and concludes that “there is no longer a place in Malorian biography for the Fair Unknown. No one but Sir Thomas Malory of Newbold Revel could have written the *Morte Darthur*” (1993: 35). The circumstances of composition, as established through the work of Dr. Field and some later researchers (that I will mention in the next paragraphs) are essential for the understanding of the political purpose of this massive work.

If the deductions of Dr. Field are correct, we find in the noble but often morally flawed knights of the narrative a sort of wistful counterpoint to the man who wrote about them from a cell in Newgate Prison. According to the biographical data unearthed by Field and other biographers such as Edward Hicks, Malory was born into a family of some repute around 1416 and was knighted in 1441, becoming a Member of Parliament for Warwickshire in 1445. Despite such promising beginnings, however, he apparently became a dangerous miscreant only a few years later. He was charged in repeated occasions with assault, rape, extortion, raiding, cattle-stealing and attempted murder, an impressive criminal record that, in words of Helen Cooper, “reads more like an account of exemplary thuggery than chivalry” (1998: x). Sir Thomas’ alleged crimes resulted in his arrest and at least two escapes. We do not know if Malory really committed any of these crimes nor the motives and circumstances of the same, but whatever the case may be, his biography certainly suggests an impressive individual with a propensity for violence, a lot of enemies, or both.

Malory was a soldier as much as a criminal, though, and he lived in a turbulent period of continual warfare that lasted well after his death. It seems inconceivable for his writings to remain uninfluenced by the two major conflicts of his times: the Hundred Years’ War and the Wars of the Roses. Malory was born during what historians came to call the Hundred Years’ War and grew up in a period when the great victories such as Agincourt or Crécy were a thing of the past and the reputation of England was in clear decline. He possibly fought in France during the final stages of the Hundred Years’ War, but even if he did not, the decisive defeat at

Castillon in 1453 was a crushing blow to English nationalistic sentiments. National pride was not the only casualty of the war, either: the chivalric code of old had been dying a long and painful death. The Hundred Years' War changed military tactics forever: the supremacy of heavy cavalry in the battlefield was cancelled by the extremely powerful longbow, and all of a sudden the armoured knight, with his expensive outfit, elite training and aristocratic upbringing became obsolete as a military force and political symbol. The high number of French knights killed at Crécy seemed to prove that the lofty and honorable chivalric ideals had become a hindrance under these new conditions. Meanwhile, the English Crown, unable to sustain their aspirations to the throne of France after a century of bloodshed, also suffered from a generalized loss of authority and prestige. The heroic leadership of Henry V was replaced by the weak and unworthy Henry VI, under whose rulership the royal authority collapsed almost entirely. Obviously, Malory's England was a far cry from Arthur's legendary realm; in the eyes of many, true chivalry had died in those days.

Presumably, during the initial stages of the war Malory fought for the House of York, since he technically owed allegiance to the Earl of Warwick, and it were the Yorkists who issued the pardon that released him from prison in 1460. It is almost certain that he was present at the Battle of Towton in 1461, "probably the largest and bloodiest battle ever fought on English soil" according to medieval historian Christopher Gravett (2003: 7). If that is the case, then certainly some echoes of Towton found their way into Malory's narration of Camlann, the battle that put an end to Arthur's reign, especially in the descriptions of noble knights laying dead in the cold earth and the enormous number of casualties. Towton resulted in the deposition of Henry VI and the crowning of Edward of York as King Edward IV. Malory's participation in Edward's campaign to besiege and recapture the northern castles of Alnwick, Bamburgh, and Dunstanburgh –previously taken by the Lancastrians– also suggest that he remained a Yorkist for some time. Some years later, however, Malory was imprisoned again after changing his sympathies towards the Lancastrian side, possibly by following the example of his liege lord, the Earl of Warwick. There is nothing known about Malory's arrest, charge, trial or verdict, but biographical data shows that he was somehow connected to the Cornelius plot, a Lancastrian conspiracy, and most scholars assume that he was actively involved in it in some way. In any case, a record found in a fifteenth-century cartulary uncovered by Dr. Anne Sutton in September 2000 proves that Malory was in Newgate Prison at Easter 1468. It was in this period of confinement when he wrote *Le Morte Darthur*. After being excluded from pardon in several occasions, Malory was eventually released in 1470 with the return of the Lancasters to power. Unfortunately, he could not enjoy freedom for long, dying just one year later.

The reign of Edward IV was marked by a sudden revival of Arthurianism, especially in the decade of the 1460s. One of the possible instigators for this renewed interest was the historian John Hardyng and his chronicle of Britain, which

helped to establish a parallelism between weak kings such as Henry VI and the Fisher King of Arthurian romance. Under the new king Edward the Matter of Britain became politicized and its themes and characters were used as means of legitimation. Edward IV himself was fond of tournaments and similar spectacles, and he recreated the splendour of the Arthurian court by gathering a circle of knight-companions around the Round Table at Winchester Castle. Even before declaring himself king, he named his illegitimate son Arthur. Fighting for a king who was regarded as an Arthur reborn alongside other noblemen deeply fascinated by the Matter of Britain such as Sir Anthony Woodville, second Earl Rivers and Knight of the Garter, it was perhaps inevitable that Malory would resort to the Arthurian cycle when he took up the pen during his imprisonment at Newgate. It has been speculated that Malory might have written *Le Morte* as a commission from Woodville, but even if that was the case, the enthusiasm and passion that he poured into his writing make it hard to deny his commitment to his subject. In his chapter about Malory, Alan Lupack explains that he “drew on several sources, including various parts of the *Vulgate* and *Post-Vulgate* cycles, the *Prose Tristan*, and the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* and the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur*; but he was not a slavish translator. He reshaped his originals, omitted much that was not relevant to his purpose, and even created new sections to advance his themes” (2005: 134). But what were those themes and purposes? What did Arthur mean to a man like Thomas Malory?

Malory’s retelling has been read either as praising or as condemning the Arthurian world. Bearing in mind the historical context in which it was written, it is tempting to consider *Le Morte Darthur* as a product of the nostalgia for a simpler world ruled by wisdom and peace. Arthur’s Old England represents, according to this point of view, the perfect chivalric society of the past, free from the confusion and unrest of the present, and Arthur becomes the very incarnation of royal authority and the divine right of kings, ideas that were being received with increasing scepticism as the Wars of the Roses followed their course. Helen Cooper argues that “Malory’s *Morte Darthur* is not an exercise in nostalgia for a golden age: it is an account of the destruction of an ideal” (1998: xii). Certainly, it is easy to imagine Malory watching the remains of Arthur’s world collapsing from the window of his prison cell, substituted by a mercenary modern world without rules, where battles were won by ignoble weapons, honor meant nothing and loyalty to one’s liege could change at a moment’s notice. Others, including P. J. C. Field, disagree with this reading of the *Morte D’Arthur* as a *roman à clef* of sorts: “Malory’s main concern was to retell the received Arthurian story as he understood it, although events from his own time may occasionally combine with and reshape the legendary events of his story” (Field, 1993: 123). However, the influence of the tumultuous times in which Malory lived is undeniably present in his writing and, as it is often the case, the truth probably lies at some middle point between both readings.

Regardless of Malory's intentions, the Arthur of his compilation moves from action to inaction to allow the narrative to include the totality of the legendary corpus as the author had received it. As it happens in many of the medieval romances from the French and English tradition, such as *Perceval, le Conte du Graal* or *Sir Gawaine and the Green Knight*, in the *Morte Darthur* we find a displacement of protagonism from Arthur to his knights. Malory uses Arthur as the centre of the world he is writing about, a symbolic sun around which Lancelot, Tristram and the rest of the knights move in orbit. Arthur becomes the *roi fainéant*, retreats to his court and bequeaths the active, heroic role to his knights. Taking his cue from medieval verse and prose romances, which often presented the king as a brave but often flawed and unwise figure, Malory somehow related the lassitude of the king to the dissolution of civilization and the chivalric ideal. The impossibility to live up to the high social and moral principles embodied in the Round Table results, therefore, in the downfall of Arthur's kingdom.

Over a century later, Edmund Spenser reverted this image of the inactive king when he chose Arthur as the central character of his epic allegorical poem *The Faerie Queene*. It is to this re-reading of the Malorian material, and to its underlying political intentions, that we must now turn.

3. Arthur in Fairy Land

First published in 1590, Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* was destined to enter the Western literary canon as one of the masterpieces of English literature, despite its reputation as complex and undecipherable. It is certainly an ambitious creation, and its convoluted layers of religious, political and Humanist meaning make that reputation not entirely undeserved. The plot of *The Faerie Queene* contains a small core of Arthurian material amidst an intricate, many-layered allegory that takes place in a pseudo-medieval world distilled from the imagery of chivalric romance. Spenser's Faerie Land is similar to Malory's Old England in its disconnection from the everyday realities of life: both settings seem temporally, spatially, or socially remote to the reader. Spenser also takes from the romance tradition the basic form of the plot: the quest. Arthur's quest to find Gloriana, the queen of Faerie Land, and earn her hand acts as a framing device, a central narrative around which the tales of other knights revolve. Each book of the poem acts almost as an independent romance in itself, protagonized by a hero representing one of the virtues: Holiness, Temperance, Chastity, Friendship, Justice, and Courtesy. Encasing his poetic creation in an epic frame and adopting the conventions of the chivalric romance and the *chanson de geste*, Spenser manages to create an elaborate allegory without sacrificing the narrative structure and timeless appeal of the best adventure stories.

The role of Arthur in the epic is evident from his initial appearance in the Book I. The Book of Holiness, brimming with religious allegory, narrates the adventures of the Knight of the Red Crosse on his quest –received from Gloriana, the Faerie Queene herself– to slay the terrible dragon that has captured the parents of the lady Una. Initially accompanied by Una and his dwarf squire, the knight has already faced monstrous beasts, villanous knights and duplicitous enchanter, and at one point he has become strangled from the maiden because of magic deceptions. In cantos 7 and 8, we find Redcrosse alone and exhausted from his battles, far more weary than we have seen him before. He rests next to a stream and tastes its waters, not knowing that they are enchanted and sap the strength of those who drink from it. The knight completes his disastrous journey to physical and moral lassitude by yielding to the seduction of the treacherous Duessa. He is in her arms when the monstrous giant Orgoglio appears and easily defeats the unarmored knight, throwing him into his deepest dungeon. It is only thanks to the opportune apparition of Prince Arthur that Orgoglio is defeated and Redcrosse liberated. Spenser's Arthur is not yet a king, but a prince errant in search of Gloriana, the Faerie Queene herself, whom he has seen only in dreams. Book I is perhaps the most relevant for discussing the presence of Arthur in *The Faerie Queene*, but he keeps appearing throughout the rest of the poem, intervening in the quests of the other knights. Unfortunately, Spenser was unable to complete the remaining six books he had originally planned, so Arthur never finished his quest and married Gloriana as the author had intended, but it is more than obvious than Spenser's Arthur differs to a large extent from Malory's. The life and times of Edmund Spenser demanded a new vision.

Throughout the sixteenth century, England experienced enormous cultural agitation. The gradual but unstoppable shift away from old patterns of organization that was already taking place in Malory's times now manifested itself at all spheres: social, political, economical, intellectual and religious, a process of evolution that was fuelled and counterweighted by the powerful need to maintain a line of continuity with a classical past that was increasingly resurgent and perceived as a valuable intellectual heritage. Isolated from the continent by its insular nature, England experienced a highly independent and relatively self-contained 'Renaissance'. Nevertheless the tides of history prevailed, and the reigns of the Tudors were inevitably marked by two decisive intellectual currents, one theological, the other secular: the Protestant Reformation and humanism. It was in this cultural climate that Spenser composed his multilayered epic, and both strands were firmly woven into the fabric of the poem. Even though the fluctuating status of religion during the Tudor period impeded the appearance of a top-tier Reformer on a par with Luther or Calvin, a veritable army of enthusiastic preachers, ministers and biblical commentators stepped up to the task. They emphasized especially the doctrines that stood in opposition to the Catholic Church of Rome; thus, frequent topics of sermons and treatises included essential Protestant doctrines like *sola fide* (justification by faith alone) and *sola gratia* (salvation by divine grace alone) or the

negation of Catholic dogmas like transubstantiation, purgatory of papal authority. The break away from the trappings of the Old Religion entailed the need to cast a revisionist look back at some of the most beloved narratives of past centuries.

The Faerie Queene is not only the result of deeply religious convictions; the humanist attitude so widespread during the Renaissance is another of the pillars that sustains its philosophical weight. Spenser's leanings are evident, for example, in his sources and influences, which include not only classical authors such as Virgil, Ovid and Lucretius but also names like Chaucer, Dante, Petrarch, Tasso and Ariosto, and also in his interest in allegory to provide moral justification. However, Spenser also adds an element of hard-edge religious bias and prejudice (probably stemming from his Calvinist or even Puritan sensibilities) that is quite divergent from the attitudes of other northern humanists such as Erasmus. His heavy tapping from medieval traditions also strays him from the main humanist attitudes of his time. Regardless of these peculiarities, *The Spenser Encyclopedia* describes the huge relevance of the poem within the humanist movement and notes the relation between the brand of humanism exhibited by Spenser in *The Faerie Queene* and his usage of the figure of Arthur:

“*The Faerie Queene* is the major poem of sixteenth-century English humanism (its counterpart in prose being Sidney's *Arcadia*). It objectifies the humanistic tradition in its generalized bid to become the definitive English epic, its philosophical seriousness, its effort to teach by creating examples of moral virtue, its generally secular emphasis, its rhetorical inventiveness, and its idealized patriotism. *The Letter to Raleigh*, which is intended to explain the method of *The Faerie Queene*, is a curious mixture of medieval and humanistic attitudes. Its claim that the poem is ‘a continued Allegory, or darke conceit’ would have been understood perfectly by Dante. Yet the object of the poem is instruction in the secular virtues: ‘to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline.’ In proper humanist fashion, Spenser chooses a figure from legendary history—‘Arthure, before he was king’—and notes that the precedents for such a choice are not only Homer and Virgil but also Ariosto and Tasso. Arthur will represent ‘magnificence’ understood as the sum of the individual virtues represented by each of the protagonists of the individual books, ‘the twelve private morall vertues, as Aristotle hath devised’” (1990: 997-98)

The very fact that Spenser felt compelled to write a letter² to his patron Walter Raleigh detailing the purpose of his work reveals that *The Faerie Queene* also has a political dimension that coexists side by side with the religious and moral allegory. The reign of Elizabeth I, despite beginning as a period of religious tension and political uncertainty, eventually flourished into an age of exploration and expansion without precedents. England became an empire, and the figure of the

² Included in *The Faerie Queene* (ed. Hadfield, Gray, et al., 2006)

queen herself was imbued with a deliberate aura of myth and mystery that made her legend grow to almost Arthurian proportions. Around the Virgin Queen arose a true cult of personality that propagated an idealized, heroic and almost divine image of Elizabeth, who was surrounded at all times by courtiers adept at the arts of praise and flattery. *The Faerie Queene* is in no small part precisely that, an extremely elaborate piece of Elizabethan propaganda, an encomium aimed directly at Spenser's queen. Thus, Elizabeth herself enters in the poem as Gloriana, the Faerie Queene, the nexus of all action and every allegory. As Spenser explains to Raleigh in his letter: "In that Faery Queene I meane glory in my generall intention, but in my particular I conceive the most excellent and glorious person of our soveraine the Queene, and her kingdome in Faery land" (Hadfield et al, 2006: 206). Arthur, the embodiment of all virtues, is prompted to abandon his court and seek adventure by the tantalizing vision of Gloriana. He appears in the poem as a prince because he has not found his queen yet, but the quest to gain her hand acts as the catalyst for all the heroic deeds of the paladin prince during the narrative. Their union is destined to engender the line of kings and queens that will take England to the greatest heights of power and glory, an overt and unabashed exaltation of the Tudor dynasty.

4. The Once and Future Prince

When Spenser decided to use the figure of Arthur as the central axis of his allegory, he was very obviously aware of the political and literary implications of this choice. In order to better understand these implications, our brief account of the context in which Spenser was writing must be complemented with an inspection of the status enjoyed by Arthurianism in the sixteenth century.

Before the coming of the Renaissance, Arthur was generally considered a full-fledged historical figure, attested by the earliest chronicles of the kingdom such as Nennius' *Historia Brittonum* (c. 800), the *Annales Cambriae* (c. 950), Malmesbury's *Gesta Regum Anglorum* (c. 1125), and Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (c. 1139). The fact that Arthur entered the realm of myth, folklore and romance through narratives such as the Welsh *Mabinogion* (c. 1350-1410) and authors such as Chrétien de Troyes (c. 1170-1190) only contributed to aggrandize and embellish his legend and ensure its immortality. Later authors expanded Arthur's world, adding to the original fusion of Celtic myths and Christian imagery new concepts such as chivalry or courtly love. The best known of these later authors, and certainly the most available to Spenser and his readers, was of course Thomas Malory.

Although many Elizabethans still believed in the existence of the legendary king Arthur, the sixteenth century saw an increased debate about his historicity, engendered by historians such as Polydore Vergil, who openly questioned the veracity of the Arthurian corpus. In spite of this increased scepticism, however, the

popularity of the character persisted, as Hugh MacLachlan states from his chapter in the *Spenser Encyclopedia*: “Although it would seem arguable that the Matter of Britain should have run its course in England by the sixteenth century, and that the Reformation must have raised antagonism to the old Roman religion of the romances, there were five editions of the *Morte Darthur* between 1485 and the end of the sixteenth century when Spenser chose Arthur as hero of his own romance” (1990: 170). More than ever before, the figure of Arthur became politicized. From the beginning, the Tudor dynasty found in the Matter of Britain an excellent source of much-needed historical justification, and they consciously employed and manipulated the myth in order to reinforce their royal authority. Thus, the old prophecies about the return of the once and future king were declared fulfilled with the ascension to the throne of Henry Tudor in 1485, and Henry VIII fashioned himself as the rightful inheritor of Arthur’s realm. This political exploitation of the Arthurian myth added layers of complexity to an already complex figure, but it did not diminish its general appeal. The figure of Arthur remained fascinating and larger than life in popular imagination, and therefore, suitable for poetic appropriation. As MacLachlan puts it, “it was left to Spenser, while echoing all these aspects of sixteenth-century Arthurianism, to recreate Arthurian romance as a vehicle of spiritual and ethical instruction, one which would embody his age’s concerns, aspirations, beliefs, and vision of its own perfected self” (1990: 172).

Indeed, in his *Letter to Raleigh* Spenser explains that “the generall end therefore of all the booke is to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline” (Hadfield et al, 2006: 205). In the figure of Arthur he found the ideal mirror for princes, the perfect fusion of private and public virtues that he wanted to communicate. In that respect, he confesses that he “chose the historye of king Arthure, as most fitte for the excellency of his person, being made famous by many mens former workes, and also furthest from the daunger of envy, and suspition of present time”. This last sentence alludes to the political connotations that he knew *The Faerie Queene* would acquire among his readers, especially in the courtly circles. Contemporary readers probably spent quite some time trying to identify which of the queen’s courtiers and ministers was represented in Arthur. Although such an attempt would be probably futile for a present-day scholar or critic, it attests to the political charge that the presence of Prince Arthur conveys to the poem’s central argument, what could be called, not without a small hint of irony, the politics of the quest.

The instrumentalization of Arthurian themes in the benefit of the House of Tudor has already been mentioned, but it is worthwhile to reiterate the propagandistic potential of his figure, since Spenser certainly realized the possibilities of that potential. Many of the adventures protagonized by Arthur in the epic are thinly veiled reflections of real political events. One such adventure is found in cantos X and XI of the Book of Justice. At that point, Arthur fights against the horrendous giant Geryoneo, spawn of the mythical Geryon slain by Hercules. The

monster has conquered the lands of the widow Belge and has set up an idolatrous regime there. Belge's sons find Arthur and ask him for help. The whole episode is a heavy-handed political allegory for the Spanish Catholic dominance of the Low Countries. The three-torsoed Geryoneo is usually interpreted as another incarnation of Phillip II of Spain, ruler of three kingdom, and even the geography of Belge's lands corresponds directly to their real-world analog:

“They came unto a Citie farre up land,
 The which whylome that Ladies owne had bene;
 But now by force extort out of her hand,
 By her strong foe, who had defaced cleene
 Her stately towres, and buildings sunny sheene;
 Shut up her haven, mard her marchants trade,
 Robbed her people, that full rich had beene,
 And in her necke a Castle huge had made,
 The which did her commaund, without needing perswade.”
 (5.x.25)

This stanza is an almost literal description of the sacking of Antwerp by Spanish troops in 1585, and in the two stanzas that follow, Spenser elaborates on the story of Spanish oppression in the Netherlands in what must be one of the passage less “cloudily enwrapped in Allegoricall devisies” (Hadfield et al, 2006: 206) of all the poem. Spenser completes his allegory with barely veiled references to Catholic idolatry:

“There stands an Idole of great note and name,
 The which this Gyant reared first on hie,
 And of his owne vaine fancies thought did frame”
 [5.xi.19.2-4])

and the Spanish Inquisition:

“But he had brought it now in servile bond,
 And made it beare the yoke of inquisition”
 [5.x.27.1-2]).

In canto XI Arthur recaptures the castle, slays Geryoneo with a single stroke and destroys both the relic of the giant's occupation and the chimerical monster to whom Belge's people were sacrificed daily, putting a definite end to Geryoneo's vile occupation. This episode, often interpreted as a justification to England's military intervention in the Low Countries, not only suggests a clear political agenda; it also connects with Arthur's continental conquests in Malory and other medieval texts. By drawing from the often ignored narratives of Arthur's overseas campaigns against the might of Rome, Spenser provides a basis for the justification of burgeoning English imperial aspirations. The use of a well-established and beloved

emblem of national identity such as Arthur helped the poet to invest such as aspirations with a shining patina of nobility and heroism.

Spenser's poem, straddling between the very different genres of epic and romance, also stands out as a glorification of Elizabeth I and her Tudor heritage. Spenser incorporated in the poem several "alter egos" of the queen, most notably in the figure of Gloriana, the eponymous Faerie Queene, as he himself explained to Raleigh (Hadfield et al, 2006: 206). As influenced by the epics of Tasso and Ariosto as he was by Malory or Chaucer, Spenser recuperates the spirit of medieval romance and adopts its essential narrative device, the quest. In Malory, the object of the quest par excellence is the Holy Grail, which only the purest of all knights can ever hope to attain. In Spenser, the exemplary knight who embodies all virtues in the perfection of magnificence is Arthur himself, and the object of the quest is not a Grail of heavily Catholic connotations, but the love of the Fairy Queen herself. Let us now concentrate in some more detail on what all this implies in terms of the adaptation of the Malorian model, and its deep modification, at the hands of Spenser.

Arthur's quest for Gloriana provides the unifying structure of the poem and, more importantly for Spenser's courtly ambitions, serves to elevate the queen to a superior state of grace, as when he affirms how that sovereign Dame is "heavenly borne, and heaven may justly vaunt" (I.59.9). The projected marriage between Arthur and Gloriana would have made true the Tudor myth of Arthurian descent and would have made of Elizabeth a monarch as glorious as her legendary forebear.

The Faerie Queene is more complex than *Le Morte Darthur* not only politically, but also morally. Mark Lambert, in his article about Malory for the *Spenser Encyclopedia*, compares the moral stance of both authors:

Spenser's sense not only of moral but of literary possibilities and difficulties was far larger than Malory's seems likely to have been. Both writers intensely loved the simple truth of noble conduct; but for Malory that truth was easier to find, and he appears to have worried not at all that simple truth might be miscalled simplicity. The undistracted earnestness of the earlier writer was, one imagines, a source of deep refreshment for Spenser—refreshment touched, perhaps, with a little envy. For the epic poet, *Le Morte Darthur* may have represented the lyric stage of chivalric commemoration and a deep truth which had to be combined with other, complex truths." (1990: 1184)

This need to combine complex truths with the simpler nobility of the old code of chivalry explains why Spenser visualized Arthur's quest as an initiation, a preparation for the demands of his future role as king. In a sense, Arthur's perfecting "in the twelve private morall vertues" becomes the ideal model for

one of Spenser's intended uses of his work: the representation of magnificence, "which vertue for that (according to Aristotle and the rest) it is the perfection of all the rest, and conteineth in it them all" (Hadfield et al, 2006: 206-7).

Even more relevant than the political and moral uses that Spenser gave to his version of Arthur is the deep-seated religious doctrine that permeates the whole of *The Faerie Queene*, and very especially Book I. We must bear in mind the radical change in the theological landscape that had occurred in the intervening period from Malory to Spenser. *The Cambridge Companion to the Arthurian Legend* describes the Protestant reactions to older material as follows:

"The attempt by medieval writers to redeem Arthurian chivalry by infusing it with religiosity backfired after the Protestant Reformation. 'The vile and stinking story of the Sangreall' did not go down well with the sixteenth-century puritan Nathaniel Baxter, and even in the nineteenth century, the heyday of the Gothic revival, when the Middle Ages were far enough away to seem exotic and glamorous, the Catholicism of the period and its culture needed exorcising." (Archibald and Putter, 2009: 06)

Clearly, Arthur needed to be reformed before he could be of any use to a self-conscious Elizabethan Protestant such as Edmund Spenser. In *The Faerie Queene*, and especially in Book I, characters like Prince Arthur or the Redcrosse Knight are (or rather become) emblems of a transcendent Protestant ideal. One of the most recent studies about this issue is *Making Arthur Protestant: Translating Malory's Grail Quest into Spenser's Book of Holiness*, by Kenneth Hodges (2010). Hodges reads Book 1 of *The Faerie Queene* as a response to Malory's Grail Quest in *Le Morte Darthur*. He interprets the story of Redcrosse as the Protestant answer to Malory's material, clearly pointing at Spenser's deliberate distortions and astute re-imagining of the chivalric quest, which allowed him to combine the appeal and resonance of his sources of inspiration with his own political and religious leanings. Spenser, says Hodges, does not shy away from borrowing and reimagining symbols and motifs from a Catholic source like Malory, fashioning them into counterparts if the need arises. In this way, Hodges says, "Book I of *The Faerie Queene* is not meant to be read in isolation, but as a powerful counter-quest to the image of Galahad and his red-cross shield pursuing a Catholic Grail" (2010: 211). Spenser achieves this counter-quest effect by creating deliberate contrasts with Malory that bring to the fore theological and political differences. Hodges suggests, for instance, that there is a connection between Malory's Galahad and Spenser's Redcrosse that has eluded the critical radar. In that respect, he writes that "Redcrosse becomes the Protestant double of Galahad, who cannot escape sin but must learn contrition and true holiness to escape the mingled threat of religious error and civil war" (2010: 202).

Another of the key moments that allows us to decode the religious significance of the poem, and very especially of Arthur's role in it, is found in the

Orgoglio episode, the symbolic and narrative center of Book I. The dependence of man in unmerited grace, a fundamental tenet of Protestantism, is first evidenced when the narrator states how, in the combat of Redcrosse against the giant Orgoglio, the seeming hero is unrelentingly attacked and “were not heauenly grace, that him did blesse, / He had beene pouldred all, as thin as flowre” (vii.12.3-4). The introduction of canto viii reinstates, clearly, and in no uncertain terms, the Protestant awareness that humanity, in its total depravity, cannot contribute to its own salvation:

Ay me, how many perils doe enfold
 The righteous man, to make him daily fall?
 Were not, that heauenly grace doth him vphold,
 And stedfast truth acquite him out of all.
 Her loue is firme, her care continuall,
 So oft as he through his owne foolish pride,
 Or weaknesse is to sinfull bands made thrall:
 Else should this Redcrosse knight in bands haue dyde,
 For whose delivera[n]ce she this Prince doth thither guide. (viii.1.1-9)

The above-quoted lines draw a stark contrast between the steadfast, constant support of grace and the human tendency to withdraw from it into sin. Redcrosse’s descent into an underworld configured here as the abysmal depths of Orgoglio’s dungeon, seems to be entirely of his own making; deception and false appearance opened the way to sin, but it was him who strayed from truth, yielded into temptation, and made himself vulnerable by removing the armor of virtue that marked him as a faithful *miles Christi*. Spenser purposefully emphasizes the knight’s mistake when he is attacked by Orgoglio and the giant finds him “disarmed all of yron-coted Plate” (vii.2.8). His “mightie armour” and “silver shield” (vii.19.5-6), lying useless on the ground, not only constitute the most visible symbols of a knight’s status and martial prowess; they are also possessed of biblical significance, and it is with this biblical transcendence that the figure of Arthur will be endowed. The association of armor with virtue was well established in the early modern period by classical and medieval mythographers, but Spenser draws upon Scripture, specifically St. Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians 6.11-17:

Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.

This passage is, of course, the basic reference for the interpretation of Redcrosse’s situation. Wearing the Armour of God had transformed the would-be hero from a “clownishe young man” to “the goodliest man in al that company”, and the epithet by which the knight had become known is based on the heraldic “bloodie Crosse” (i.2.1) displayed on breastplate and shield. By forfeiting the

protection given by the armor, Redcrosse not only renounced divine protection but he also shed the heroic identity he had assumed for his quest. As the Pauline verses proclaim, the foe is not only flesh and blood, but pure spiritual wickedness. Failing to employ properly the gift he has received in the form of armor, Redcrosse does not stand a chance against his proud enemy; his rescue by the virtuous Prince Arthur, then, is providential in the full sense of the word.

The culminating moment in this whole episode is the inevitable confrontation between Arthur and Orgoglio, which fully establishes the new image of the Prince (and future king). To grasp the full meaning of this climactic battle, however, it is necessary to notice how the spiritual significance of the character of Arthur projects itself over the character of his monstrous antagonist, and clarifies, by contrast, the negative connotations that are present in the latter. The Protestant perspective on the sin of pride, which Orgoglio physically embodies, sees that sin as the main source of moral perdition, as the main force that leads man away from grace. According to theologians such as Calvin, Tyndale and William Perkins, pride fixes the human soul firmly within the order of nature and leads it away from virtue, unless the hollow materiality of this sin is rooted out by the grace of God. If Arthur's weapons show the persistence of grace in clearly Pauline terms, Orgoglio's presence (that is: the sin of pride) seems imbued with the vainglorious gesticulation and boastful arrogance that the Protestantism attributed to a proud, corrupted humanity, and very especially to Catholicism. Thus, the allegorical implications of the combat between the swollen giant and Arthur begin to crystallize into a clear and coherent Protestant discourse.

The final battle begins with Orgoglio living up to his name before the attack of the Prince. Having defeated easily the Redcrosse Knight with the "wind" of one of his blows, the giant faces Arthur with arrogance and over-confidence. Unlike Redcrosse, however, Arthur is fully protected by his armor (symbolic and physical) and not burdened by physical and moral exhaustion. Aided by divine grace, and by what seems to be an act of revenge of the earth for the giant's previous aggression, the Prince swiftly proceeds to dismember the giant, one limb at a time, in the culminating scene of the whole episode. The heroic tradition of dismemberment and decapitation of giants and monsters goes a long way back in time, and is present in many cultural traditions and mythologies. From Gilgamesh beheading the evil giant Humbaba or the slaying of Medusa by Perseus to Goreu's decapitation of Ysbaddaden Pencawr in the Welsh *Mabinogion*, the final victory of Beowulf over Grendel or David cutting off Goliath's head with the giant's own sword after killing him with a slingshot, the battles against hostile giants that culminate in decapitation or dismemberment are recurrent in the myths and literature of the Western world. King Arthur himself had been traditionally imagined as a celebrated giant-slayer, as Geoffrey of Monmouth recounts, killing the colossus that threatened his kingdom at Mont-Saint-Michel and then commanding Bedivere to cut off his head (Monmouth, 1999: 172-74). The dismemberment of an enemy becomes a ritualized

gesture of victory and reaffirmation, especially when the enemy is monstrously inimical to the cultural, national or religious values of the hero. Indeed, Orgoglio's death seems to reinforce the theological bases of Protestantism and emphasizes the idea of *sola gratia*. This episode, then, is extremely representative of the transformation that the figure of Arthur experienced under Spenser's pen, while simultaneously reinforcing the idea that if Spenser's magnum opus was written under an ideological prime directive, that was undoubtedly the Protestant faith.

Conclusions

The mixed reactions of the Tudor Protestants to *Le Morte Darthur* did not prevent Spenser from realizing the usefulness of its titular character for his treatment of sixteenth-century politics and his elaborate delineation of moral and religious virtue. Like most of his coevals, Spenser approached at his extremely disparate sources as rich wellsprings, true mines from which to extract the building blocks of his works. In his hands these blocks were not rigid and unyielding, but supple and malleable, adaptable to his narrative needs. As the present article has tried to expose, a good example of Spenser's talent for sculpting foraneous material is his retrieval of the figure of Arthur, directly inherited from Malory's *Morte Darthur* and transformed into an instrument for the dissemination of ideologies. As the examples provided in the previous section only begin to attest, the major power players of the real-world political landscape such as the King of Spain or the Catholic Church were turned into the terrible monsters and supernatural menaces so common in medieval romance, a sustained allegory with the sole intention of promulgating Spenser's rather radical vision.

Five centuries and a half after being written in a dank prison cell, Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* remains the principal means of diffusion of the Arthurian legend among English readers, and its enduring legacy kept alive in the imaginations of thousands the memory of days long gone and worlds that never were. At the height of the English Renaissance, Edmund Spenser inherited that legacy and selected the choicest bits to include them in *The Faerie Queene*. The Elizabethan poet did not make a heavy use of the Malorian legacy, but its influence is still palpable in the form and tone of the poem, in the situations and characters that populate his nebulous and otherworldly Fairy Land, in the medieval spirit of his allegorical romance. Despite his proportionally small use of the Matter of Britain, Spenser can be regarded as the author that took up the baton from Malory and passed on the myth of the once and future king to later writers such as Alfred Lord Tennyson. His virtuous and active Arthur redeemed Malory's *roi fainéant* and bestowed new political, moral and religious dimensions to the already mythic proportions and legendary stature of the most celebrated and revered English hero of all times.

References

Bibliography

Archibald, E. and P., Ad (Eds). (2009). *The Cambridge Companion to the Arthurian Legend*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cooper, H. (ed). (1998). *Le Morte Darthur: The Winchester Manuscript*. Oxford: Oxford University Press [E-Book].

Field, P. J. C. (1993). *The Life and Times of Sir Thomas Malory*. Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer.

Gravett, C. (2003). *Townton 1461: England's Bloodiest Battle*. Oxford: Osprey Publishing,

Hamilton, A.C. (Ed.) (1990). *The Spenser Encyclopedia*. London: Routledge.

Hodges, K. (2010). Making Arthur Protestant: Translating Malory's Grail Quest into Spenser's Book of Holiness. *The Review of English Studies, New Series*, vol. 62, n. 254, 193-211

King, J. N. (2001). Spenser's Religion. *The Cambridge Companion to Spenser*. Ed. Andrew Hadfield. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lupack, A. (2005). *The Oxford Guide to Arthurian Literature and Legend*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Monmouth, G. (1999). *History of the Kings of Britain*. Transl. Aaron Thompson. Cambridge: In Parentheses Publications.

Spenser, E. (2006). *The Faerie Queene, Books One to Six*. Eds. Hadfield, Gray, Kaske, et al. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.

Recibido: 30 de noviembre de 2014

Aprobado: 17 de enero de 2015